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The Perceptions of Middle School Counselors on Bullying Preparedness

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The Perceptions of Middle School Counselors on Bullying Preparedness

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College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

School counselors are in a position to enforce bullying interventions and provide prompt and thorough investigation of student reported incidents. There are many causes and types of bullying creating challenges for school counselors when identifying the warning signs. This challenge is one obstacle middle school counselor's encounter when approaching and addressing reported incidents of harassment. My purpose for completing this qualitative case study was to discover middle school counselor's perceptions on resources, strategies used, and what additional training may be needed to provide prompt and thorough investigations of students adequately reporting bullying incidents. In this qualitative case study, I collected insights from middle school counselors from four local school districts in Southeast Texas regarding their perceptions of bullying and prevention procedures at middle schools. I focused on school counselors at these middle schools (grade levels sixth through eighth). I examined the experiences of middle school counselors in these school districts, as well as the resources and training provided to them. The underlying problem that led to this study was that current middle school counselors might not have up-to-date resources or training on school practices so that they can promptly and thoroughly investigate student reported incidents of bullying. These challenges are obstacles that middle school counselors encounter when approaching and addressing reported incidents of bullying. The findings of this study revealed that middle school counselors' perceptions of bully preparedness need up to date resources, face challenges when addressing bullying, and identify gaps between what is being done to address bullying and what should be done. Counselors need resources that focus on bully awareness and conflict resolution skills.

Keywords: bullying, prevention, conflict, counselors, middle, students

Dedication

For my boys—Shawn, Christerpher, and Giovanni.

Never give up just because things are hard.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Texas Education Agency (1994) identified school counselors as program managers who advocate for students in a multitude of ways. One critical role of a school counselor is managing programs that support and promote school safety (TEA, 1994, p. 3). School counselors are in a position to enforce bullying interventions and provide prompt and thorough investigation of student reported incidents. According to Philips and Cornell (2012), school counselors are more qualified than other educator staff to identify and confirm acts of bullying. Putting an end to bullying requires taking immediate action (Bullying Prevention, 2012; Chamberlain, 2013). The United States Department of Education reported on bullying and found that there are higher percentages of students between the ages of 12 to 18 who reported incidents of bullying than other age groups (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). The 2014 statistics indicated that 24% of females and 19% males reported being harassed at school (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014).

There are many causes and types of bullying, creating a challenge for school counselors when identifying the warning signs. This challenge is one obstacle middle school counselors encounter when approaching and addressing reported incidents of bullying. According to Green (2007), bullying is a major concern that has existed for many years but not as severe as it is today. Whether bullying is physical (pushing, hitting, and pinching), verbal (name-calling, terroristic threats, and spreading rumors), or cyberbullying, it is an increasing trend (Green, 2007, p. 336). School counselors are the key stakeholders in the bullying intervention and prevention process (Austin, 2012). Even though they address victims of bullying, counselors also assist bystanders and bullies with prevention methods (Ockerman, Kramer & Bruno, 2014). Many times, resources and training require updates that incorporate new methods and practices.

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The best way to identify this issue is to gain the perspectives of school counselors and examine their practices.

This chapter introduces a qualitative multiple case study design that allowed me, as the researcher, to explore the perceptions of middle school counselors concerning bullying. Through this case study, I was able to determine the following: the challenges for counselors advising and monitoring middle school students concerning bullying; how effective school district practices are concerning bullying incidents; what strategies were used when responding to reported incidents; and what additional training and resources may be needed to address reported incidents of bullying. I provide background information describing the roles of school counselors and the problem of bullying.

Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework

Counselors provide counseling, prevention, and intervention information to students in the educational setting (DiMatteo, 2012). The state of Texas mandates that school counselors provide intervention and prevention programs within educational classes (TEA, 1994). There are differences between bullying and school violence, but they are significantly linked together because victims of bullying sometimes act out in revenge (Chamberlain, 2003). School counselors are the qualified leaders to address the initiatives to address bullying in the education system (Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012). Responding immediately to incidents of bullying requires having adequate procedures in place to provide prompt and thorough investigations. However, researchers need to explore the gap between clear and concise approaches, in order to resolve the challenges counselors may face when addressing bullying.

School counselors will be able to transfer the new knowledge they gain from updated resources and training to their roles, in order to implement effective bullying prevention

programs in schools (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015). Mezirow's transformative theory brought insight on transformative education and the responsibilities of counselors, which will assist with advising administrators, teachers, parents, and students on how to make improvements to procedures that pertain to bullying. Transformative learning involves critical reflection and independent thinking to enable people to make meaning of their experiences or to make them coherent to facilitate change (Mezirow, 1997).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was that bullying exists. The goal was to examine what resources are available to counselors to help address bullying. Adequate resources and procedures are important to addressing bullying. This gap must be filled with specific bullying intervention strategies to be effective in preventing further bullying incidents and in protecting victims.

Purpose of the Study

I carried out this case study in order to discover middle school counselors' perceptions on resources, strategies used, and additional training that may be needed to adequately address reported bullying incidents. The study was necessary because counselor perceptions of their challenges, resources, and training may reveal new insights, which could assist administrators with making necessary changes to district/campus practices. I used qualitative methods to research and determine the views of middle school counselors. Through this approach, I identified the following: challenges for counselors advising and monitoring middle school students concerning bullying, how effective school district practices are concerning bullying incidents, which strategies middle school counselors use when responding to reported incidents

of bullying, and what additional training and resources middle school counselors may need to address reported incidents of bullying.

Research Questions

The research questions for this qualitative case study were:

1. What are the perceptions of school counselors on the resources and currently provided training to address bullying?

2. What strategies do middle school counselors use to address bullying?

3. How do strategies and training to address bullying vary between districts in Southeast Texas?

4. How are counselors trained to prevent bullying?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

The rationale for performing this study was to gain more information from middle school counselors regarding their current resources and training so that they can be more effective with addressing incidents of bullying. The study was relevant and significant because in previous studies where researchers used quantitative analysis, they were only able to focus on determining preparedness of resources being used to prevent and address school bullying. In these types of studies, researchers were not able to reveal the experiences or meaningful information needed to make preventions and interventions better. DiMatteo (2012) used pre-generated questions with answer choices in an analysis of the participating principals' frequency of use of resources to prevent, respond, and build social and emotional competence among students. Using surveys with answer choices limited the information to be obtained. Participants could not provide the in-depth and elaborative information necessary to draw conclusions. The use of answer choices alone did not allow researchers to provide meaningful information that was relevant to the issue.

The only data gained indicated that there is likely to be a problem related to available resources, but the data did not indicate other information pertaining to how to make changes in order to bring about improvement.

DiMatteo (2012) proved only that principals did not use all options available to address school violence, with no further explanation as to why the options were not utilized or considered. Walsh (2010) also argued that using qualitative research is necessary when searching for meanings of experiences. Crawford (2013) conducted a qualitative case study and was able to explore the violence prevention program to determine why some students were unable to resolve conflicts. Based on the data gathered during that study, the mediators of the program were able to provide significant insights into sessions, which helped determine what changes could be made to better the program. In concluding this study, I discovered that counselors needed training on how to address unresolved conflict resolutions rather than just training on how to deal with conflicts in general. This particular case study was relevant and significant in collecting data, and the researchers provided feedback for determining which changes are necessary and how resources and training can be updated so that middle school counselors could potentially be more effective in addressing incidents of bullying.

Definition of Terms

Bullying. Bullying is the physical act of hitting and the verbal acts of name-calling and spreading rumors, including insults, teasing, and excluding (Kellaher, 2011).

Cyberbully. Cyberbullying is the repeated use of technology to harass, humiliate, or threaten people (Holladay, 2011).

School violence. School violence includes behaviors such as bullying, teasing, and forms of harassment, not limited to the extreme actions like shootings and assaults (Gomez, 2010).

School counselor. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), school counselors are:

> licensed/certified educators with a master's degree in school counseling who promote and enhance the personal/social, academic, and career competencies of all students. They design, implement, evaluate, and improve a comprehensive school counseling program that is charged with promoting and enhancing student success (King, 2014, p. 11-12).

School counselors in Texas. School counselors in Texas are described by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) administrative code as those who:

> counsel students to fully develop each student's academic, career, personal, and social abilities. School counselors are also required to participate in planning, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive developmental guidance program to serve all students and to address the individual needs of students (TEA, 1994, p. 3).

Middle school. Middle school is an intermediate school between an elementary school and a high school, typically for children in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades (TEA, 1994, p. 7).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Methodological assumptions consist of the research methods used in the process of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). I used a case study as a guide, with the following three assumptions. First, bullying negatively affects middle school students. According to the United States Department of Education, 1 in 5 middle school aged students have reported being bullied in 2014 (Robers et al., 2014). The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) indicated that a cumulative percentage of 98% of students in grade levels sixth through eighth reported bully incidents (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2013). Students who are victims of bullying are likely to have

academic difficulties, exhibit aggressive behavior, and suffer from social withdrawal (Egan & Todorov, 2009). Second, middle school counselors can have a positive impact on victims through an implementation of intervention and prevention methods. School counselors are, essentially, program managers, so coordinating bullying prevention programs is appropriate to their role. Whitted and Dupper (2005) argued that school counselors play a pivotal role as program developers, program promoters, and on-site coordinators of bullying prevention programs. Third, participants are informed about confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation, since participants will be more likely to answer questions about integrity and give detailed accounts of experiences. Examining the perspectives of middle school counselors was important in this study because I assumed that all responses were truthful and the information was relevant to the topic of discussion that guided the research and explained why and how things actually are in regards to school violence.

Delimitations to this case study affected the interpretation of findings due to the focus of middle school counselors in four school districts creating a significantly small sample size. I selected middle schools because of the prevalence of bullying occurring more often among sixth grade through eighth grade students (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). Lessne and Harmalkar (2015) reported the prevalence to be higher among this group of students, which made studying middle school the preferred area to consider. I chose to triangulate the data through the use of the semi-structured interviews, blind questionnaires, and review of school records available. Participants completed the blind questionnaires and mailed them back to me in a self-addressed envelope. Questions used for the semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires were both based on the same review of the literature and identical in structure to gather consistent data.

The potential limitations of the study are those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from the research (Creswell, 2013). As with any study, limitations could appear, such as questions not being answered or participants not wanting to answer. The interview protocol included a no-answer section to address this concern. Despite the participant not answering a particular question, I attempted to collect the information. The sample size was a limitation because I gathered data in four school districts with only one middle school counselor participating from each district. The following individuals were not included because the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of middle school counselors: elementary school administrators, staff, students, teachers, and parents; middle school administrators, students, teachers, and parents. I questioned the participating counselors on what bullying acts are happening, what school counselors do to address incidents, what needs to be done by counselors, what gaps need to be closed between what is happening to address bullying, and what else needs to be done. The concerns, perceptions, and attitudes from participants may not be the best representation of all school counselors in general, but the conclusion of this study provided future studies with some guidance and insights for administrators, regarding what updates to resources and training school counselors may need. A qualitative study design may result in necessary information being collected through specific questions being asked and answered, which could provide school counselors' perspectives on experiences and on the specifics of bullying.

Chapter 1 Summary

Bullying is a steadily growing trend that has become an alarming concern among middle school students and consequently is an issue that needs attention (Cunningham & Whitten, 2002; Gomez, 2013; Farrell, Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003). About 98% of middle school students

reported bullying at school, most commonly in secluded areas such as hallways and stairwells (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2013; Robers et al., 2014). Even though there have been numerous studies on the prevalence of bullying, there lacks sufficient research on the perceptions of school counselors regarding the preparedness of resources and training to deal with bullying (Phillips & Cornell, 2012; Schaefer-Schium & Ginsen, 2003). In this case study, I focused on which bullying acts are happening, what school counselors already do to address the incidents, what additionally needs to be done by counselors, and what gaps need closure between what is happening to address bullying and what else needs to happen.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

In the last decade there has been an increasing trend of harmful behaviors, or bullying, being carried out against and by middle school students (Gomez, 2013; Farrell, Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003; Cunningham & Whitten, 2002). Despite the differences between bullying and school violence, they are, in fact, linked to one another, and both require immediate attention (Chamberlain, 2003). The perpetrators of school violence oftentimes act out of revenge that can lead to serious occurrences of violence, such as school shootings; these individuals are typically victims of bullying. Not only is bullying a characteristic of school violence, but it is also a significant cause of violence (Piotrowski & Hoot, 2008; Saurini, 2011). The United States Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center conducted a study of 37 school shootings and concluded that violators reported being bullied prior to the violent occurrence (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2004).

The mass shooting at Columbine was the worst of any high school shooting in American history and launched the adoption of anti-bullying legislative policies (Haan & Mays, 2013). School violence includes behaviors such as bullying, teasing, and harassment, not only the extreme actions like shootings and assaults. Gomez (2010) suggested that researchers study bullying and school violence as one entity. Chamberlain (2003) argued that bullying would continue and become more severe, leading to violence, as long as nothing is done to address the issues. School violence is a major reaction to bullying; therefore, gaining insights into what could make preventions and interventions better is needed (Chamberlain, 2003; Gomez, 2010; Saurini, 2011).

Nationally, the U.S. Department of Education's report on bullying showed that there are higher percentages of students between the ages 12 to 18 who reported incidents of bullying at school (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). The 2014 statistics indicated that 24% of females and 19% males reported bullying at school (Robers et al., 2014). Female students reported incidents of bullying that involved name-calling insults, rumors, and exclusion from activities on purpose. On the other hand, male students reported incidents of being pushed, shoved, spit at, or tripped. These two groups were not mutually exclusive with no common ground in types of bullying. Cyberbullying was also reported more by female students than males. White students (24%) reported the most incidents of bullying compared to Hispanic (19%), Asian (9%), and Black (20%) students (Rober et al., 2014). Also, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) reported that in 2011, 37% of sixth grade, 30.7% of seventh grade, and 30.7% of eighth grade male and female students reported bullying (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2013). The majority of reported bullying took place in secluded areas such as hallways or stairwells, and the least reported locations were in areas with a probability of staff present, like on playgrounds or in cafeterias (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2013).

School counselors are usually the personnel designated responsible for addressing incidents of youth violence and bullying in middle schools (Cunningham & Whitten, 2002; Farrell, Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003; Harris & Jeffrey, 2010). Appropriate procedures or strategies are critical for prevention purposes allowing school counselors to address incidents of bullying from students. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, each state is required to develop procedures for investigating incidents of bullying (Stuart-Cassel & Springer, 2011). Required procedures must include prompt investigations with the implementation of intervention strategies, including those strategies that protect victims from

further bullying or retaliation. The law generalizes these methods with regard to providing school districts with the flexibility to develop local procedures. Gomez (2010) stated that at the local level, there needs to be specific timelines for investigations and for providing effective measures to identify and institute immediate interventions (Gomez, 2010).

Adequate resources and procedures for providing thorough investigations are important to addressing bullying. Without these adequate resources, a gap may be created preventing thorough investigations to take place. This gap must be filled with specific bullying intervention strategies to be effective in preventing further bullying incidents and in protecting victims. However, middle school counselors face challenges addressing reported incidents of bullying and school violence due to inadequate policies, resources, and training.

The Statement of the Problem

The problem is that in the last decade there has been an increasing trend of harmful behaviors, or bullying, being carried out against and by middle school students. Schaefer-Schium and Ginsberg (2003) showed that school counselors needed more training dealing with bullying. Harris and Jeffery (2010) also argued that school counselors' involvement in the prevention process of school violence, specifically in bullying, can prevent incidents, given their expertise in guidance counseling. Harris and Jeffery (2010) suggested that counselor education programs include the initiatives to approach and address school bullying. Local school districts should incorporate these initiatives into staff development training for middle school counselors, by using evidenced-based active programs to address bullying.

My purpose for this case study was to discover middle school counselors' perceptions on resources, strategies used, and what additional training may be needed to effectively address reported bullying incidents. This study is important because middle school counselors'

perceptions of their challenges, resources used, and training may reveal new insights for administrators, regarding procedure changes that might need to be made. In this case study, I incorporated qualitative methods to determine the views of middle school counselors on their training and counseling responsibilities related to school bullying issues.

Research Questions

The research questions for this qualitative case study were the following:

1. What are the perceptions of school counselors on the resources and currently provided training to address bullying?

2. What strategies do middle school counselors use to address bullying?

3. How do strategies and training to address bullying vary between districts in Southeast Texas?

4. How are counselors trained to prevent bullying?

Conceptual Framework

I used a transformative conceptual framework to guide this study's design and methodology. Under the umbrella of a transformative framework, transformative theory provides guidance on the way adults learn to negotiate meanings, purposes, and values critically, reflectively, and rationally instead of passively accepting the social realities defined by others. The evolution of the transformative research framework by theorists Kuhn (1962), Freire (1970), and Habermas (1971) provided key ideas that Mezirow (1997) used to build his transformative learning theory. The transformative learning theory has come a long way in revisions, modifications, and constructs since the 20th century, when Kuhn (1962) first introduced the "paradigm shift" in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Dewey's goal was to take

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advantage of the natural moving force of making meaning of experiences. Dewey (2009) stated that,

> while the content of knowledge is what has happened, finished and hence settled and sure, the reference of knowledge is future or prospective. For knowledge furnishes the means of understanding or giving meaning to what is still going on and what is to be done. (p. 183)

Mezirow used Habermas's (1970) theory of adult learning to address his own learning theory until his approach became more developed. Dewey's educational theory eventually influenced the foundation of Mezirow's transformative theory (Dewey, 2009).

Christie, Carey, Robertson, and Grainger (2015) argued that Mezirow's theory explains an individual's particular view of the world. Transformative learning involves critical reflection and independent thinking to enable people to make meaning of their experiences. Making sense of experiences is interpreting experiences or making them coherent in order to facilitate change (Mezirow, 1997).

I chose transformative theory for this case study because if middle school counselors are more critically aware, after receiving up-to-date resources and training of bully intervention preparedness, then they will be able to transfer that acquired knowledge to their responsibilities as guidance counselors (Christie et al., 2015). For this study, Mezirow used his work on transformative education and psychology to bring important substance to the attributes and skills counselors must have to effectively mentor and advise school administrators, teacher, parents, and students.

Researchers connected transformative theory with the subject of bullying because school leaders must use reflective judgment to eliminate or modify distorted assumptions of procedures

related to bullying that can block behavior change. Middle school counselors can transmit knowledge learned through their transformative perspectives, which could potentially promote effective and efficient change. School counselors must be fully informed and prepared to advise others and provide immediate action if necessary in order to establish change. Mezirow (1997) stated that the intention of all transformative learning is to bring forth changes for the better. Therefore, school administrators may need to transform the resources and training provided to middle school counselors. By making these changes, administrators will give more significance to the efforts being made to end bullying and stop school violence.

Transformative paradigms are designed by theorists (Freire, 1970; Kuhn, 1962; Habermas, 1971) to bring forth changes that could potentially provide better systems (Mezirow, 1997). MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009) conducted a study on student achievement and a principal's obligation to understand school culture before he or she implements changes using a transformative paradigm. For administrators to make changes, they must transform their understanding of their students' culture. "Principals serve as the change agents to transform the teaching and learning culture of the school," (MacNeil et al., 2009, p.74). The middle school counselors in this study also served as change agents, similar to the principals in MacNeil et al.'s (2009) study. Middle school counselors must have up-to-date training on school district policies for change to be effective. MacNeil et al. (2009) argued that an organization must know it's clear purpose and the actions needed to fulfill that purpose, so that it will transition to work well as it was intended to. An organization suspected of lacking up-to-date systematic procedures for addressing harmful behaviors could benefit from the transformative theory, in an effort to prevent bullying.

My theory for this study was that school counselors would be able to focus on the learning objectives and goals established by effective resources. Providing training and guidance for school counselors would help them develop characteristics that will increase their efficiency in addressing or preventing bullying incidents. Gomez (2010) argued that developing these skills could promote better educator and student relationships. Building these supportive relationships promotes student engagement, positive attitudes, a sense of belonging, and most importantly, the willingness to transform students' behavior (Gomez, 2010). Mezirow (2000) suggested "Formulating more dependable beliefs about our experience, assessing their contexts, seeking informed agreement on their meaning and justification, and making decisions on the resulting insights are central to the adult learning process," (p. 4). Making changes in human capabilities such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, or competencies in education is a growth process (Noe, 2013). Updated resources and training for middle school counselors may help develop a team-like relationship between counselors and faculty, to create active prevention programs to address bullying. As suggested by Mezirow (1997), this type of learning is not an add-on but the essence of transformation and change. Gomez (2010) concluded that if schools intervene and consider options such as providing counseling to bullying victims or implementing prevention programs, bullying could be prevented. Cunningham and Whitten (2007) stated that middle school counselors are in a position that allows them to advocate for the implementation of school violence prevention programs.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

  School bullying and the effects. Bullying has become an area of concern in middle schools around the nation (Whitehead & Dupper, 2005). These researchers determined that acts of violence related to bullying are occurring more among middle school students, and it is

affecting those students negatively. Victims of bullying are likely to exhibit academic

difficulties, aggressive behavior, and social withdrawal (Egan & Todorov, 2009). Bullying can

also affect students into adulthood as well as impact their mental health and well-being. Crozier

and Skliopidou (as cited in Egan & Todforov, 2009) studied some adults who were victims of

adolescent bullying, and they concluded that these adults have unresolved hurt, anger,

embarrassment, and shame related to the bullying. This mental health concern is a significant

reason why addressing incidents of bullying is critical to the well-being of students. Bullying can

result in several mental health impairments in a victim, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal

thoughts or attempts, and eating disorders (Buxton, Potter, & Bostic, 2013).

Most significantly, victims of bullying can become perpetrators of school violence

(Vossekuil et al., 2004). Many of these perpetrators were found to have been bullied, persecuted,

or injured by others before the violent occurrence. Results from a study conducted by the United

States Secret Service and Department of Education indicated that students who carried out

school violence were often victims of bullying (Vossekuil et al., 2004). Those interviewed in

Vossekuil et al.'s (2004) work described attackers as being teased and bullied almost on a daily

basis.

Cyberbullying. According to Meredith (2010), the prevalence of bullying is greater in

middle schools and among female students than male students, and results from the *Combating*

Bullying research showed that the highest occurrences of bullying is among girls (both roles as

bully and victim) beginning in the sixth and seventh grade. The convenience of the Internet has

made it easier for students to become cyberbullies because there is an increase of the forms of

communication, including email and instant messaging through social media sites (Meredith,

2010, p. 313). Middle school students use their cell phones to harass others, forward pictures by

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text messaging, and spread rumors to humiliate their peers, including posting damaging pictures or videos, and spreading rumors through social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram (Huber, 2010, pg. 4). The effects of bullying are detrimental to the health and well-being of students.

Kellaher (2011) noted that, although bullying is often physical, it can also include things like name-calling and spreading rumors. According to Green (2007), bullying is a major concern for survival and has existed for many years all over the world, just not as severe as it is today. Whether the bullying is physical (pushing, hitting, and pinching), verbal (name-calling, terroristic threats, and spreading rumors), or cyberbullying, it is an increasing trend, according to researchers, and it needs to be addressed (Green, 2007, p. 336). Within the last decade, descriptions of bullying included such things as playground pinching, teasing, or simple pushing and punching. In those days, parents advised children that these incidents were just love taps or signs of affection, but today it is more than a love tap (Holloday, 2011, p. 311).

Bullying used to pertain to physical and verbal attacks towards others, but now instances of bullying include cyberbullying, which uses technology applications and social media to bully (Holladay, 2011). Cyberbullying is the repeated use of technology to harass, humiliate, or threaten people and did not even exist a decade ago, yet the problem is pervasive today (Holladay, 2011).Unlike traditional bullying, where the audience consisted of the peers of the victim and the incidents were limited to the people in that group, cyberbullying has a larger public audience.

Prosecuting violators of cyberbullying is challenging because many states do not have criminal laws targeting this type of bullying (Heath, 2008). Some states have cyberstalking statutes in place that pertain to the repeated harassment or threatening of an individual through

the use of the internet and electronic communication; unfortunately, these statutes have limited applicability and success (King, 2010). Limited statutes create a burden on prosecutors, regarding how to approach building a cyberstalking case that meets the requirements for prosecution (Arntfield, 2015; King, 2010). Cases involving cyberbullying that use the cyberstalking statutes are often unresolved because of the difficulty of proving there is a "credible threat" of violence, which cyberbullying does not involve the majority of the time (Arntfield, 2015).

School officials can create fake social media profiles in an attempt to catch cyberbullying as it occurs; however, this could be a complicated approach (Arntfield, 2015). Despite catching cyberbullying in action, disciplining the act could potentially create legal issues because first amendment rights are protected. In Layshock v. Hermitage, Justin Layshock argued that his 1st and 14th amendment rights protected him and allowed him to create a Myspace profile that intentionally humiliated his high school principal (Heath, 2008). Justin was suspended from school, placed in the alternative program, banned from all extracurricular activities, and prevented from participating in his high school graduation ceremony. The courts ruled for the student because the incident happened off campus and did not cause a disruption or create a confrontation in cyberspace; additionally, no threat of physical violence occurred (Heath, 2008). Also, the school had no grounds to punish him for off-campus incidents and doing so violated his parents' 14th amendment right to punish their child themselves. Therefore, school officials' efforts to catch cyberbullying in action may be unsuccessful because of the 1st and 14th amendment rights granted to the people.

Preventing and addressing bullying. Disciplining bullying is not as easy as perceived, but preventing and addressing it is easier (Huber, 2010). Huber (2010) found that disciplining

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bullying must be reasonable, consistent, and appropriate; this will potentially discourage bullying from occurring. To prevent bullying, comprehensive plans need to be in place that can easily be followed and allow educators to reach out to students.

In Eldwood, New York, a program entitled Operation Respect was implemented for students, to target bystanders of bullies (Huber, 2010). A gifted and talented student reported being bullied to her teacher. The teacher decided to develop a program using the book *Stand Up for Yourself and Your Friends* by Criswell (2009). Weeks later, the students who bullied the other student came to her and apologized (Hargrove, 2010, p. 40). One student who gossiped about fellow students to make her friends laugh, reflected back on how she hurt others' feelings:

Having a School Resource Officer (SRO) monitoring the halls and interacting with the students is an effective strategy for intervening when situations arise in the hallways between classes and the only limitation is separating authority figure and friend (Cloud, 2007, p. 60). Bullyproof is a program developed in 1996 by Nan Stein at the Wellesley College Center for Women. The program consisted of 11 lessons of activities based on bullying. The purpose of the program was to educate students on the many different roles students can have in bullying situations (Borntrager, Davis, & Hallford, 2006, p. 93). This program, however, did not show a decrease in observed bullying, but the awareness of bullying increased (Borntrager, Davis, & Hallford, 2006, p. 93). There was not a behavior change in bullying, but there was not an increase in bullying either. This program was successful because of the awareness gained from the program.

The most significant benefit of implementing effective anti-bullying strategies and prevention programs is less time spent handling discipline problems and more focus placed on teaching and learning bully prevention strategies (Green, 2007). Aside from the criminal aspects

of bullying, the parents of victims often dedicate their time to speaking out about their child's death in order to prevent other suicides from taking place. The mother of one victim is the spokesperson for the Megan Meier Foundation, and her speeches focus on educating students to choose not to be a bystander and to do something to help victims of bullying. The father of another victim of bullying visits schools and tells his story in hopes of educating teachers and students on the seriousness of cyberbullying and the damage it causes (Long, 2008, p. 29).

Students need school violence prevention programs that teach conflict resolution skills. Cunningham, Cunningham, Ratcliffe, and Vaillancourt (2010) found that students build stronger peer social relationships when trained on social skills versus only being told not to bully. They also suggested using student involvement to spread awareness. Jenson, Dieterich, Brisson, Bender, and Powell (2010) argued that counselors who used a curriculum focused on social competency and social resistance skills helped students stay out of trouble, build positive relationships, and avoid anti-social behavior. Counselors used this curriculum to promote positive relationships between students. Hall (2004) argued that guidance counselors provide all participants involved the opportunity to learn social and conflict resolution skills. Students will develop plans of action to help guide them in how to proceed when they encounter unresolved peer conflict. Gourneau (2012) stated that providing students with the knowledge to develop social skills will minimize bullying. Students can use these programs to help them reach an agreement to calm down, plan, and rethink unresolved conflict (Crawford, 2013, Gourneau, 2012). The Texas public school system is required by the TEA to educate students with essential knowledge and skills; however, this curriculum does not include behavioral essential knowledge and skills. School violence prevention programs include essential knowledge and skills that school counselors can use to educate and implement.

The Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum is a school violence prevention program that schools use for teaching social skills to students so that they can develop empathy training, impulse control, and anger management skills (Committee for Children, 2010). Second Step is an evidenced-based, data driven prevention program that was identified as successful because of its structured approach (Carey et al, 2009). The program's effectiveness was measured by researchers using rigorous psychometric standards for reliability and validity, such as Aggressive Behavior Scales, School Social Behavior Scales, and Social Skills Rating System (Carey et al., 2008). The program curriculum pertained to kindergarten through eighth grade students. One potential outcome of the program was teaching students social skills that reduced aggressive and bullying behaviors (Carey et al., 2009). Participation in Second Step requires students to attend two sessions a week for thirty minutes.

The United States Surgeon General argued that the development of programs with adequate standards should replace programs that do not meet those standards (Farrell, Valois, Meyer & Tidwell, 2003). Responding in Peace and Positive Ways (RIPP) is a program that could replace an ineffective violence prevention program. Farrell et al. (2003) conducted a study on RIPP to determine its effectiveness among middle school students in rural settings. Five rural counties in Florida were considered. Farrell et al. (2003) discussed the study's findings:

> An important question addressed in this study was the extent to which a violence prevention program developed in an urban school system with a predominantly African American student population would be useful in a rural school system serving a more ethnically diverse population. (p. 162)

Despite the need to study the impact RIPP could have in other community settings further the school-wide implementation of RIPP did produce positive changes (Farrell et al., 2003). The

overall conclusion of Farrell et al.'s (2003) work (based on self-reported measures) was that violence prevention programs are needed and should be better implemented by "highly skilled, committed, and well-trained staff" (Farrell et al., 2003). Students should be prepared for verbal or physical threats or attacks, and they should not be afraid when it happens. Preparation is the key in the fight against school violence (Farrell et al., 2003). Curricula for prevention programs should include a focus on awareness methods such as increasing knowledge or improving social skills, as evidenced by the success of the Second Step and RIPP programs.

   School counselor roles. School counselors have the opportunity to advocate and enforce integrated approaches to bullying into the school environment. Encouraging stakeholder involvement in bully prevention is another method school counselors can strive for. The support from other school administrators, such as assistant principals and principals, can assist counselors in the approach to preventing bullying. Cunningham and Whitten (2007) stated that middle school counselors are in a position that allows them to advocate for the implementation of bullying prevention programs. One of the roles of school counselors, as described by the Texas Education Agency (1994), is that of program manager. Whitted and Dupper (2005) argued that school counselors play a pivotal role as program developers, program promoters, and on-site coordinators of bullying prevention programs. School counselors are program managers and coordinating bullying prevention programs is appropriate to their role. The Texas Educational Agency (1994) identified middle school counselors' roles using five basic criteria: guidance counseling, consultation, coordination, assessment, and program management. School counselors in Texas are required to participate in continuous professional development that includes a continuum of learning opportunities to enhance research skills with up-to-date development in the counseling field (TEA, 1994, p. 3).

Phillips and Cornell (2012) identified school counselors as more qualified and experienced with investigating student reports of bullying. In their study, school counselors effectively identified victims of bullying through an interview process. School guidance counselors have the training and qualifications to conduct interviews to collect sensitive and personal information from students. Phillips & Cornell (2012) stated that school counselors have undergone specific training and learning in their collegiate studies, in order to provide counseling and be able to interview students to collect sensitive information. These qualifications aid in how effective counselors are as a resource in identifying victims of bullying. DiMatteo (2012) stated that school counselors are the people who are called upon to provide counseling, prevention, and intervention information to students. Administrators are positioned to reduce the prospect of school violence and to draw upon resources. Therefore, administrators enforce policies and procedures pertaining to school violence and then administer disciplinary measures for those events; school guidance counselors, however, provide assistance and training to students. If students receive training on appropriate social interactions, then they would not need to use trying to fit in to provide a secure place for themselves to stand (Jacobson, 2010).

McCormac (2014) examined the effectiveness of a bully intervention program designed to reduce incidences of bullying. Guidance counselors led the intervention program. Counselors collaborated and communicated with parents, teachers, administrators and staff to promote school safety. Austin (2012) argued that school counselors are the key stakeholders in the intervention and prevention process, and as incidences of bullying increase, the roles and responsibilities of school administrators should shift toward examining how policies can be implemented to ensure the safety of all students in the schools. School counselors are uniquely

qualified and trained to address not only victims of bullying but the bystanders and bullies who perpetrate violence (Ockerman, Kramer, & Bruno, 2014).

Bullying policies and laws. Texas legislators established their laws under amendments to existing statutes of laws, such as those pertaining to student conduct. According to the U.S. Department of Education reports, Texas was the only state that did not require their school districts to create bullying or harassment policies (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). School districts were only mandated to develop codes of conduct addressing general student behavior. Texas was not required to adopt a state model for bullying policies. However, in June 2011, Governor Rick Perry signed legislation that required Texas to create bullying policies. The Texas Education Code §37.001 requires school districts to have specific options developed under a local policy that is appropriate for each grade level and provides for preventing and intervening in student discipline problems, including bullying, harassment, and making hit lists.

The framing of individual state school district policies varies significantly. State laws require that school district policies contain key components such as defining bullying, reporting and investigating expectations, staff training, and bullying prevention (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). According to the analysis report, Texas did not include the following components in their state laws: enumerated groups, district policy, district policy review, definitions, reporting, investigations, written records, and mental health (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 41).

Policies in each school district can vary depending on the guidelines they choose to incorporate, as long as they follow the state laws put in place, according to the Texas Education Agency. There are 43 states in the United States taking on the fight against bullying, with both laws and policies in place that link bullying behavior to specific procedures for investigating

incidents (Graham, 2010, pp. 66–69). According to Texas Education Code §37.001, school districts are required to have specific options developed under a local policy that is appropriate for each grade level and provides for preventing and intervening in student discipline problems, including bullying, harassment, and making hit lists. Four school districts selected for this study, define bullying as written or verbal expression, expression through electronic methods, or physical conduct against another student on school property, at a school-sponsored or related activity, or in a district-operated vehicle (HJISD, 2016; KISD, 2016; LISD, 2016; PAISD, 2016). The definition includes the following:

- Results in harm to the student or the student's property;

- Places a student in reasonable fear of physical harm or of damage to the student's property; or

- To be sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive to create an intimidating, threatening, or abusive educational environment for a student.

Efforts to keep kids safe from intimidation at school are gaining momentum, but some question the need for new laws (Bailey, 2008). Implementing laws and policies against bullying is a step toward stopping it (Bailey, 2008; Hargrove, 2010). Legislation and many policies are changing to prevent bullying and the violence that comes from it.

The tormentors in the case of one victim in South Hadley, Massachusetts, were charged with harassment, civil rights violations, stalking, and other pending charges (Hargrove, 2010). A mother of one student posed as a boy on a social network site, MySpace, and befriended a student then harassed her. The mother was charged with three misdemeanors of computer fraud as well as conspiracy and computer hacking charges. These violations were considered cyberbullying and violated MySpace's terms of service. The posting of pictures and personal

information of a teenage girl led to the harassment by men wanting sex. The mother was the first person to be charged under Missouri's revised cyberbullying law. The charge is a Class D felony charge, and if found guilty, the accused could face up to four years in prison (Meredith, 2010, p. 323). In Texas, there are only laws that address and protect children from bullying (Vossekuil et al., 2004).

There is no specific federal legislation focusing on bullying (Graham, 2010). However, categorizing bullying as discriminatory harassment requires federally-funded schools to address and resolve the situation at the federal level (Stein, 2007). In fact, federally-funded schools that do not respond to harassment (including bullying) will violate civil rights laws enforced by the Department of Education and the Department of Justice (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). This violation includes Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); therefore, anyone who receives a report of harassing conduct must take action to investigate and resolve the situation (Cornell & Limber, 2015).

In Texas, bullying and harassment are separate entities, but counselors are still required by federal law to address any reports of discrimination including bullying, if they receive federal funding (Cornell & Limber, 2015). TEA (1994) identifies school guidance counselors as the persons responsible for the intervention and prevention processes to address bullying incidents. Based on civil rights laws, school guidance counselors will be held accountable civilly for not immediately and responding to reported bullying incidents (Austin, 2012; Cornell & Limber, 2015; Stein, 2007).

Methodological Literature

There are many studies that have attempted to discover the most efficient approach to end bullying. However, the debate should not focus solely on stopping bullying but preparing and training stakeholders responsible for addressing reported incidents of such behavior. In their study on school counselors' perspectives and readiness, Chambers, Zyromski, Asner-Self, Kimberly, and Kimemia (2010) presented literature arguing for the need of counselor preparedness in bullying prevention. Chambers et al. (2010) argued that when bullying is not addressed leads toward more serious acts of school violence. One of the primary roles of the school counselor is to address the needs of students in times of crisis; therefore, much of the literature argues that school counselors' perceptions of adequate training and resources are critical in preparedness to address bullying immediately (Chambers et al., 2010, p. 4).

Qualitative research is inductive and provides meaning to studies (Walsh, 2010). A qualitative inquiry method brought meaning to Walsh's (2010) study for advocating safer responses to defiant student violence using a case study approach. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the perceptions of participants on their effectiveness in responding to rebellious student violence. The researcher collected the data through interviews with ten educators. Walsh (2010) concluded that the findings of this study proved that receiving training makes members of crisis response teams more efficient in responding to student violence. "Properly trained and supported emergency response teams will make it possible for school officials to have shared ownership and pride in actually dealing with defiant student violence" (Walsh, 2010, p. 72). The perspectives of members, through relevant qualitative research, guided the researcher's study.

Analyzing different views from individuals involved in the implementation of intervention and prevention strategies can also provide important bottom-up approaches to

research. School districts created policies and procedures to address bullying; unfortunately, training on up-to-date resources is not a priority (Church, 2011; Walsh, 2010). Teachers are usually the first respondents to handle such behaviors, so getting their perspectives on training for those policies and procedures seems logical (Church, 2011). Chambers et al. (2010) and Walsh (2010) argued that school counselors are the key stakeholders whose valid role in schools includes addressing reported incidents of bullying. Church (2011) examined six teachers' views regarding school violence policies and procedures. He argued that those important perspectives provided insight into what obstacles were faced, and on preventing school violence or intervening to stop it. Examining the perceptions of those involved with bullying is important in learning how to make changes for effectiveness. Church used interviews to focus on studying people in their natural setting, as well as exploring attitudes, behavior, and experiences. In conclusion, through qualitative research, Church (2011) was able to share the experiences, beliefs, and insights from the teachers' perspectives in order to transform and make changes on the preparedness of policies and procedures addressing school violence. The same collection of experiences, beliefs, and insights from school counselors regarding bullying can help make a similar transformation of procedures to addressing bullying elsewhere.

Review of Methodological Issues

Other researchers have focused on measuring preparedness and the use of resources to prevent and respond to bullying through quantitative analysis. This approach does not provide the relevant experiences or meaningful information that is needed to make preventions or interventions better because the lack of meaningful information provided through multiple choice answers. DiMatteo (2012) conducted an exploratory analysis of the frequency of a principal's use of resources to prevent, respond, and build students' social and emotional

competence. The issue with this type of study is that the utilization of the surveys is pre-generated questions with answer choices. These answer choices do not provide meaningful and relevant information to the issue or problem because pre-generated answer choices have been established for the participant to choose from not allowing them to provide relevant feedback of their experiences. After analyzing this data, researchers could only postulate that the problem was likely to be present but no information was given that could lead to improvements. The results of this data may indicate a starting point for formulating ideas, but nothing more concrete was given. In conclusion, researchers proved only that principals did not explore all options for addressing bullying incidents; unfortunately, there was no information about why those options were not considered.

Walsh (2010) also argued that using qualitative research is necessary when searching for meanings of experiences. In his study, he wanted to discover the perceptions of school staff in responding as a crisis team to school violence. Based on collecting qualitative data, Walsh determined that training as a team, returning as a team, and meeting periodically as a team makes team members feel more useful in responding to defiant student violence. Also, Crawford (2013) conducted a qualitative case study and was able to explore the violence prevention program to determine why some students were unable to resolve conflicts. Based on gathering this data, the mediators of the program were able to provide significant insights into sessions to determine what changes could be made to better the program. In conclusion of this study, mediators needed more training on how to address unresolved conflict resolutions rather than just training on how to deal with conflicts. This is why qualitative research is necessary because it is the only method to gather perceptions of individuals on what is needed.

Seidman (2013) stated that interviews provide researchers with an in-depth understanding of lived experiences; therefore, this type of research serves as a solid foundational framework that guides perspectives to interpret meaning. Qualitative research for this study is going to "formulate our problem and research questions to study and how we seek information to answer the questions," (Creswell, 2013, p. 18). Collecting and examining the perspectives of middle school counselors was important in this study because the assumptions about what is reality and truth in their perspectives guided me, as the researcher, to explain why and how things are regarding school violence. The natural setting of qualitative research is a characteristic that is a constant when it comes to qualitative methods of research. The natural environment that is studied and observed allows a researcher to collect data on items or issues. However, to gather data on the subjects or issues is actually putting into practice with real people, real problems, and the real cultural influences facing the questions or issues (Seidman, 2013).

Synthesis of Research Findings

As the number of bullying incidents continues to rise, effective prevention and intervention implementation by key stakeholders is necessary. School counselors are experienced and qualified to advocate and implement bullying procedures. They have received adequate training in college to provide counseling to students (Phillips & Cornell, 2012).

Some researchers have found that school counselors contend that more training is needed to address bullying or school violence (Francisco & Fasko, 1999). The results of Francisco and Fasko's (1999) study indicated that data focused more on training in crisis intervention could also benefit school counselors. Of the school counselors who participated in Francisco and Fasko's (1999) study, 92% suggested that they would attend intervention training, and 74% reported that they had attended previous training, while 24% have not. "Designing programs that

meet the National Model guidelines, school counselors can establish services to address the immediate needs and concerns of students" (Chambers et al., 2010, p. 24). Counselors can use this model to provide a framework for effectively addressing school violence incidents. Chambers et al. (2010) used the National School Violence Survey (NSVS) to determine counselors' perceptions on preparedness for addressing school bullying, and found that counselors felt only "somewhat prepared."

Critique of Previous Research

Power-Elliott and Harris (2012) conducted a study on the roles of guidance counselors and their roles addressing bullying. Research showed that guidance counselors, because of their education, may respond to bullying incidents in unique ways, as compared with other adults in the school environment. The researchers found that there was no correlation between prevention/intervention training and how counselors responded to reported incidents of bullying. Researchers concluded those participants' responses to bullying significantly influence school policies, programs, and training. Power-Elliott and Harris (2012) suggested that counselor training in the prevention and intervention of school bullying is a significant part of the solution to fighting the issue. School leaders need to support comprehensive efforts to prevent these harmful behaviors or all types of school bullying and commit to creating safe, supportive, respectful, and pleasant climates for learning. These efforts begin with adequately training the people responsible for identifying and addressing reported acts of school violence or bullying. Addressing bullying and preventing it requires all stakeholders such as administrators and counselors to be involved (Espelage, Polanin, & Low, 2014).

Chapter 2 Summary

There is an increasing trend of harmful behaviors among middle school students; these behaviors now include more prevalent acts of bullying. Responding immediately to reported incidents of bullying requires adequate resources for providing prompt and thorough investigations. However, researchers must identify the gap between clear and concise methods or strategies, in order to resolve the challenges counselors face when addressing incidents of bullying. Identifying the specifics for addressing bullying intervention strategies will allow school administrators and staff to prevent further acts of bullying and protect victims.

Chapter 3: The Methodology

As discussed in Chapter 2, bullying incidents are evident in schools and are a growing issue among all students; however, they are more prevalent among middle school students (Cunningham & Whitten, 2002; Gomez, 2013; Farrell, Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003). School counselors can use effective resources and trainings to better guide them in addressing such behavior. Bullying is the most recognized form of school violence, and Gomez (2010) suggested that researchers study bullying and school violence as one entity. Many victims of bullying are the perpetrators of school violence, essentially acting out in revenge (Chamberlain, 2013). Bridging the gap between what is happening to address bullying and what needs to happen could ensure school counselors have adequate resources and training; if not, then they should be provided with up-to-date materials.

Research Questions

The research questions for this qualitative case study were the following:

1. What are the perceptions of school counselors on the resources and currently provided training to address bullying?

2. What strategies do middle school counselors use to address bullying?

3. How do strategies and training to address bullying vary between districts in Southeast Texas?

4. How are counselors trained to prevent bullying?

Purpose and Design of the Study

My purpose in this case study was to identify middle school counselor's perceptions on resources, strategies used, and what additional training may be needed to adequately address bullying incidents. This case study was necessary because counselors' perceptions of their

challenges, resources, and training may provide new information for administrators. Previously, researchers have only focused on preparedness or resources being used to prevent and address school violence through quantitative analysis. DiMatteo (2012) used pre-generated questions with answer choices in a discussion of a principal's frequency of use of resources to prevent and respond to bullying, and to build social and emotional competence among students. Using surveys with answer choices limits the information to be obtained. Participants cannot provide in-depth and elaborative information that the researcher can use to make conclusions. The results of answer choices may not indicate meaningful and relevant information related to the issue. The only data gained is that there is likely to be a problem, but with no other information on how to make changes for improvement.

Crawford (2013) conducted a qualitative case study and was able to explore a violence prevention program and determine why some students were unable to resolve conflicts. Based on the interpretation of this data, the mediators of the program were able to provide significant insights into sessions to determine what changes could be made to better the program. In conclusion of this study, Crawford (2013) discovered that mediators needed training on how to address unresolved conflict resolutions rather just training on how to deal with conflicts. In this case study, I used qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews) to determine the views of middle school counselors regarding their training and procedures related to bullying issues.

I sought to gain insights of middle school counselors from four local school districts in Southeast Texas, regarding their perceptions of bullying and prevention preparedness. School counselors at these middle schools (grade levels sixth through eighth) were the focus of this study. I examined the experiences of middle school counselors in these school districts, as well as the resources and training provided to them. Middle school counselors are required to address

and implement interventions related to student reported violence, as mandated by local school districts and the state of Texas (TEA, 1994).

Qualitative Design

Yin (2013) said that using a case study satisfied three aspects of qualitative methodology: describing, explaining, and understanding. These points identified issues useful for generating cases, solutions, and conceptual questions to test. Researchers use qualitative research methods to collect in-depth data on what is complete, what more needs to be completed, and what opportunities exist to bridge the gap between these two. The unit of analysis for my case study was the responses from school counselors through the use of semi-structured interviews. Using interviews allowed me to collect data without the risk of harm to individuals and provided me the opportunity to incorporate from interviews the evidence that support conclusions. School counselors are not at risk of psychological damage from retelling their experiences of addressing school violence, because they are not victims sharing their story. They also have the training to counsel victims of incidents of violence; therefore, they are not at risk for psychological harm (Ockerman et al., 2014; Power & Harris, 2012). Researchers surmised that interviews were a time-efficient means of collecting a range of experiences and thoughts of school counselors (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2013). According to Seidman (2013), interviews are the best way for counselors to provide an in-depth understanding of experiences and the only way to investigate an educational organization's policies and perspectives.

The middle school counselors who participated in this study were encouraged to share their experiences and perceptions in an open-ended format through semi-structured interviews. This flexible questioning was the best approach to build and explore responses from participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2013). I used this information to add to what

current research studies are concluding about bullying and the need for adequately trained school counselors (Phillips & Cornell, 2012). Researchers used this data to provide understanding about school counselors' perceptions concerning the implementation of strategies for reporting incidents of bullying, as well as their perceptions on what more is needed (such as updated training and resources) to bridge the gap between what is not complete and what is being done.

Studying counselors' points of view allowed me to have an increased understanding of the challenges they encounter when implementing strategies to address bullying. I also discovered how strategies and training addressing bullying vary between multiple school districts, and the differences in how counselors receive that training (Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2013). School administrators may need to transform the resources and training provided to middle school counselors (updating resources and training). If school counselors want to better their understanding of how to improve the way they address incidents of bullying, then they must be able to reflect and then initiate change critically. Making sense of experiences is interpreting them coherently to facilitate change (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative learning is another term for independent thought (Christie et al., 2015, p. 22). Through the use of transformative learning, middle school counselors can promote change because if these counselors are more prepared to enforce district policies, they will be able to transfer the knowledge they acquire from adequate resources and training and apply those changes to their responsibilities as guidance counselors (or make changes to policies that do not work).

School counselors must be prepared to advise others about bullying prevention and intervention methods in order to promote change. Using current and practical resources to provide immediate action is necessary to stop and prevent violence. Counselors participate in ongoing staff development; however, it is possible that the appropriate type of training does not

meet the current needs correlated with the procedures and programs already in place. Therefore, the resources and training provided to middle school counselors by school districts may require updated information to transform their learning and bring forth changes to policies, strategies, and resources, in an effort to stop bullying.

Research Population and Sampling Method

This study took place in four school districts in Southeast Texas. These school districts are located within the same county. These school districts have middle schools (grade levels sixth through eighth), and each campus has at least one full-time guidance counselor. According to Yin (2016) and Merriam (2002), case studies include two levels of sampling (broader and narrower). Researchers would categorize this qualitative case study at the narrow level because this case study took place in only four school districts. Sampling for this qualitative case study was purposeful (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2016). The most beneficial aspects of using a small, purposeful sampling for this study included the following: school counselors are the employees responsible for addressing incidents of bullying; the counselors have firsthand knowledge of reported incidents of violence; and they are more likely to participate and share what they know (Cunningham & Whitten, 2002; Farrell, Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003; Harris & Jeffrey, 2010). I narrowed this study to specifically pertain to middle schools (grades sixth through eighth) in four school districts because these grade categories reported bullying the most compared to other grade levels, as concluded by the most current School Crime Supplement of the National Crime Victimization Survey (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2015).

My main focus for this study was to collect enough data through these semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires until no new information was provided and saturation was met (King, 2014; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2016). In the event that saturation had not been reached, it

was proposed that I, as the researcher, could include other middle school counselors in neighboring school districts. I did not initially consider these neighboring school districts because of better access to the four school districts selected. I utilized purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2016) because middle schools (grades sixth through eighth) reported bullying the most compared to other grade levels, as reported by the most current School Crime Supplement of the National Crime Victimization Survey (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2015). The most beneficial aspect of using a small, purposeful sampling for this qualitative study was to generalize the data to school districts that are similar in demographics.   Despite the potential limitations of using such a narrow sample, I was able to use the results of my study, related to the understanding, validity, and meaningfulness of the perceptions of middle school counselors, in order to formulate conclusions related to the challenges counselors may be facing in regards to taking action against bullying (King, 2014; Walsh, 2010). By utilizing the participation of school counselors in this case study, I was able to provide an understanding of their real life experiences, in an effort to learn more about bullying.

Access to participants. The superintendent of each school district granted permission to conduct the study at these locations, allowing me to begin the recruitment of participants. Requesting permission from campus principals at each site was not necessary once approval was granted by the superintendent. However, school administrators were given a copy of the consent, as a courtesy. I conducted interviews after school so as not to affect daily operations of the school. The counselors from these middle schools were given an opportunity to voluntarily participate and invited, by email, to participate in the study. I used correspondence through email to provide better time and date stamped information to document attempts of contact. Initially, participants were contacted via email to introduce myself and formally ask for volunteers. The

counselors that agreed to participate were emailed an informed consent (Appendix B). Each

participant read, signed, and returned the consent form as a scanned pdf document in an email.

Questions for the interview protocol and the questionnaire were semi-structured and had been

developed based on current research obtained through responses from school counselors, which

helped me identify insights, strategies, and interpretations of the problems related to bullying

(Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2016).

Instrumentation

Before the scheduled interviews, counselors received a blind questionnaire to assist with

triangulation. I mailed the questionnaire to each counselor and included a postage stamped return

envelope. I included instructions for completing the questionnaire, to ensure that there would be

no identifying information associated with each questionnaire. I used the anonymous

questionnaire to compare responses provided during in person interviews. I scheduled interviews

with the school counselors and then conducted the interviews in their offices after regular school

hours. This procedure ensured that the conversation was not interrupted and counselors were able

to provide adequate information. I followed a scripted semi-structured interview protocol

(developed based on the literature) to ensure consistency and validity of all meetings (see

Appendix C).

I reviewed school-reported state records to explore what kinds of bullying incidents were

reported. The U. S. Department of Education (2011) reported that procedures for reporting

bullying are mentioned in policies, according to the most recent survey. However, reporting

requirements differ according to who is responsible for reporting what and when. Three of the

four school districts in this qualitative case study did not have distinct reporting policies.

Bullying procedures are integrated within each school district's student code of conduct. There

were no reported findings of stand-alone bullying reporting policies or procedures. This finding indicates why reporting incidents to the district administration was not necessarily required or mandated.

Data Collection

Conducting a case study involves the inductive practice of scrutinizing data to develop a clear and concise description of the experiences (Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2013). King (2014) collected data through interviews by systematically organizing information. In his study, King (2014) recorded interviews using free downloadable software called Audacity to validate details of interviews. I used this process to provide an opportunity to go back and verify any clarifications. For this qualitative study, I audio recorded discussion sessions to ensure the accuracy of the data collected, using the same free downloadable software called Audacity. I transcribed the recorded interview data gathered from interviews and then identified themes using a software program called Atlas.ti.

I protected the identity of participants by replacing their names with a letter and using numerical identifying codes that were not associated with their identity. I did not distribute interview data information to any other agency, and I kept that information private and confidential as promised in the informed consent. I stored all collected data on a USB drive and kept it secured in a locked safe with a key in my home until the conclusion of the study. The advising staff members and I will be the only ones to have access to the stored data on the USB drive until disposal. I also backed up the data in a Google Drive account belonging to me, and I am the only person with access. I will delete all contents on the USB drive and deactivate the Google Drive account, with the contents being erased 3 years from the conclusion of the study. I used the findings from the qualitative study to draw conclusions about possible updates of

resources and training for prevention programs against school violence for counselors. Seidman (2013) suggested using more than one interview series to collect data. However, in this study, one semi-structured interview with counselors was sufficient because conducting additional interviews could have led participants to change their responses. I reconstructed counselors' experiences to provide better details and to encourage reflection on the meaning of their experiences.

School counselors in this study did not have to have minimum years of experience as a guidance counselor to participate because it was not necessary considering the training for their degree, certification, and required staff development. School counselors hold a master's degree accredited by an accrediting agency (as recognized by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board), complete the Texas Education Agency (TEA) certification exam, and have a minimum of two years of classroom teaching experience in a public or accredited private school (Texas Education Agency, 2004). Also, school counselors in Texas are required to participate in continuous professional development every school year with an accumulated 120 hours per certification period of 5 years, which includes a continuum of learning opportunities to enhance research skills with up-to-date development in the counseling field (TEA, 1994, p. 3).

Number and duration of interviews. I conducted interviews individually in one session with a reserved timing of at least 30 minutes. I also used a scripted interview protocol guide for each semi-structured interview, to maintain consistency and accuracy. I reminded each of the participants of the rationale of the recorded interviews and who would have access to the information. When using semi-structured interviews, it is common for questions to lead to other questions, especially with open-ended questioning (Yin, 2016). I conducted the interviews in

this manner to guide participants and to provide a more detailed history of their experiences (Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2013).

I maximized reliability by using semi-structured interview protocols because the expansion of their perceptions regarding implementing strategies to address bullying provided rich and thick details. I used this structure to help complete the study, by determining how to better assist school counselors with addressing incidents of bullying. Interviews took place after school on the campus where each counselor worked, when students had left for the school day. By following this procedure, I eliminated interruptions and secured the confidentiality of responses.

Identification of Attributes

The researcher asked the participants 11 semi-structured interview questions pertaining to bullying. As defined in Chapter 1, bullying is the physical act of hitting and the verbal acts of name-calling and spreading rumors, including insults, teasing, and excluding (Kellaher, 2011). Through semi-structures interviews and blind questionnaires, I was able to gain information about counselors' perceptions on bullying preparedness. These questions were developed to discover middle school counselor's perceptions on resources, strategies used, and what additional training may be needed to provide prompt and thorough investigations of students adequately reporting bullying incidents. One question asked "What, if any, do you think are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in addressing bullying?" The responses provided during the interview and written responses on the blind questionnaires I was able to determine counselors do face challenges when addressing bullying. Overall, participants noted that there is a need for more resources on prevention programs addressing bully awareness. With this insight

I was able to answer the first research question, what are the perceptions of school counselors on the resources and currently provided training to address bullying?

Data Analysis Procedures

Developing systematic methods to analyze the design of this qualitative case study was important to classify, categorize, and manage the collected data. Creswell (2013), Leedy and Ormrod (2010), and Yin (2013) suggested using steps to achieve a detailed and systematic interpretation of data when identifying patterns and themes. As a backup, I saved recordings on a USB drive and in a Google Drive account electronically. Once I completed transcription and was assured of accuracy, I deleted the records, unless written permission to use this information in the presentation of the thesis was provided in writing as described on the consent form. I protected the identity of participants and ensured confidentiality through the immediate deletion of the recordings. I typed the transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews in a Microsoft Word document and saved them on the same USB drive and Google Drive as the recordings. I sent the transcribed text as a Microsoft Word document attachment to each participant to verify accuracy. If corrections were needed, I revised the responses at that time. I kept all collected data stored on a USB drive and secured in a locked safe in my home. Only the researcher and advising staff members will have access to the stored data on the USB drive until disposal. I was the only person with access to login information to the Google Drive. I will delete all stored on this drive and the Google Drive account will be deactivated with contents erased 3 years from the conclusion of the study.

Triangulation occurs when the researcher identifies evidence from sources to document a code or theme from other sources of data, which strengthens the study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2013). As suggested by Creswell (2013 and Yin (2013) the use of two instruments (blind

questionnaire and semi-structured interview) established triangulation. The establishment of credibility was through member checking of counselors reviewing summaries of their interviews to compare school counselor's interpretations of their reality of experiences. The goal was to identify important themes in order to analyze interview data; I used Atlas.ti to organize the transcribed data and then connected phrases or keywords to identify themes within the transcribed text (King, 2014). As suggested by Creswell (2013) and Hatch (2002) to guide the coding process, I asked myself questions such as: What strategies were they using? What was going on here? What did I, as the researcher, learn from this information? The emergent themes included: bully awareness, procedures, counselor roles and responsibilities, closing the gap between what is done and not done, classroom guidance counseling, how to report bullying, discipline referrals, intervention and prevention programs, student involvement programs, training for students, and resources. I examined data from the semi-structured interviews, blind questionnaires, and available school records then developed categories or typologies that reflected emerging themes to guide comparisons. Saturation was met once themes no longer emerged and the data was reduced from all sources of data. In the event saturation was not met, it was proposed that I reach out to middle school counselors in a neighboring school district. Neighboring school districts were not initially considered because I had better access to the local school districts chosen.

The unit of analysis studied was middle school counselors. Also, analysis was dependent on the reported bullying incidents at middle schools in four Texas school districts. In this study, I was guided by clear connections made between the data collected and the research questions. I achieved coding through a case study approach identifying themes (perceptions) based on the assumptions guiding this study: bullying negatively affects middle school students; counselors

can have a positive impact on victims through implementation of intervention and prevention methods, and the assurance of confidentiality through voluntary participation (Gomez, 2010; Yin, 2013).

Limitations of the Research Design

Limitations. Limitations of a study are those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from your research (Creswell, 2013). The small sample size was a limitation because I gathered data in four school districts with at least one middle school counselor participating from each district. The following individuals were not included because the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of middle school counselors: elementary school administrators, staff, students, teachers, and parents; middle school administrators, students, teachers, and parents. As there are limitations with any research, the expected limitations of the data analysis were the small sample size, some questions may be left unanswered, participants may have elected not to give certain information during the interview session, or they may have chosen not to participate at all. If a member had not provided a response to a question, I would have moved on to the next question and documented that the participant did not submit a response.

Despite the elaborate and in-depth information provided by counselors, I reviewed the findings with caution because this qualitative case study intended to gain only the perspectives from school counselors' experiences and meanings of bullying. The concerns or attitudes from participants in one school district may not be the best representation of all school counselors in general, but researchers of future studies can use the results of my study to offer guidance and insights to administrators on what updated resources and training school counselors may need.

I used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, all of which did not reflect the position of the school district policies and procedures or decision makers outside the views of counselors (King, 2014). Limitations to this case study may have affected the interpretation of findings, due to the study being focused on middle school counselors in only four school districts. Questions used for both the semi-structured interviews and questionnaire were developed based on the same review of the literature. The questionnaire may have limited or guided the content of responses from counselors.

Delimitations. Lessne and Harmalker (2015) reported that the prevalence of bullying occurring more among sixth grade through eighth grade students was higher than that reported at other grade levels, which made studying middle school the preferred area to consider. As a qualitative case study, this research was narrow, intended to gain perspectives, and limited to middle school counselors who could relate to other research on bullying. Delimitations are choices made by the researcher such as boundaries that have been set for the study (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2013). Delimitations to this case study affected the interpretation of findings due to the focus of middle school counselors in four school districts creating a significantly small sample size. My purpose for this study was to investigate the perceptions of middle school counselors on what bullying acts were happening, to address incidents, and to determine what needs to be completed and what gaps need to close between what is happening to address bullying and what else should be done. This approach was convenient for me because of the access to collecting data. Therefore, there were no risks expected to affect the purpose of this qualitative case study (King, 2104).

Assumptions. Qualitative case studies depend on the revealed information from participants, adequate descriptions of experiences, and remembering situations that they

encountered (Yin, 2013). Methodological assumptions consist of the research methods used in

the process of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). The assumptions guiding my study included

the following: bullying negatively affects middle school students; counselors can have a positive

impact on victims through intervention and prevention methods; participants will not be afraid to

participate; participants have the assurance of confidentiality; participation is voluntary; and

participants will answer questions with integrity and give detailed accounts of experiences. I used

these assumptions to help guide this qualitative study, in order to gain the perspectives of school

counselors' experiences and meanings of bullying.

Validity

In middle schools, school counselors are usually the personnel designated to address

reported incidents of youth violence and bullying (Cunningham & Whitten, 2002; Farrell,

Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003; Harris & Jeffrey, 2010). Schaefer-Schium and Ginsberg (2003)

conducted a study to show that counselors want additional resources. These findings were in the

Warning Signs initiative published by the American Psychological Association (APA) public

education campaign. These findings indicated that school counselors need more training dealing

with youth violence. There are four criteria to consider in a qualitative study: credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin,

2016). Yin (2013) stated that credibility of the research is what makes a qualitative research

study strong and believable to readers. Credibility will also enhance the research with clear

descriptions describing the assumptions of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Credibility. Credibility is the responsibility of the researcher, to add value to the

research by collecting data, interpreting it, and reporting the findings (Seidman, 2013; Yin,

2013). Creswell (2013) stated that the best way to validate credibility is by member checking;

this consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account. I required the school counselors to review rough drafts of summaries of their interviews for accuracy and credibility.

Transferability. Transferability is the notion of taking the analytic generalizations from a qualitative study and applying them to other situations (Yin, 2016). Despite the focus on middle school counselors as leaders addressing reported incidents of bullying, my study was universally generalizable to bullying across the nation as evidenced by about 98% of middle school students across the nation (grade levels sixth through eighth) that reported bullying at school (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2013; Robers et al., 2014).I created clear and concise descriptions of the research, and assumptions were described to enhance transferability and allow replication (King, 2104).

Dependability. Dependability are the changes along the way of the research and the documenting of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used a scripted semi-structured interview protocol as a guide to facilitate all meetings.

Confirmability. Confirmability in case studies demonstrates procedures used (data collection methods) to replicate similar outcomes (Yin, 2013). Therefore, documenting all procedures was necessary, data was checked and verified, and all interview responses were confirmed by school counselors (King, 2014).

Ethical Issues

Merriam (2002) suggested that the researcher serves as the instrument for collecting and analyzing data in qualitative research. Researchers should be effective communicators who can establish and maintain a good relationship with participants. Participants should be able to trust the researcher. I maintained and guaranteed privacy and confidentiality of participants at all

times throughout the research, as informed in the consent to participate (Appendix B). Following the ethical codes of conduct, guidelines for research, institutional review boards (IRBs), consent forms, and vetting committees, any potential harm is avoidable (Yin, 2013). IRB approval is required before the initiation of any research can begin.

Obtaining informed consent to prevent harm to participants is one of the most important steps in conducting research. The first consent obtained was permission to conduct the study in the four school districts provided by the superintendents. Next, I asked school counselors to volunteer to participate in the study via email invitation. Once school counselors agreed to participate, I sent and then obtained the informed consent to participate documents by email. All participants in the study were aware of the aspects of the study through informed consent. Providing participants informed consent through email was a better way to affirm that informed consent was attainable through the use of email correspondence with the dates and times available. Therefore, this assisted with retaining and storing the data. In the informed consent form, I included the purpose and methods of the study, benefits, possibility of harm from the study, confidentiality and anonymity, data storage, ethical procedures, and my full contact information (see Appendices A & B).

Confidential information was not to be disclosed. Privacy represents the constitutional right of an individual to choose the manner, extent, time, and place to share with others, and it is easy for researchers to unintentionally invade the privacy of others (Yu, 2008). At the conclusion of this study, the participants and school districts had complete access to the final dissertation. The interview data was placed on storage device along with consent forms for 3 years from the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 3 Summary

      Middle school counselors in these school districts may need up-to-date resources or training on school procedures to conduct prompt and thorough investigations of student reported school bully incidents. I used the results of this study to offer suggestions on resources and training counselors may need to be more active with implementing prompt and thorough investigations of student reported bullying incidents. I was also able to provide new insights for administrators regarding changes to policies.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

For this study, I used a qualitative case study to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of school counselors on the resources and currently provided training to address bullying?

2. What strategies do middle school counselors use to address bullying?

3. How do strategies and training to address bullying vary between districts in Southeast Texas?

4. How are counselors trained to prevent bullying?

I used these research questions to guide my investigation of perspectives from middle school counselors concerning bullying. The questions pertained to resources, strategies used, and what additional training may be needed. I also used a semi-structured interview protocol to guide interviews with four middle school counselors in Southeast Texas. Additionally, I accessed school records, policies, and blind questionnaires to achieve triangulation. The goal was to analyze the views of middle school counselors on bullying from different school districts, to reveal new ideas for administrators to consider when making changes to procedures.

Chambers et al. (2010) argued that there is an inadequate amount of research on bullying and stakeholder preparedness. Walsh (2010) found that stakeholders had not received proper training. Previous researchers used quantitative analyses focused on determining staff preparation towards implementing available resources to prevent and address bullying (DiMatteo, 2012; Walsh, 2010). These researchers did not offer relevant information to better prevention and intervention methods. For my study, I was able to gain insight on bullying by interviewing middle school counselors in their roles as program managers who advocate for

students in a multitude of ways when dealing with bullying. I utilized this qualitative case study to investigate perspectives from middle school counselors concerning bullying that explored resources, strategies used, and what additional training may be needed. One middle school counselor from each of four school districts participated in the study for a sample size of four participants. Examining the perspectives of these counselors involved with bullying was important in learning how to make effective changes.

Description of Sample

This study took place in four school districts in Southeast Texas. These school districts are part of the same county. These four school districts have middle schools (grade levels sixth through eighth), and each campus has at least one full-time guidance counselor. Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel (2010) suggested that counselors must have knowledge of how to prevent bullying incidents and be able to work with students to provide a positive school climate that is conducive to student success. School counselors are responsible for addressing incidents of bullying, have firsthand knowledge of reported incidents of violence, and are more likely to participate and share what they know. Therefore, I chose school counselors as a purposeful sampling for this study (Cunningham & Whitten, 2002; Farrell, Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003; Harris & Jeffrey, 2010). According to Yin (2016) and Merriam (2002), case studies include two levels of sampling (broad and narrow). Sampling for this case study was at the narrow level because the case study took place in only four school districts. I utilized purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2016). Research focused on middle schools (grades sixth through eighth) in four school districts because these categories reported bullying the most compared to other grade levels, as reported by the most current School Crime Supplement of the National Crime Victimization Survey (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2015).

King (2014), Seidman (2013), and Yin (2016) suggested collecting data until no new information surfaces, to achieve data saturation. I chose to use semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires to collect qualitative data. One school counselor from each of four school districts in Southeast Texas participated in the semi-structured interviews.

School guidance counselors receive adequate training for their degree in graduate school and for certification; they are also required to participate in ongoing staff development. Therefore, the counselors in this study did not need to have minimum years of experience. School counselors in this study held master's degrees accredited by an accrediting agency, as recognized by the TEA Coordinating Board, completed a TEA certification exam, and had a minimum of two years of classroom teaching experience in a public or accredited private school (Texas Education Agency, 2004). All of the school counselors held a master's degree with a certification as a school guidance counselor. They all worked in middle schools with students in the age range between 11 years to 13 years old. The participants averaged 18 years of counseling experience at the middle school level.

Research Methodology and Analysis

I used a qualitative case study as a guide to analyze perceptions of middle school counselors in four school districts. A purposive sample of one secondary school counselor from each of four school districts in Southeast Texas participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants also completed blind questionnaires, with no identifying information, which they sent back to me by mail. I had planned to review school records; however, due to the lack of requirements in procedures pertaining to the reporting of information regarding incidents of bullying, that information was unavailable.

I encouraged middle school counselors to share their experiences and perceptions in an open-ended format through semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires. This flexible questioning was the best approach to build and explore responses from participants. I utilized this information to add to what current research studies are concluding about bullying and the need for adequately trained school counselors. Other researchers and school administrators/staff, including counselors, can use these studies to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of school counselors concerning the implementation of strategies for reporting incidents of bullying, as well as address what more is needed (such as updated training and resources) to bridge the gap of stopping bullying to effect change. I presented semi-structured interview questions, guided by four research questions used to collect the perceptions of school counselors on bullying. I coded transcriptions of audio-recorded interviews that were organized using a software program called Atlas.ti. I then summarized the most revealing quotes by participants to identify themes by hand.

I collated, organized, and presented the raw data in summary form, using Atlas.ti for the coding process. I typed the data into the program using a verbatim transcription of the semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaire responses. Once the data was typed, I was able to analyze the information and code it by highlighting significant words or sentences related to any behaviors, events, strategies, and policies related to the research questions. As suggested by Creswell (2013) and Hatch (2002) to guide the coding process, I asked myself questions such as: What strategies were they using? What was going on here? What did I, as the researcher, learn from this information? The emergent themes included: bully awareness, procedures, counselor roles and responsibilities, closing the gap between what is done and not done, classroom guidance counseling, how to report bullying, discipline referrals, intervention and prevention

programs, student involvement programs, training for students, and resources. I examined data

from the semi-structured interviews, blind questionnaires, and available school records then

developed categories or typologies that reflected emerging themes to guide comparisons.

Summary of Findings

   Findings for research question 1. I used blind questionnaires and conducted semi-

structured interviews with the participants and gathered responses from participants about their

perceptions of the resources and training provided by the school district to address bullying.

Each participant shared that they had experiences with bullying and described those experiences.

The following themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews: bully awareness, procedures

addressing bullying, counselor roles and responsibilities, and closing the gap between what is

being done and what should be done to address bullying.

   Bully awareness. The first theme to emerge concerned bully awareness. According to

the participants, one concern was that students need to understand the exact definition of

bullying. All counselors shared that students call every conflict situation bullying, using the term

lightly or quickly. Counselors believe that they need useful resources and student training to

address this issue. The lack of student bully awareness creates a significant challenge. The

problem causes difficulty in investigating because counselors must first determine whether or not

the incident is indeed bullying or simply a conflict between students. Participant C29 responded

that "the biggest challenge is the catch phrase bullying." Participant C30 shared that educating

students with an awareness of what bullying looks like is needed. Participant C8 remarked that it

is often challenging "trying to figure out what the incident is or was, and often it is just conflict

and not bullying." Participant C13 shared involvement with bullying, noting that "a lot of times,

because bullying has been the buzzword for a few years now; parents will misconstrue what's

going on with their child and call it bullying when it is not. I think it is more conflict situations."

Overuse of the term bullying is a challenge for counselors because they often waste time

investigating reports of bullying when, in the end, it is a conflict situation. Conflict is a

disagreement between people, and bullying is a person harassing another person (Crawford,

2013, Gourneau, 2012). Students today are accusing people of bullying as a means to get the

other person into trouble because bullying is such a serious accusation; therefore, some students

misuse the term in order to get the immediate attention they seek for their situation.

Participant C30 offered the following example:

I had one kid and his mother up here almost daily. Once we got to the bottom of it, the

kid who was reporting the incident was the one instigating the problem and did not like

the other kid's reaction and would say the other kid was bullying him, but it was not real

bullying. It was just conflicting.

The guidance counselor can teach students awareness of what is and is not bullying so that actual

bullying may not be overlooked because of the overuse of the term (Chen, Chang, & Cheng,

2016). The similarities of responses from counselors all indicate there is a need for additional

student learning of what bullying is. The feedback from counselors also led the researcher to

conclude that students confuse conflict with harassment. Counselors' perceptions regarding the

resources they currently use are relevant to determine if there is a need to update methods of

educating students on the differences between bullying and conflict.

Procedures for addressing bullying. The next theme to emerge was procedures

currently in place to address bullying. The participants' descriptions of methods were all based

on their personal choices of selecting how to address bullying. These reports include using

resources of their choosing and developing their program or interventions. The counselors stated

that were no specific procedures regarding bullying in the student handbook. Bullying is in the

student handbook of the four school districts as not being tolerated. However, the counselors get

to determine how they want to investigate each reported incident of bullying.

One example from participant C29 was:

When a student reports an incident, they have two options. They can come directly to the

office, or sometimes other students will come in as bystanders and make a report. There

is an incident report they can fill out like this one. They complete the form with as many

details as they can, and I conduct the investigations. I pull in witnesses, and once I gather

all information, I then consult with the administrators about it. Then if it is bullying, they

will take over from that point.

Participant C30 discussed filling out bullying reports:

They can also fill out a bully report with full details, date-times, and consistency of

bullying. We go from there and call parents, call kids in, and if we need to, we do a

round table discussion. Or refer the bully or child to the administration for disciplinary

action, which includes suspension or sending them to an alternative school if bullying

did, in fact, occur.

Participant C13 offered a different method:

It depends on the situation. If a parent or student contacts me I get with them or everyone

involved, and if possible, I like to bring in the two people concerned to talk about it. And

like I said before, it is more of just conflict type of situations that need to be told.

The four school districts have similar procedures pertaining to allowing the guidance counselors

to choose how they want to address reported incidents of bullying. The participants reported that

the four school districts are similar in that they do not have consistent or established procedures

regarding bullying. This finding is a significant outcome of the study. Each school has left it up to the counselors to determine if an incident is bullying, but was not established procedures or protocol for them to make that determination.

Counselor roles and responsibilities. Another theme that emerged was counselor roles and responsibilities. Some participants shared that their roles are to guide and counsel. Participant C29 shared, "Really it should be guidance and teaching skills. I think there should be more education and awareness of what bullying is." Other participants said that their roles are to ensure students have a safe learning environment, build trusting relationships with students, and be student advocates. Participant C30 believed that the participant's role was to "make sure students are safe from bullying." Despite the different personal interpretations of their roles as school counselors, they all worked to investigate bullying, address the incidents, and implement prevention and intervention programs.

Participant C8 explained the importance of investigation:

As a counselor, my primary goal is to provide a safe environment for students to come to me. Students are often afraid or worried about coming to me, and all they want is someone to go to and be heard. That is why my focus is to provide a trusting relationship with them, so they know when they come to me that things will be addressed or investigated and I will help them.

Participant C13 discussed being an advocate: "Well, I think we are student advocates, and when it is taken to another level that the administrators should get involved and assist with disciplinary action."

The different perspectives of their roles indicate counselors need adequate training on how they should approach bullying issues among their students. The roles and responsibilities

differ significantly amongst the participants. Their common goal, however, is to provide guidance on how to cope with bullying. This is an indication that counselors need resources and training on bullying, and on their roles as counselors in regards to bullying.

Closing the gap. The final theme that emerged was closing the gap between what is being done and what should be done to address bullying. All participants commented on this problem, and all noted that there is a gap regarding approaches to address bullying.

Participant C29 explained the critical nature of awareness education:

Awareness and educating students on social interactions, bullying, and conflicts are critical. I also think that in elementary school students there should begin a more in-depth awareness program of harassment. Students need to know what bullying is and what it looks like before they go crying wolf.

This response is significant because it connects what is required to close the gap with what should be done to address bullying and avoid the misleading reports of harassment.

Participant C30 discussed this misreporting:

Kids need to know what bullying is and what it is not. Once I begin to investigate incidents, it is not even a situation of bullying. It is most of the time just one kid getting mad with another over something minor. But when it is bullying, the administrators need to be consistent with discipline. One issue I see is how the leaders punish kids. They will suspend one kid, but another kid will get community service. It should be zero tolerance, and the discipline should fit the crime.

Participant C13 brought attention to changes being made in bullying programs:

Well, I think there is a gap of what students are calling bullying. I am sure there is more that we can do. We are very fortunate to have the volunteer that comes weekly. But

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overall kids should get involved with knowing or identifying what bullying looks

like or what it is. We are bridging that gap with the program that our eighth

graders have developed within the program.

Participant C8 discussed education and awareness, suggesting that "Focusing on

prevention methods using sufficient awareness will close the gap because many students do not

know what actual bullying is."

The counselors' responses supported the assertion that there needs to be a strong focus on

how to educate students about bullying, to close the gaps identified between what has been done

and what, in their opinion, still needs to be done. The participants believed that students do not

have an adequate understanding of the differences between conflict and bullying. The approach

suggested by them is using up-to-date resources that target bully awareness. Counselors can

receive training on such resources to in return educate students using suggested prevention

programs. The perceptions provided by the participants revealed, in part, the inadequacies in

bullying prevention and awareness, and in responses by counselors, which is the main problem

presented in this study.

Findings for research question 2. I used blind questionnaires and conducted semi-

structured interviews with the participants and gathered responses from participants about

strategies the participants used to address bullying. Participants responded to bullying incidents

directly using interventions, programs, and resources of their choosing. The themes that emerged

from these semi-structured interview questions and the corresponding blind questionnaires

included classroom guidance counseling, how to report bullying, intervention and prevention

programs, and discipline referrals.

Classroom guidance counseling. The first theme that emerged explored the use of classroom guidance counseling as an approach to addressing bullying. Participant C29 discussed how using a classroom guidance approach is effective:

> The most efficient approach is getting involved, getting in the classroom, and educating them on bullying. Teaching them what bullying is, what to do, giving them where to go because that anonymous notification is not being used as much as it should. I tell students that it is hard to be a bystander and not say anything to a bully but reporting anonymously can help. I go into the classroom through a core class; for example, I went through ELA the first month. I talked about addressing kindness and how we treat each other. I also talk about protocols for reporting.

Participant C30 shared how establishing a good rapport and relationship with students is working: "Basically the guidance is working."Participant C8 also agreed with getting involved with students as a classroom group approach: "Guidance lessons with educating what bullying is have worked well."

Counselor responses indicated that the best strategy to address bullying is to get involved with the students and establish relationships with them. Building trusting relationships with students helped counselors investigate incidents because this trust resulted in students being more open and honest about bullying. Part of this strategy involves going into the classrooms and engaging with students because within these guidance activities counselors can teach whole group lessons on bullying and potentially begin to establish trusting relationships with students.

Reporting bullying. The second theme to emerge was reporting bullying. Participant C8 discussed how reporting in her district is approached: "Students report bullying using an anonymous app that the school district has developed and initiated." Participant C29 noted that

students have two options in which they can make a report: "They can come directly to the office or sometimes other students (bystanders) will come and file an incident report providing as many details as possible." Participant C30 shared approaches similar to those of participant C29, but added:

> They can also fill out a bully report with full details, date-times, and consistency of
> bullying. We go from there and call parents, call kids in, and if we need to do a
> roundtable discussion. Or refer the child to the administration for disciplinary action,
> which includes suspension or sending them to an alternative school.

> Offering these different methods of reporting bullying incidents suggests that students

will feel they do not have to deal with it on their own or be in fear of retaliation for making a report. Although the counselors discussed different methods of reporting incidents of bullying, each reported that they have a strategy for allowing and encouraging anonymous reporting. Making anonymous bullying reports is beneficial because it encourages students to come forward with reports while at the same time protecting their identity from would-be bullies.

Bully interventions and programs. The third emerging theme was the lack of specific bully interventions and programs. Counselors did not describe specific bullying interventions and programs they use, when asked what interventions or programs they use to address bullying. Instead, counselors shared that they use other intervention methods of their choice. Participant C8 noted what they are doing to address bullying and what should be done:

> In my counseling classes, I use a book titled *It Doesn't Have to Be This Way* for The
> guidance activities. I teach about kindness, and we have random acts of kindness rallies
> where students will go around doing random acts of kindness. This advice is focused on
> sixth graders. There is also a unity day where students will wear orange in support of the

victims of bullying. I think that prevention should not be difficult to address in primary

grade levels or elementary school. Interventions should focus on both parts: bullying and

conflict resolution. If it is bullying, then there should be interventions to address that next

response to address conflicts.

This participant explained how using a book as a strategy to teach kindness and how to

treat people is an effective approach for her students. However, there was mention in previous

semi-structured questions by the participant that students need to be taught conflict resolution

skills because students often mistake conflict for bullying. The participant described this strategy

as effective, but admitted that more needs to be done to help students identify the difference

between conflict and bullying.

Participant C29 discussed choosing programs and intervention methods:

As counselors, we pretty much approach intervention or programs as we choose because

we are qualified in the area of guidance and do what is best, and my administrative team

supports me with the programs and interventions I want; it depends on the incident, and I

explore different methods as they are encountered.

There was an inconsistency with strategies described by this participant. This participant

addressed each incident independently and determined if it was bullying. The participant then

handled the situation accordingly. Although it is great that the administrative team supports the

counselor's choice of approaches, this exploration of different methods exemplifies a lack of

consistency of strategy, regarding intervention and programs.

Participant C13 described one such program:

We have a lady who comes and volunteers to come, and she works with the crime

victim's center in a nearby city, and she comes once a week and works with our eighth

graders with developing student-initiated clubs for bullying. She helped them to develop

a bullying program, and they wrote a bully pledge. They have created a bully club, and

they raise money. During announcements, students go over the bully pledge daily to

bring forth awareness of bullying. I know there are different programs and it does help to

have something when people ask about what we are doing about it. As far as what type of

program, I think there should be more awareness. Like I said before, people describe

bullying for every situation and it is not bullying. So it becomes difficult to address, or it

is a waste of time.

All four participants responded that they have strategies that they use to address bullying. A common theme to emerge, however, was student confusion between conflict and bullying. The counselors reported that they are in need of new resources to close this gap and address the underlying issue.

Discipline referrals. The last theme to emerge was discipline referrals. Discipline referrals are a strategy used to address the bully's behavior. Participant C8 discussed referrals to the administrators:

It is not directly reported to the administrative team or district unless it is identified as bullying. Then those students are referred to the administrative team on campus for them to address it based on the student code of conduct guidelines.

All remaining participants agreed with participant C8, those actual incidents of bullying are reported to the administrative team to address discipline according to the school district's code of conduct. Participant C30 added information regarding consistency with discipline: "One issue I see is how the administrators punish kids. They will suspend one kid, but another kid will get community service. It should be zero tolerance, and the punishment should fit the crime." A

lack of consistency with how students are disciplined for bullying decreases the likelihood that others will learn by example and avoid being bullies. As a result, inconsistent discipline does not clearly send the message that the act of bullying will not be tolerated.

Findings for research question 3. I used blind questionnaires and conducted semi-structured interview questions and gathered responses from participants about variances in strategies and training in their school districts. The theme that emerged focused on training. Participants tended to share more about what students needed rather than additional training counselors could use, mainly noting that they felt they had sufficient knowledge and skills to deal with bullying. There were no significant variances between strategies and training between school districts; however, there were significant similarities in the types of training needed.

Trainings. This emerging theme from the responses of participants addressed training and procedures, or a lack thereof. In this study, participants did not elaborate or describe specific training or methods in which they participated. I was able to ask an additional question extending from a question regarding what strategies are working well. I asked what training participant C29 could attend to help with strategies.

Participant C29 noted:

There is not any training that I could attend to help me, but students should have more programs that are going to focus on awareness. These students need to know what bullying is, what it looks like and how to cope with it. The students need the training, not me or counselors. We have enough education or are more qualified in the area of counseling. Bullying is a subject within guidance counseling that counselors could use to train or educate students on bully awareness.

Participant C30 was asked, in addition to the interview question regarding what current strategies are currently working, if there was any training they could attend to help address bullying. Participant C30 remarked: "Not me, but the students could use more awareness programs with role playing activities."

School counselors receive adequate training annually through their school districts as required by TEA; therefore, they tend to focus on the fact that students need more training through prevention programs focusing on bully awareness. Counselors implementing effective bully awareness prevention programs should be able to reduce the time to handle discipline problems and place the focus committed to teaching and learning of conflict resolution skills. Despite only two counselors providing feedback, there may still be a need for up-to-date resources and training. A lack of response to this particular research question does not necessarily indicate a lack of need for changes in training. It is clear by the collective responses to these semi-structured interview questions that counselors do, in fact, need up- to- date resources to address bully awareness.

Findings for research question 4. I asked semi-structured interview questions and analyzed blind questionnaires from the participants. Responses were gathered about how participants are trained to prevent bullying. The emerging theme was resources. Counselors provided a significant amount of feedback regarding the need for resources to teach students the difference between conflict and bullying.

Resources. Participants shared that they did not need formal training on bullying because their expertise as counselors includes bullying awareness and prevention. They also receive staff development through their school districts as required by TEA. However, counselors suggested that students receive training on what bullying is and is not. Counselors suggested that they need

more resources on bully awareness prevention programs rather than on bullying interventions. The participants described the resources they currently use as tools that they are independently allowed to choose. Counselors also suggested that they are allowed to choose which resources and strategies they use and that their choices are not reviewed or approved before use.

Participants noted that their students need up-to-date training resources to address the concern that their students are over-using the term bullying. Participant C13 discussed the need for more awareness resources:

I can also add that we need more materials to use for bully awareness. We have enough information about preventing bullying; we just need more to share with the students on what bullying is. There should be more materials on what bullying looks like other than bullying is happening. That is what you get from bully awareness. We know it is going on but what is it.

Participant C13 suggested needing more training on adequate resources targeting bully awareness. This participant also shared that students confuse conflict with bullying in their reports.

Participant C8 recounted an incident that exemplifies this confusion:

I think that prevention should be initiated in primary grade levels or elementary school. Programs should focus on both parts: bullying and conflict resolution. If it is bullying, then there should be interventions to address it and interventions to address conflicts. Students should know how to identify conflict and be able to resolve it instead of making reports of bullying. Just yesterday I had a student file a bully report on another student. This student claims that the other student was bullying them because they excluded them from a birthday party. When I called in both students to discuss what happened, in the

end, the student claiming to be bullied by the other student said some mean things, and that is why they were not invited to the birthday party. The other students stated that she invited her friends to her party and since the other student hurt their feelings then they obviously were not a friend. This incident was conflict-resolution and not bullying. If there should be any training, it should be for the students on awareness and conflict resolution.

Participant C30's comments concurred with those of participant C8:

The only additional information I have is that of all the incidents this school year that have been reported to me, only one of them was an actual incident of bullying. I think kids use the term bullying too lightly to get more attention than they need regarding their event. So there needs to be more awareness or teaching what bullying is and what it is not.

School records. Finally, I reviewed school-reported state records to explore what kinds of bullying incidents were reported. The U. S. Department of Education (2011) reported that procedures for reporting bullying are mentioned in policies, according to the most recent survey. However, reporting requirements differ according to who is responsible for reporting what and when. Three of the four school districts in this qualitative case study did not have distinct reporting policies. Bullying procedures are integrated within each school district's student code of conduct. There were no reported findings of stand-alone bullying reporting policies or procedures. This finding explains why reporting incidents to the district administration was not necessarily required or mandated.

The Texas Education Agency 2015-2016 Data Standards Appendix E is the most current guideline that addresses reporting disciplinary offenses. Chapter 37 of Discipline Management

(TEC §37.001) requires each school district to report incidents using specific disciplinary action codes. This report is submitted as an annual "snapshot" that is typically due in October. These reports are completed by entering disciplinary offense codes into the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) in Texas. Disciplinary action addressing bullying is identified under a generalized category titled *Local General Code of Conduct Violations (L21)*. The offense codes under this umbrella for bullying are BL2 bullying/harassment-sex; BL3 bullying/harassment-disability; and BL4 bullying/harassment- race, color, and nationality. When school districts submit a PEIMS summary to TEA, the category L21 is the only offense code reported. Each participant's school district reported to TEA the following L21 offenses: C29-1,396 students; C30-51 students; C8-21 students; and C13-54 students (TEC §37.001). Due to TEA requirements regarding the way school districts code offenses, there is no way to identify how many cases of bullying actually occurred. The only way to investigate the disciplined offenses of bullying is to individually scan through disciplinary referrals on each campus, searching for codes BL2-4 under offense code L21. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. §1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) is a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. Any person wanting access to such information is required to seek permission to view those records. Parents must give the authorization to release any educational records (including disciplinary) from a student's cumulative folder. I did not have informed consent or authority to view the records, as required under the FERPA law (34 CFR § 99.31).

Presentation of the Data and Results

I used a case study to investigate perspectives from middle school counselors concerning bullying. In this study, I explored resources, strategies being used, and what additional training may be needed. Examining the perspectives of those involved with bullying prevention and

intervention is important in learning how to make effective changes. There were many studies attempted in an effort to discover the most efficient approach to ending bullying (Austin, 2012; DiMatteo, 2012; Phillips & Cornell, 2012). However, the focus should not solely be on bullying prevention but also on preparing and training counselors to address reported incidents of bullying. Chambers et al. (2010) argued that those school counselors' perceptions of adequate training and resources are necessary for preparedness to address bullying.

Resources and training addressing bullying. The first research question asked about counselors' perceptions of the resources and training they are provided to address bullying. I posed the semi-structured interview questions and facilitated responses from counselors. Each participant shared that they had experience with bullying and described those experiences. The following themes emerged from the semi-structured interview questions: bully awareness, procedures addressing bullying, counselor roles and responsibilities, and closing the gap between what is being done and what should be done to address bullying. The data showed that the term "bullying" is being used lightly by students. In this study, participants elaborated on the need for more bully awareness. The responses to bully experiences indicated that students do not know what the definition of bullying is and is most concerning. Participant C8 noted the difficulty of "trying to figure out what the incident is or was, and often it is just conflict and not bullying."

Counselor preference or choice determined the types of procedures used to address bullying. These methods included choosing resources and developing programs or interventions. Power-Elliott and Harris (2012) argued that, based on their research study, the following procedures used by counselors when handling bullying were proven to be most effective: disciplining the bully, collaborating with the bully, working with the victim, and getting other adults involved. Another theme to emerge was the roles and responsibilities of school

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counselors. Participants noted that their top priorities were ensuring that students are provided a

safe learning environment, building trust with students, and acting as their advocates. Participant

C29 stated that counselors' roles and responsibilities "should be guidance and teaching skills.

The researcher believes that there should be more education and awareness of what bullying is.

DiMatteo (2012) stated that school counselors are the most qualified to provide counseling and

to advocate and support students' emotional needs at school. Participants also shared ways to

close the gap between what is being done and what should be done. Counselors noted a marked

difference with approaches when addressing bullying. There needs to be a focus on prevention

methods, in conjunction with bullying awareness. Participant C8 stated that "focusing on

prevention methods using sufficient awareness will close the gap because many students do not

know what actual bullying is." Implementing prevention programs can provide education

through positive experiences: conflict resolution, mentoring, counseling, and coping skills

(Edmondson & Zeman, 2011; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012).

Strategies used to address bullying. I conducted semi-structured interview questions

and analyzed blind questionnaires from the participants. I gathered responses from participants

about strategies they used to address bullying. Participants responded to bullying incidents

directly using interventions, programs, and resources of their choosing. The themes that

emerged included classroom guidance counseling, how to report bullying, discipline referrals,

intervention and prevention programs, and student involvement programs. One participant noted

that the administrative team on the campus supports and respects their position as a guidance

counselor and allows them to choose approaches they deem necessary to address incidents of

bullying.

Participant C29 explained:

As counselors, we pretty much approach intervention or programs as we choose because we are qualified in the area of guidance and do what is best, and my administrative team supports me with the programs and interventions I want; it depends on the incident, and I explore different methods as they are encountered.

In regards to discipline referrals, bullies are referred by the investigating counselor to the campus administrative team for discipline. However, the inconsistency in disciplinary action was a concern noted by participants. Participants described some effective approaches and strategies, including guidance counseling, student involvement programs, and ways to report bullying anonymously. Participant C30 stated that "basically the guidance is working." Participant C8 agreed, voicing that "guidance lessons with educating what bullying is have worked well." Many times students are embarrassed or scared to report a concern about bullying and will not report it. Participant C8 discussed how reporting bullying in her district is approached: "Students report bullying using an anonymous app that the school district has developed and initiated."

Variances in strategies and training between school districts. I asked semi-structured interview questions and gathered responses from participants about counselors' strategies and training in their school districts. The theme that emerged from the participant's responses to the semi-structured interview questions focused on training for students. Participants shared more about what students need rather than additional training they could use.

Participant C29 stated:

There is not any training that I could attend to help me, but students should have more programs that are going to focus on awareness. These students need to know what

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bullying is, what it looks like and how to cope with it. The students need the training, not

me or counselors.

Participants in this study discussed that students need more programs that teach

awareness, what bullying is, and how to cope with it.

Training to prevent bullying. I asked semi-structured interview questions and utilized

blind questionnaires that generated responses from participants. Participants shared that they did

not receive or need formal training on bullying because their expertise in their field and their

level of education in the master programs prepared them to deal with all aspects of bullying.

They were allowed to pick and choose strategies they think are the best approaches to bullying.

Participants shared that students should be trained on what bullying is and is not. Participant C8

also explained:

I think that prevention should be initiated in primary grade levels or elementary school.

Programs should focus on both parts: bullying and conflict resolution. If it is bullying,

then there should be interventions to address it and interventions to address conflicts.

Participants suggested that they needed more resources on bully awareness prevention

programs rather than on interventions. The emerging theme was resources. Participants shared

that bully prevention programs that focus on awareness will build a culture of respect among

students. School counselors need effective bully prevention programs that tackle awareness.

Participant C13 stated that, "I can also add that we need more materials to use for bully

awareness. Prevention programs need to increase awareness of what bullying is and ways to

fight it." One approach suggested that counselors use role play activities so students can act out

certain situations to better understand the experiences of individuals who experience bullying.

People learn best through experiences, which supports the philosophy of transformative learning

(Mezirow, 1997). All students would have a better concept or awareness of what bullying is through role play experiences.

Chapter 4 Summary

Overall, I used the findings of this case study to make conclusions regarding counselor perceptions of resources, strategies being used, and what additional training may be needed to ensure prompt and thorough investigations of student reported bullying incidents. I used semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires that provided insightful information on the perspectives of counselors regarding bullying acts, school counselors addressing incidents, what needs to be done, and how to close the gaps between addressing bullying and what else can be done. I gained valuable perspectives on bullying by evaluating participants' responses. My review of school records was also insightful, and I used that information to support the claim that there should be more done on how bullying is reported. Semi-structured interviews, blind questionnaires, and the examination of school records provided me with relevant information for this case study. Participants responded positively and very openly with feedback. All participants appeared to understand all interview questions and did not display any confusion about what was being asked. They all participated until the end of the interview session and did not choose to leave any question unanswered.

School counselors are qualified to identify acts of bullying. They are competent leaders who address bullying and are able to design, implement, evaluate, and enhance a comprehensive school counseling program that is charged with promoting and improving student success (King, 2014; Philips & Cornell, 2012; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012). Given the increase in bullying, more prevention programs are needed to target awareness and address bullying effectively. Nationally, the results of the U.S. Department of Education's report on bullying indicated that

there are higher percentages of students between the ages 12 to 18 who reported incidents of bullying at school. Specifically, it is significant to investigate from a middle school counselor's perspective what bullying acts are happening, what school counselors do to address incidents, what needs to be done by counselors, and what gaps need to be closed between what is happening to address bullying and what else needs to be done.

With the findings of this study, I was able to determine that the data matched the literature on which this study was based; the results of the study also showed that middle school counselors need more resources, face challenges when addressing bullying, and identify gaps between what is being done to address bullying and what should be done. The majority of participants in this study noted that there was a need for more resources on prevention programs addressing bully awareness. Participants remarked that "getting to the bottom" of the reported incident of bullying is challenging. It was noted that students overuse the term bullying, creating a challenge for school counselors investigating a report of bullying. I observed a gap with approaches when addressing bullying. There needs to be a focus on prevention methods using awareness of bullying. A practical approach to bully awareness includes the implementation of prevention programs that provide positive experiences through education, conflict resolution, mentoring, counseling, and coping skills (Edmondson & Zeman, 2011; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012). I was able to use these findings to support current research, which suggested that prevention programs targeting bully awareness are useful (Battey & Ebbek, 2013; Bowllan, 2011; Haggas, 2006).

I reviewed school records, and based on this analysis, it was suggested that bullying is being under identified and under reported to the U.S. Department of Education and TEA. School districts categorize incidences of bullying under a local generalized code of conduct titles L21.

Bullying is not reported as a separate violation of the student code of conduct by administrators. This finding is similar to that of the analysis of the School Crime and Safety Report, which shows that school districts should include in their results reported incidents of bullying (Hallford, 2009). Currently, this report only includes data collected from voluntary national surveys from students, teachers, and administrators. Standardizing reporting of bullying nationally is a challenge, due to each individual state's reporting options, discipline terms, and how bullying is disciplined (Hallford, 2009).

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

Most of the prior research on bullying pertained to determining preparedness of the resources being used in order to prevent and address school bullying through quantitative analysis (Gomez, 2013; Farrell, Valois, Meyer, & Tidwell, 2003; Cunningham & Whitten, 2002). In these types of studies, researchers were not able to reveal the experiences or meaningful information that can make preventions and interventions better. DiMatteo (2012) used pre-generated questions with answer choices in an analysis of a principal's frequent uses of resources to prevent, respond, and build social and emotional competence amongst students. Researchers using surveys with answer choices limit the information to be obtained because participants cannot provide in-depth and elaborative information. Researchers cannot use answer choices alone to provide meaningful and relevant information to the issue. As a result, researchers can only gain data regarding likely problems, but with no other information on how to make changes to improve. To date, researchers have reported little if any qualitative research with in-depth data of what is done, what more can be done, and what opportunities exist to bridge the gap between what is done and what should happen. School counselors shared that they do not have up-to-date resources or training on procedures, in order to conduct prompt and thorough investigations of bullying. Schaefer-Schium and Ginsberg (2003), who reported that school counselors needed more training dealing with bullying, discussed these problems in their research. In my own research, I incorporated qualitative methods to investigate the views of middle school counselors regarding challenges of advising and monitoring middle school students concerning bullying, the effectiveness of school district practices, which strategies middle school counselors used when responding to bullying, and what additional training and resources were needed to address bullying. I used the findings of this study and aligned it with

the literature on which this study was based; I was able to reveal that middle school counselors need more resources that focus on student prevention. The participants face challenges when addressing bullying and identify gaps between what is being done to address bullying and what should be done. The majority (three out of four) of participants in this study noted that there is a need for more resources on prevention programs addressing bully awareness.

I used a qualitative study to examine school counselors' perceptions of bullying and to investigate their roles in responding to reported incidents. I used this data to provide descriptors of counselors' views and challenges concerning bullying. Additionally, the participants made recommendations for prevention and intervention approaches, which may help increase awareness in dealing with bullying. I designed the interviews in such a way to allow for the exploration of the experiences and attitudes of middle school counselors in four school districts in Southeast Texas. I revealed, through the use of a qualitative case study design, the counselors 'perceptions, experiences, and attitudes about bullying, which painted a clear and concise image that the reader could see. These qualitative case studies were descriptive in nature, and I collected the data through semi-structured interview questions about bullying.

I studied middle school counselors as my unit of analysis. The results of the analysis were dependent upon reported bullying incidents at four middle schools and their corresponding districts in Southeast Texas. I made clear connections between the data collected and the research questions I used for this study. I achieved coding through a case study approach, then I identified themes (perceptions) based on the assumptions that guided this study: bullying negatively affects middle school students; counselors can have a positive impact on victims through implementation of intervention and prevention methods; and the assurance of

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confidentiality encourages voluntary participation in anonymous reporting of bullying (Gomez, 2010; Yin, 2013).

I used semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires that did not reflect the position of the school district policies and procedures or decision makers outside the views of counselors (King, 2014). I developed questions used for the semi-structured interviews and questionnaires based on the same review of the literature. I did not begin researching until IRB gave approval to proceed. Each school district's assistant superintendent signed a permission letter before soliciting school counselors. Each participant signed an informed consent before interviews were scheduled. I collected data through semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires until I could provide no new information and data saturation was met (King, 2014; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2016).

Sampling for this qualitative case study was purposeful (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2016). The most beneficial aspect of using a small, purposeful sampling for this qualitative study was to connect the data to school districts that are similar in demographics. Additionally, I narrowed this research study specifically to middle schools (grades sixth through eighth) in four school districts based on the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey. I used this survey to report that participants were bullied the most in grade levels sixth through eighth as compared to other grades (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2015). I used this small sample to provide accurate data and relevant information to meet the needs of the study. However, I limited the research by using this small sample size, and I could have potentially created bias because only middle school counselors in four distinct school districts were asked to participate. I came to the realization that the selected counselors were similar and did not broadly represent the perceptions of the general middle school counselors throughout Southeast Texas. I used this

case study to focus on qualitative research rather than quantitative research that could have provided additional analysis.

Summary of the Results

I used a qualitative case study to investigate the perspectives of middle school counselors concerning bullying, resources available, strategies being used, and what additional training may be needed. Examining the perspectives of those involved with bullying is important in learning how to make effective changes. There were many researchers who attempted to conduct studies to discover the most efficient approach to ending bullying. *Bullyproof* is a program developed by Nan Stein to educate students about the many different roles students can have in situations from bullying (Borntrager, Davis, & Hallford, 2006). The study was not able to use the ending results from this program to prove that there was a decrease in bullying, but the attitudes toward bullying prevention improved. Researchers identified *Second Step* as a successful evidenced based, data driven prevention program because of its structured approach, which taught social skills that reduced aggression and bullying behaviors for grade levels kindergarten through eighth grade (Carey et al., 2009). However, the focus should not solely be on stopping bullying, but on preparing and training counselors who address reported incidents of harassment. Chambers et al. (2010) argued that school counselor perceptions of adequate training and resources are necessary for preparedness to address bullying. The research questions for my qualitative case study were as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of school counselors on the resources and currently provided training to address bullying?

2. What strategies do middle school counselors use to address bullying?

3. How do strategies and training to address bullying vary between districts in Southeast Texas?

4. How are counselors trained to prevent bullying?

The rationale of this study was to gain more information from middle school counselors regarding their current resources and training, so that they can be more efficient in addressing incidents of bullying. This study was relevant because previous researchers only focused on determining preparedness of resources being used to prevent and address school bullying through quantitative analysis. I relied on three assumptions to guide me in this study: bullying negatively affects middle school students, middle school counselors can have a positive impact on victims through the implementation of intervention and prevention methods, and participation is strictly voluntary. Participants answered questions about integrity and gave detailed accounts of experiences.

The perception of school counselors on the resources and training addressing bullying is that there needs to be more focus on bully awareness. I achieved this focus through appropriate preventions guided by recognition methods and concluded that counselors do need up-to-date resources that target bully prevention and awareness. Students do not have a clear understanding of the term bullying described by counselors. Counselors reported that the term bullying is used to describe every conflict situation. This action makes investigating a reported incident very challenging because once it is determined that harassment did not occur, counselors have to start over with addressing the problem, creating a delay in dealing with and resolving the issue. Counselors also reported that their roles and responsibilities allow them to provide guidance on bully awareness. Counselors agreed that awareness and educating students on social interactions, bullying, and conflicts are critical. Ideally, this awareness and educating should

begin in elementary school so that students can develop a more in-depth awareness of bullying. Students need to know what bullying is and what it looks like before they report the incident because, more often than not, the reported bullying is actually conflict that arises when one kid gets mad at another over something minor.

The strategies that middle school counselors reported using to address bullying incidents are interventions, programs, and resources of their choosing. The counselors described strategies that were different, but they provided guidance counseling and procedures for reporting bullying. However, counselors are not using specific interventions or programs. Instead, I reported other methods based on the situation and incident; this shows a lack of consistency in strategies. Advocates suggested some practical strategies, such as guidance counseling, student involvement programs, and ways to report bullying anonymously. Three counselors described one practical approach pertaining to simply being present in the classroom and educating students on bullying. Counselors express what is needed to teach students what bullying is, what to do about bullying, and where to go to report bullying, because anonymous notification is not being used as much as it could be. Counselors who use this approach do so in the classroom through a core class. They stated that getting students involved is one beneficial method. The students in one school district organized a club to stop bullying. This club was student organized with a focus on bully prevention. Every morning during announcements, students recited the bully pledge to remind themselves and each other about treating peers with respect. One school district had volunteer speakers who come and shared their experiences with bullying. An active and involved volunteer had a brother who committed suicide because he was bullied. A volunteer sharing their experiences helped students relate and learn that they are not alone teaches them how to ask for help. Counselors reported that bullies are typically disciplined by administrators. However,

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participants lacked consistent communication, regarding the way bullies are disciplined. For example, one kid will get suspended from school, but another kid will get community service. All four participants reported that bullying is deserving of zero tolerance and should be held to a higher standard when students are disciplined.

Discussion of the Results

By using the findings of this study, I was able to reveal that middle school counselors' perceptions of bully preparedness need up-to-date resources, face challenges when addressing bullying, and identify gaps between what is being done to address bullying and what should be done. Counselors noted that the primary emphasis noted is a need for more resources on prevention programs addressing bully awareness. Counselors do not receive specific training to prevent bullying. Counselors shared that they do not receive or need formal training on bullying because they are considered the experts in their field. Counselors suggested that they needed more resources on bully awareness prevention programs rather than on receiving training. The implementation of bully prevention programs should result in an awareness of the issue and increased respect among students. School counselors need effective bully prevention programs to tackle awareness of what bullying is and ways to fight it. Counselors reported that they participate in staff developments and attend workshops based on their role as a guidance counselor. Counselors say they have enough information about preventing bullying; they just need more resources on bully awareness to share with the students, regarding what bullying is. Programs should include components that pertain to both parts: bullying and conflict resolution. Students should know how to identify conflict and be able to resolve it, rather than calling it bullying.

Counselors shared that one of the main challenges they face involves "getting to the bottom" of the reported incident of bullying. Students are reporting conflict situations as bullying using the term very lightly, creating a challenge for school counselors investigating a report of bullying. I noted a gap, which was consistent from all counselors, concerning approaches to addressing bullying. There needs to be a focus on prevention methods using awareness of bullying. The findings of this study mirror current research, which is that prevention programs targeting bully awareness are useful (Battey & Ebbek, 2013; Bowllan, 2011; Haggas, 2006). These insights indicate that not only is there concern about bullying, but there is also a problem with conflict-resolution. Students are internalizing conflicts with their peers as bullying. This interpretation may be a reason for the increase of bullying, as reported by the United States Department of Education in 2014 (Robers et al., 2014).

I was able to conclude, through this case study, that counselors need resources that focus on bully awareness and conflict resolution skills. This finding is also consistent with written responses on the blind questionnaires participants provided for comparison. The students need adequate training, and counselors need the resources to provide such training. Counselors use prevention methods targeting conflict to teach students about resolution of conflict through negotiation, effective communication, problem-solving, and social skills building. School counselors who implement conflict resolution programs will provide positive results in lowering school violence and behavior issues (Breitenbach, 2010). Implementation of these programs is important during the middle school years when students are still developing in the adolescent stage and are often unsure how to handle conflicts with other students. By teaching conflict resolution skills, school administrators and staff are focusing on both academics and the mental health of students (Breitenbach, 2010; Schellenburg, 2005).

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover middle school counselors' perceptions on resources, strategies being used, and what additional training may be needed to address bullying effectively. Counselors indicate that focusing on prevention methods targeting bully awareness is the key to closing the gap between what is being done and what should be done. Counselors should use the prevention programs to incorporate conflict resolution strategies, mentoring, counseling, and teaching coping skills (Edmondson & Zeman, 2011; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012). Researchers used very little, if any, qualitative research to investigate the perceptions of school counselors in the area of bullying. Middle school counselors expressed that they need up-to-date resources, face multiple challenges, and strive to identify gaps between what is being done to address bullying and what needs to be done. The most important role for school counselors is to promote student development. Therefore, qualitative research to explore the perceptions of middle school counselors on bullying preparedness was necessary (Crawford, 2013; Walsh, 2010). Overall, counselors need useful resources that implement training using prevention programs, to close gaps between which strategies are actually used and which should be utilized.

Students need prevention programs that teach conflict resolution skills and the differences between conflict and bullying. Ideally, students will develop competencies in these programs to address unresolved peer conflict. Rather than students calling unresolved conflicts "bullying" and not reaching a resolution, they should learn how to rethink the situation and plan a better approach to a solution (Crawford, 2013; King, 2012; Walsh, 2010). The Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum is a school violence prevention program pertaining to teaching social skills to students, so that they may develop awareness, empathy training, impulse control,

and anger management techniques; this program is highly recommended (Committee for Children, 2010). Carey et al. (2009) identified Second Step, a federally funded, evidenced based, data driven prevention program, as successful because of its structured approach targeting the grade levels kindergarten through eighth grade. Schools use this program as a tool to teach social skills that reduced aggression and bullying behaviors. Second Step is an exceptionally well-researched intervention program that addresses violence prevention (Committee for Children, 2010). Students should be prepared for verbal/physical threats and attacks and not be afraid when those things happen. Preparation is the key to the fight against school violence (bullying). Prevention programs should be utilized to focus on awareness methods, such as increasing knowledge of bullying or improving social skills as evidenced by the success of the Second Step program.

The *Bully Prevention Challenge Course Curriculum* (BPCCC) is one successful program that could be used in efforts to bring forward awareness. BPCCC's program curriculum includes challenge activities reflecting bully behaviors, so students will be better able to identify and address bully behaviors (Battey & Ebbeck, 2013). The students who participated in the program increased their awareness of behaviors that lead to bullying and learned how to prevent it. The *Expect Respect Project* (ERP) is another useful awareness prevention program with a focus on how to identify bullying (Meraviglia, Becker, Sanchez & Robertson, 2003). The Olweus Bully Prevention Program (OBPP) is an example of a resource or program school counselors could implement to teach awareness (none reported using this program (Olweus, 1993). The OBPP focuses on changing the school environment through increasing awareness of bullying, by establishing social norms against bullying (Olweus, 1993). Olweus (1993) reported many positive results with at least a 50% reduction in bully episodes when advocates implemented

bully awareness prevention programs. In an effort to assist counselors with tackling the gaps and challenges that arise when addressing bullying, school districts should provide sufficient resources. Based on previously discussed literature in Chapter 2 and insights revealed from this study, bully awareness prevention programs are needed. School administrators and staff should use these prevention programs to educate students on identifying bullying, teach conflict resolution, provide mentoring and counseling, and teach coping skills (Battey & Ebbeck, 2013; Edmondson & Zeman, 2011; Meraviglia, Becker, Sanchez, & Robertson, 2003; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012; Schellenburg, 2005).

Limitations and Delimitations

As with any research, the expected limitations of the data analysis were the sample size selected and that participants might leave some questions unanswered; participants may have elected not to give certain information during the interview session, or they may have chosen not to participate at all; this was not the case in this study. Even though counselors provided elaborate and in-depth information, I reviewed the findings with caution because I had used this qualitative case study to gain the perspectives from school counselors' experiences and meanings of bullying. The concern or attitudes from participants in one school district may not be the best representation of all school counselors in general, but the researcher provided future studies guidance on how to approach further research and insights for administrators on what updated resources and training school counselors may need. I created and used semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires that did not reflect the position of the school district policies and procedures or decision makers outside the views of counselors.

The delimitations of this case study are the interpretation of findings due to the focus of middle school counselors in four school districts created a significantly small sample size. I

selected middle schools because of the prevalence of bullying occurring more often among sixth grade through eighth grade students. Lessne and Harmalkar (2015) reported the prevalence to be higher among this group of students, which made studying middle school the preferred area to consider. I chose to triangulate the data through the use of the semi-structured interviews, blind questionnaires, and review of school records available. Participants completed the blind questionnaires and mailed them back to me in a self-addressed stamped envelope. Questions used for the semi-structured interviews and blind questionnaires were both based on the same review of the literature and identical in structure to accurately gather consistent data. The content of the questions may have been the cause of participants' responses being limited or guided, which created delimitation.

Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

The underlying problem that led to this study was that current middle school counselors might not have up-to-date resources or training on school practices so that they can promptly and thoroughly investigate student reported incidents of bullying. There are many causes and types of bullying, which create challenges for school counselors when identifying the warning signs. These challenges are obstacles that middle school counselors encounter when approaching and addressing reported incidents of bullying. According to Green (2007), bullying is a major concern for survival that has existed for many years, but not as severe as it is today. Whether bullying is physical (pushing, hitting, and pinching), verbal (name-calling, terroristic threats, and spreading rumors), or cyberbullying, it is an increasing trend that needs attention (Green, 2007, p. 336). Power-Elliott and Harris (2012) suggested that a significant part of the solution to fighting school bullying is counselor training related to prevention and intervention. However, in this study, counselors noted the importance for students to receive adequate training on

awareness through prevention programs. Schools that provide knowledge by training students to identify workable solutions to their unresolved conflicts reduce the reports of bullying (Crawford, 2013; Walsh, 2010). Problems associated with peer conflicts will always exist. However, preparing students to resolve conflicts appropriately combats school violence as a whole. Counselors shared that the most challenging task is getting to the bottom of the incident in order to conclude whether or not the situation was just a conflict between peers and not actual bullying.

The transformative paradigm design brings forth changes to provide better systems (Mezirow, 1997). The transformative theory is connected with perceptions of preparedness of resources because middle school counselors must use reflective judgment to eliminate distorted assumptions of procedures of bullying that can block behavior change. In this case study, I determined that counselors may need more resources that focus on teaching students how to identify bullying and resolve the conflict. Therefore, school district administrators may need to transform the resources and training provided to middle school counselors. This change will give awareness to bullying and the fight to stop school violence through prevention programs. I wanted to investigate the perceptions of school counselors on current resources, training, strategies used, and the differences between school districts, to determine what transformations may be needed. Counselors need up-to-date resources targeting bully awareness to train students. The resources and student training in all four school districts lacked systematic procedures to address bullying, and the districts' counselors and administrators could benefit from the transformative theory to help them be prepared to prevent bullying.

Furthermore, policies and procedures by school districts in Texas are not adequate when reporting incidents of bullying to the United States Department of Education and TEA. I

discovered that three of the four school districts in this qualitative case study did not have certain

reporting policies. The bully procedures are within each school district's student code of

conduct by TEA. The 2015-2016 Data Standards from TEA (Appendix E) are the most current

guidelines that address reporting disciplinary offenses. Disciplinary action addressing bullying is

under a generalized category titled Local General Code of Conduct Violations (L21). The

offense codes under this umbrella for bullying are BL2 bullying/harassment-sex; BL3

bullying/harassment-disability; and BL4 bullying/harassment- race, color, and nationality. Due

to the procedure that TEA requires for school districts to code offenses, there is no way for

inquiring individuals to identify how many cases of bullying occurred. The only way to

investigate the disciplined offenses of bullying is to individually scan through disciplinary

referrals on each campus, looking for codes BL2-4 under offense code L21. Unfortunately, the

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. §1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) is a

federal law that creates a roadblock to investigating further.

Recommendations for Further Research

The problem I addressed was that middle school counselors lack of up-to-date resources,

face multiple challenges, and need to identify gaps to stop bullying. I used this case study to

gain insights from counselor perceptions through a qualitative approach, which few previous

studies have done (Crawford, 2013; DiMatteo, 2012; Walsh, 2010; Schellenburg, 2005).

Researchers have argued that there is an inadequate amount of research on bullying and

preparedness (Chambers et al., 2010) and on receiving up-to-date resources (Walsh, 2010).

Researchers of previous studies only focused on determining preparedness of resources being

used to prevent and address bullying through quantitative analyses and did not provide relevant

information on better prevention and intervention methods (DiMatteo, 2012; Walsh, 2010). In

these types of studies, researchers did not reveal the experiences or meaningful information to make preventions and interventions better. School counselors provided in-depth suggestion on how to effectively address bullying. School counselors need resources that focus on student awareness of bullying through prevention programs. As part of their role within the education system, counselors should take on the leadership role to begin the initiative to reduce and prevent bullying (Battey & Ebbek, 2013). Cunningham and Whitten (2007) stated that middle school counselors are in a position that allows them to advocate for the implementation of bullying prevention programs. One of the school counselor's roles, as described by TEA (1994), is that of program manager. School counselors are program managers, so coordinating bullying prevention programs is appropriate to their role. Whitted and Dupper (2005) argued that school counselors play a pivotal role as program developers, program promoters, and on-site coordinators of bullying prevention programs. I was able to use findings in this study to identify school counselor perceived needs of resources, challenges, and gaps to be filled in, dealing with bullying.

I used three assumptions to guide this study. First, bullying negatively affects middle school students. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) said that a cumulative percentage of 98% of students in grade levels sixth through eighth reported bullying (Lessne & Harmalkar, 2013). Victims of bullying are likely to have difficulty academically, behave aggressively, and withdraw socially (Egan & Todorov, 2009). Second, middle school counselors can have a positive impact on victims through the implementation of intervention and prevention methods. School counselors are program managers and coordinating bullying prevention programs is appropriate to their role. Whitted and Dupper (2005) argued that school counselors play a pivotal role as program developers, program promoters, and on-site coordinators of

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bullying prevention programs. Third, the assurance of confidentiality and participation is strictly

voluntary; participants will answer questions about integrity and give detailed accounts of

experiences. Examining the perspectives of middle school counselors is important in this study

because the assumptions about what is reality and truth in the perspectives will guide the

research to explaining why and how things are with regards to school violence. In current

research literature, researchers confirm the need of addressing bullying on multiple levels in

public schools (Crawford, 2013; DiMatteo, 2012; Egan, & Todov, 2009; Huber, 2010; Robers et

al., 2014; Walsh, 2010). Recommendations follow, based on the data collected and from the

emerging themes of the study.

The first recommendation pertains to school counselors as transformational leaders in

their schools because they are change agents that promote bully awareness (Whitted & Dupper,

2005). As leaders, counselors can collaborate with staff members on campuses about

implementing bully awareness programs. As change agents, counselors can work with the

administrative team to develop or change policies or procedures for addressing bullying. I

concluded from this study that counselors may need resources such as prevention programs that

focus on bully awareness to overcome the challenges to become better leaders in addressing

bullying. Therefore, I recommend that future research explores bully awareness prevention

programs and their effectiveness on the middle school level.

Another recommendation specifically concerns the reporting of bullying to the United

States Department of Education and Texas Education Agency (TEA). Reporting bullying

incidents is integrated within each school district's student code of conduct. Unfortunately, the

only incidents reported are the confirmed and referred incidents for discipline situations. The

only way to investigate the disciplined offenses of bullying is to scope through all of the

disciplinary referrals on each campus; looking for codes BL2-4 under offense code L21 to determine how many cases of bullying is reported. Unfortunately, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. §1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) is a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. Parents must give permission to release any educational records (including disciplinary) from a student's cumulative folder (34 CFR § 99.31). This issue exists because bullying is a code under a generalized student code of conduct violation. Disciplinary action addressing bullying is under a generalized category titled Local General Code of Conduct Violations (L21). The offense codes under this umbrella for bullying are BL2 bullying/harassment-sex; BL3 bullying/harassment-disability; and BL4 bullying/harassment-race, color, and nationality. When school districts send a PEIMS summary to TEA, the category L21 is the only offense code reported. The researcher recommends that further research investigates reported incidents of bullying. The purpose of recommendation is to encourage the United States Department of Education and TEA to reconsider how bullying is coded and reported. Today, the only way to know specifics of whom, what, and when, in regards to bullying, is to conduct quantitative research studies that collect numbers through willing participants of the survey.

Conclusion

I designed this case study so that I could provide descriptions of experiences of middle school counselors' perceptions of bullying. Future research could include a qualitative study of students in secondary grade levels (sixth through eighth grade) who experienced bullying. Also, future researchers could replicate this study by using a larger and more diverse sample of school counselors in multiple school districts in the United States to compare differences in policies and procedures. School counselors who participated may not have been representative of school

counselors in general and may have differences in perceptions; therefore, there should be further investigation. It is possible that, through the design of the study, I created limitations of the overall findings. I used semi-structured interviews in these case studies, which may have limited or encouraged the content of responses by counselors. Future researchers could use a quantitative study to identify frequencies in the replies using larger samples across multiple school districts. Future researchers could also include how to change procedures of reporting bullying on the national or state level.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: School District Permission to Conduct Study

Dear Superintendent,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Transformational Leadership program at Concordia University, and I would like to include middle school guidance counselors from your school district (and others) in a research project on bullying. If the guidance counselors take part in this project, they will participate in semi-structured interviews and will be asked questions about policies and procedures that address bullying. You will be provided with a copy of the interview protocol.

The purpose of this project is to discover middle school counselors' perceptions on resources, strategies being used, and what additional trainings may be needed to effectively provide prompt and thorough investigations of student reported bullying incidents. Counselors' participation in this project is completely voluntary. In addition to your permission, counselors will be provided with a Human Subject Informed Consent Form. You are free to withdraw your permission for counselors' participation at any time and for any reason without penalty. This study will determine how to better assist school counselors with addressing incidents of bullying. Interviews will be conducted individually in one session with reserved timing of at least 30 minutes after school and will not disrupt or interfere with school operations.

The information that is obtained during this research project will be kept strictly confidential and will not become a part of counselor's or the school district's record. Any sharing or publication of the research results will not identify any of the participants or school district by name.

I look forward to working with your school district. I think that this research will be beneficial for counselors and help address possible changes toward school violence policies and procedures.

You will receive a copy of the signed consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Vanessa Torres Spears at [Researcher phone number redacted] or at email [Researcher email redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

Please send the signed consent to [Researcher email redacted] or call [Researcher phone number redacted] if you want the document to be picked up by the principal researcher. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

_____   _____

Signature   Date

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form for Interviews

Research Study Title: The Perceptions of Middle School Counselors on Bullying Preparedness
Principle Investigator: Vanessa Torres Spears
Research Institution: Concordia University
Faculty Advisor: Mark Jimenez
Purpose and what you will be doing:

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to discover middle school counselors' views on the issue of bullying and to reveal their suggestions on the resources and training they may need to effectively provide prompt and thorough investigations of student reported bullying incidents. There is no deception in this study. I am interested in your opinions and reflections about the issues of bullying.

You will be interviewed in person to get detailed information regarding your perceptions on bullying. The session will last about 30 minutes and will be recorded to ensure an accurate record of the interview. The research questions concentrate on the school counselor's perceptions of what bullying incidents are happening, what procedures there are to address incidents, what more needs to be done, and what opportunities exist to bridge the gap between what resources and trainings are available and what more should be done to better prepare school counselors to address reported incidents of bullying.

The following person is involved in this research project and may be reached at anytime: Vanessa Torres Spears, [Researcher phone number redacted], email: [Researcher email redacted].

Risks:
Although there are no known risks in this study, some of the information is personally sensitive and also includes questions about personal experiences of bullying which may be distressing to some people. However, you may withdraw at any time (which all and any previously collected information will be deleted) and you may choose not to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable in answering. In the event that additional support may be needed, please be reminded of the free crisis program provided by [Site information redacted] that serves your area and surrounding counties. This is a community program offered by the Texas Department of State Health Services that assists with crisis management that might adversely impact the lives of people. You may contact [Site information redacted] at [Site information redacted] or visit their website at [Site information redacted].

The data collected in this study is confidential. All data is coded so that your name is not associated. In addition, the coded data is available only to the researcher associated with this project.

Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study.

Benefits:
In addition, using the results of this study, I may be able to provide a more solid base from which to examine bullying effects on children and help guide those who are proactively involved with bullying to inform and educate students.

Confidentiality:
I will not distribute this information to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. I will have a record of your name or other identity, but this will be stored on a USB drive kept locked by key in a safe at my home and as a backup in a password protected Google Drive. I will transcribe voice recordings in writing and will use a pseudonym instead of your name as part of the transcription process. Your name will not be included in any publication unless you take the option of giving written permission

to publish specific information. Once transcription is completed and assured of accuracy, I will delete the recordings immediately, unless you give written permission to use this information in the presentation of my thesis. I will work in this way to keep your information secret, which will keep your identity confidential. There are only two reasons why I might have to give your name to a counselor or official:

1. If I thought you were going to hurt yourself or hurt someone else, I would give your name to a counselor at the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (*800-273-8255*). In an urgent situation, we might need to also contact a public authority official. The counselor would call you and talk with you, and maybe your parent, if it is necessary to help keep you from being seriously hurt or seriously hurting someone else.

2. If I discovered that someone was going to hurt you, and I had to do something to help you, I would go to an official or counselor. I would try to do this in a way that does not give your name. I would try to discuss this with you first. But, if the only way to protect your safety is to give your name, I will give your name to help keep you from being seriously hurt.

I would have to do 1 or 2 above, since it is required by state law. If you do not agree to our following this law, you will have to withdraw from the study *before* I thought you were in danger.

Right to Withdraw:
Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or to stop participating in the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required, and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a bad emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

Contact Information:
You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Vanessa Torres Spears at [Researcher phone number redacted] or by email [Researcher email redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

Your Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_____   _____

Participant Name   Date

_____   _____

Participant Signature   Date

_____   _____

Investigator Name   Date

_____   _____

Investigator Signature   Date

APPENDIX C: Questionnaire

Please complete the questionnaire as truthfully to your knowledge of the questions asked. Do not write your name on the questionnaire or indicate any identifying information. When you have completed answering all questions, please mail the questionnaire back in the paid self-addressed envelope included.

1. In 2-3 sentences, describe your experiences with students involved with bullying.

2. In 2-3 sentences, describe the interventions and programs you use to address bullying.

3. In 2-3 sentences, describe the programs you would like to see used to address bullying.

4. In 2-3 sentences, describe the challenges with addressing bullying in schools.

5. In 2-3 sentences, describe your roles and responsibilities as a school counselor when addressing bullying.

6. In 2-3 sentences, describe what is being done to bridge the gap between what is currently being done and what should be done to address bullying.

7. In 2-3 sentences describe how effective have the current practices been in reducing bullying in the last two years?

8. In 2-3 sentences describe what current strategies are working well with addressing bullying?

APPENDIX D: Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:
Interview Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

I would like to first thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Your responses to these questions will provide valuable information on middle school counselors' perceptions related to bullying. This interview will take about 30 minutes or less. As informed in the consent form, all interviews will be recorded for accuracy and clarity.

Recordings will be saved on a USB drive and in a Google Drive account electronically as a backup. Transcriptions of the audio recorded interviews will be typed on a Microsoft Word document that will be saved on the same USB drive and Google Drive as the recordings. The transcribed text will then be sent on a Microsoft Word document to each participant to verify accuracy. (If corrections are needed to be made, they will be revised at this time.) Once transcription is completed and assured of accuracy, the recordings will be deleted immediately, unless written permission to use this information in the presentation of the thesis is provided in writing. Interview data will be stored along with consent forms for a period of 3 years from the conclusion of the study then destroyed. All collected data stored in a USB drive will be kept secured in a locked safe with a key in the home of the researcher.

Although there are no known risks in this study, some of the information is personally sensitive and also includes questions about personal experiences of bullying which may be distressing to some people. However, you may withdraw at any time (if so, all previously collected information will be deleted), and you may choose not to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable in answering. In the event that additional support may be needed, please be reminded of the free crisis program provided by [Site information redacted] that serves your area and surrounding counties. This is a community program offered by the Texas Department of State Health Services that assists with crisis management that might adversely impact the lives of people. You may contact [Site information redacted] at [Site information redacted] or visit their website at [Site information redacted].

Questions:

1. What are the experiences you have had with students, who have been involved with

   bullying?

   This may include students who were the focus of bullying or initiated bullying.

2. What are the procedures for addressing reported incidents of bullying?

3. What interventions or programs do you use to address bullying?

4. What interventions or programs do you think should be used?

5. What effective strategies have you used to address incidents of bullying?

6. What, if any, do you believe are the challenges in addressing bullying in schools?

7. What, if any, do you think are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in addressing bullying?

8. What do you think will close the gap between what is actually being done in your school and what should be done in your school to address bullying?

9. How effective have the current practices been in reducing bullying in the last two years?

10. What current strategies are working well with addressing bullying?

11. Are there any additional general comments about bullying you would like to add?

Appendix E: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does "fraudulent" mean?

"Fraudulent" work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one's own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate's final work without full and complete documentation.

What is "unauthorized" assistance?

"Unauthorized assistance" refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

• Use of unauthorized notes or another's work during an online test
• Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
• Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
• Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

Statement of Original Work

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association.*

_____
Digital Signature

_Vanessa Spears_____
Name (Typed)

_9/13/2017_____
Date