MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF BULLYING AND
THE EFFECTS OF AN ANTI-BULLYING POLICY

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Abstract

The problem of bullying in schools is an issue of national importance. Research points to an abundance of negative impacts on students involved in bullying and require the attention of adults to address and resolve bullying incidents between students. This study, giving credence to the voices of eighth graders in one central Massachusetts middle school, sought to uncover not only student perspectives about bullying but also to determine what these perceptions revealed about the effectiveness of the school district’s anti-bullying policy. This study used a mixed methods approach and employed both survey and focus group discussion methods. Data from the School Climate Bully Survey (Cornell, 2011) provided descriptive student-reported data on the nature and extent of bullying. Initial review of the survey results in the form of frequency statistics on each question provided baseline data from which focus group questions emerged. Statistical analysis of the survey data generated the quantitative portion of this study while focus group data generated the qualitative portion of this study. The survey revealed that about 33 percent of the students in the sample experienced some sort of bullying in the past month with verbal bullying as the most common type of bullying experienced. Themes that emerged from focus groups revolved around confusion regarding the definition of bullying, skepticism in the survey results, the notion that adults are too far removed from youth culture to be truly helpful, and that a teen’s search for autonomy may actually prevent adults from making effective inroads into this pervasive problem. Finally, participants discussed specific ways adults could be more helpful to them in combating the problem of bullying.

Keywords: Bullying, middle school, student perceptions, anti-bullying policy
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of Problem and Significance

The problem of bullying is quite pervasive in American schools. According to recent national research, approximately 80 percent of school children report being bullied at one time or another and 160,000 students are absent from school daily because of bullying (Parker-Roerden, Rudewick, & Gorton, 2007). Scarcely a day goes by that one is not confronted with a story on the evening news about school bullying. Despite media attention on its devastating effects, bullying behaviors continue to plague schools and classrooms. Bullying and school violence not only cause individual social and emotional problems but the entire school community suffers in terms of overall lost time on learning (Johnson, 2009). Teachers, administrators, parents, and students expend a considerable amount of energy dealing with the fallout of bullying within the school environment, energy that could and should be devoted to real learning (Marshall, Varjas, Meyers, Graybill, & Skoczylas, 2009; Newgent et al., 2009). Clearly, schools are struggling to come to terms with this issue, an issue that is not about test scores or reading proficiency, not about math achievement or advanced placement offerings, but one that has, at one time or another, negatively impacted the learning environment at all levels of schooling and has the potential to overshadow even the most promising of educational reform attempts. Bullying has become an educational issue of national importance.

Research conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in conjunction with the National Association for Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (2008) not only confirms that bullying and harassment negatively affect the learning environment, but that out of 1600 principals surveyed, more than 50 percent believe that a gay or lesbian student would not feel safe from bullying at their school. For these students, the emotional and mental health
repercussions of bullying can negatively impact their learning (Parker-Roerden et al., 2007). School truancy, avoidance, and fear of harassment all contribute to the far-reaching educational impact of bullying. Research points to victims of bullying experiencing high levels of school avoidance, aggression in school, low achievement, depression, and higher incidence of future criminal activity (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Fox & Boulton, 2005; Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, & Li, 2010; Olweus, 1978, 1993). Poor psychosocial adjustment, poor peer relations, and perpetuation of the cycle of abuse have also been documented (Fox & Boulton, 2005; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1978; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1991). Additionally, GLSEN reports that half of the almost 1600 American school principals surveyed about school safety and bullying identify bullying, name-calling or harassment of students as among the most serious problems in their schools as compared to substance abuse, gang-related violence or racial/religious difference issues (2008). It seems clear from this evidence that both individual students and the institutions that serve them are being affected equally negatively by the problem of bullying.

The educational implications of school bullying reached a critical point, such that state legislatures began to address the issue. In Massachusetts, for example, the bullying-related deaths of two Massachusetts school children was sensationalized in the media and, as a result, shined a spotlight on schools and their role in responding to bullying (Miller, C. D., 2010; "Mother says bullies drove her son to suicide," 2009). Like most states, the state of Massachusetts passed anti-bullying legislation whereby all Massachusetts school districts were required to develop an anti-bullying policy (MA.S.2323, 2010). One of the provisions of this bill is to train faculty, students, and families in bullying prevention and intervention. Essentially, schools were being required to specifically address issues of student safety as it relates to
harassment and bullying at a policy level. Massachusetts’ school districts were forced to decide what their anti-bullying policies would look like and how they would be implemented to meet the requirements of this new law.

It has yet to be determined how the new anti-bullying law will impact the nature and extent of bullying in schools. Some variability in levels of bullying in schools is related to the individual school’s climate (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Kartal & Bilgin, 2009; Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008; Roland & Galloway, 2004; Smith & Hoy, 2004). According to the National School Climate Council, school climate is defined as “…norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe” (Cohen, J. & Greier, 2010, p. 1). Teachers and administrators play a critical role in establishing a positive school climate. A student’s feeling of being safe in school is one of school climate’s key elements as it is closely related not only to consistent and fair discipline but also the nature of relationships among students and between students, teachers and administrators (Cohen, J. & Greier, 2010). The application of rules and policies, including those that relate to bullying within the school, contribute to the prevailing sense of safety and satisfaction with school climate.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

Knowing how students perceive the nature and extent of bullying in their school reflects the nature of the school climate as well as the success of the efforts within the school to reduce the prevalence of bullying and harassment. In this way, this research was intended to learn about the ways in which students perceived their school’s efforts to combat bullying. Do students believe that these policies make a difference in their everyday school lives? On a more intellectual level, the goals of this research included learning how anti-bullying policies are perceived by students and therefore how they might help to improve school climate. Teachers,
administrators, and students in the school establish the prevailing climate of the school through their relationships with each other, along with their beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors that they bring to school with them everyday. Bullying is just one behavior that manifests itself commonly within the walls of the school. Learning how students perceive this phenomenon of bullying and attempts to reduce the amount and degree of bullying may shed some light on the efficacy of anti-bullying policies and the extent to which they affect the social environment of a school.

**Summary of Research Questions**

This research sought to uncover student perceptions about three school climate factors: the nature and extent of bullying at one middle school, the anti-bullying policies and practices in place at the school, and the impact these policies and practices have on bullying behaviors. This research is intended to answer four specific questions.

**Question 1.** What are student’s perceptions about the nature and extent of bullying that occur in the school? This question is intended to help the researcher develop a clear picture of bullying behaviors in the school. This includes learning how often bullying occurs, who the victims and bullies are, the form that the bullying takes, i.e., verbal, physical, relational, or online, and where bullying occurs. Survey responses will create a baseline of data from which the researcher can explore student perceptions of the nature of bullying in the school.

**Question 2.** What are student’s perceptions about the policies and practices that are in place to reduce bullying in school? The research site has a formalized district anti-bullying policy modeled after the state recommendations. The policy has been in place for approximately one year along with formal reporting procedures. This question will help the researcher know
how knowledgeable students are about these policies and procedures and whether they believe these policies and practices are useful in combating bullying in school.

**Question 3.** What are student’s perceptions regarding what effects school policies and practices have on the nature and extent of bullying in school? This question is intended to determine how much students believe bullying can be controlled by policy and formal school procedures and the extent to which students perceive that current policies and practices have had any impact on bullying in their school.

**Question 4.** What are student’s perceptions about the effectiveness of adults in preventing bullying or intervening after it has occurred? This process-oriented question attempts to uncover whether students perceive that adults can help them stop bullying. Also, it will identify what action adults take that help to improve school climate in terms of school connectedness, relationships between students and teachers, and overall feelings of safety and which actions are ineffective.

**Summary of Paper Contents and Organization**

This thesis is organized by first outlining the overall problem and goals, and stating the research questions. The next section presents the theoretical framework through which the problem of bullying is being examined. Following the theoretical framework is the literature review focused on defining the problem of bullying further and investigating the research that has informed the issue in recent years. Chapter three describes the methodology employed in collecting and analyzing the study data. Chapter four reports out the research findings and analysis of those findings. The final chapter discusses the significance of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and current body of literature, examines limitations of this study and draws conclusions for the reader.
Theoretical Framework

Social ecological theory and social cognitive theory was the framework through which this research was examined. Espelage and Swearer (2000; 2004a; 2001; 2004b) are best known for the application of social ecological theory to research on bullying. These authors contend that bullying is not solely a personality-based phenomenon, but rather is rooted in environmental influences (Espelage et al., 2000; Swearer & Doll, 2001; Swearer & Espelage, 2004). It is the interplay of individuals with each other and within a given environment that gives birth to bullying behaviors. Social ecological theory, as explained in more detail below, helps to explain the interplay of the school climate with bullying and victimization in schools.

Social cognitive theory. The main tenets of social ecological theory have deep roots in Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which advances the basic premise that behavior, cognition and environment are interacting, bidirectional forces with each one influencing the other (Bandura, 1986, 1989, 2001; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). For example, when a child lives in a home where abusive behavior is the norm, the child learns that abusing another is an acceptable method of dealing with frustration or getting what he or she wants. The abuse the child experiences within that environment and between individuals in that environment influences how the child behaves in similar situations. Learning happens as a result of these interacting influences. Bandura’s theory explains the powerful influence of observational learning whereby children imitate the models they observe and the feedback they receive either reinforces or inhibits their behaviors (Allen, 2010; O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). As a learning theory, social cognition helps us to understand how individuals learn and the influences that impact their learning and behavior. Bullying and
victimization are learned behaviors that exist within a social context and as such influence and are influenced by many environmental and social factors.

Bandura (1989) theorizes that learning occurs via interactions with the environment and is dependent upon the reinforcement received as a result of the behavior. In some types of environments, children can actually dictate the climate of the environment by the behaviors they produce (Miller, P. H., 2011). Teachers have witnessed this when one child’s behavior disrupts the work of an entire classroom. Teachers also have seen how one child’s negative behavior can produce negative behaviors in others. This has much to do with the power of observational learning and the extent to which these behaviors are reinforced within the classroom, another important part of Bandura’s (1989) theory. If bullying behaviors are not directly addressed and thus are indirectly tolerated, then students may imitate this behavior, especially if the action produces a favorable result for them. Favorable results for the bully could mean simply attention from other students or adults, or even getting something they want from the victim. If bullying behaviors produce a favorable result for the bully, then the bully’s behavior is reinforced and therefore likely to be repeated. The more the bully’s behavior is reinforced, the more power the bully may wield, and in turn, the more they influence the environment. To the extent that the bullying behavior is perpetuated other students quite possibly will imitate it.

Another element of Bandura’s (1989) theory, his concept of self-efficacy, aids in understanding the social-ecological nature of bullying. Bandura (1989; 2001) theorized that the extent to which children’s behaviors are reinforced favorably will help to determine a child’s self-efficacy or sense their own capability to deal effectively with those events they experience within their environment. A strong sense of self-efficacy can help a child persevere in the face of difficult tasks while a poor sense of self-efficacy can lead to social-emotional problems.
Bandura (2001) relates his concept of self-efficacy to the construct of personal agency, the degree to which one feels able to control events that unfold in the environment and, ultimately the degree to which one feels able to control one’s own role in that environment.

Children may gain strong self-efficacy or feel agentic in some areas while not in others. Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961) specifically studied children’s sense of self-efficacy in aggressive interactions where they found that children with a high degree of self-efficacy get what they wanted from their peers. Social learning theory including the concepts of self-efficacy and agency support the notion that students who exhibit bullying behaviors continue to do so even in the face of certain kinds of adult interventions. This relates directly to environmental influences that could be interpreted as motivational factors for bullying. Understanding these influences in schools may allow for more effective interventions and prevention programs that meet children’s needs and keep all students safe.

The study of interacting influences of self and environment is not new. Two classic studies on human-environment interaction help to illustrate this bi-directional influence. One of these is the simulated prison experiment conducted by Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo (1973). In this experiment, individuals were randomly assigned to roles of prisoner or guard and were introduced to a simulated prison environment. During the experiment, individual participants, despite being given no specific instructions regarding how they were to behave, began to develop hostile and negative behaviors, much like actual behaviors in a prison setting. Those assigned to guard roles became verbally abusive and controlling. Those assigned to prisoner roles began to demonstrate signs of anxiety, depression, and passivity. The experiment, which was intended to run for two weeks, was stopped prior to the scheduled end time due to the stress incurred by these voluntary participants. According to Haney, et al. (1973), “the extreme pathological
reactions which emerged in both groups of subjects testify to the power of social forces operating…” (p.10). In other words, it demonstrates that individuals influence and are influenced by their environments and that societal expectations and attitudes influence individuals who then interact with and influence others in the environment. This tendency of society and the environment to shape the roles that individuals take on is a powerful force, even in the face of individual determination not to be influenced. This experiment informs the study of bullying and peer influences by identifying the significance of social forces in shaping participant behaviors. When applied to a school situation, these powerful social forces play a significant role in the climate of the school and how all of the individuals within that school environment perceive their roles.

Another classic experiment reinforces this theory of the bidirectionality of influences between the individual and the environment. Stanley Milgram (1963, 1965a, 1965b) is widely known for his experiments on obedience and conformity. In his experiments, participants took on the role of a “teacher” who was working with an unseen “learner” to study memory. The teacher was directed to give electrical shocks when the learner gave an incorrect answer. As the questions became more and more difficult and the learner (who was an accomplice of the experimenter) failed to answer questions accurately, the intensity level of electrical shock increased. As the intensity of the shocks increased, the learner would demonstrate painful reactions also increasing in intensity. Unbeknownst to the teacher, the learner was, in fact, not receiving shocks at all. He was simply acting. Noteworthy in these experiments, was that many teachers continued to give increasingly more powerful shocks despite the learners crying out in pain and at one point, not reacting at all. Later, when participants were reunited and teachers were assured that the learner had not been hurt, many teachers claimed that they continued to
administer the shocks because the experimenter was ordering them to do so. Very few teachers actually protested about giving the shocks and fewer still actually refused to administer the shocks, despite hearing the learner was in pain. Milgram’s (1963, 1965a, 1965b) experiments demonstrate how the role of an authority figure or high status figure, as well as the actions of bystanders influence the behavior of individuals.

Taken together, these classic experiments have contributed to my understanding of bullying behaviors. The social context of bullying includes the participation of individuals with varying degrees of social power. The roles individuals take on influence and are influenced by the social environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979), an early ecological systems theorist, asserts, “…the tendency to evoke behavior in accord with expectations for a given role is a function of the existence of other roles in the setting that invite or inhibit behavior associated with the given role” (p. 94). Behavior, therefore, is not necessarily simply a matter of personal preference but of the powerful social forces that exist in the environment at any given time

Social ecological theory. Bandura’s (1989) social cognitive theory, and the seminal studies by Zimbardo (1973) and Milgram (1963, 1965b) set the stage for examining bullying within its social context, which is one of the foundational tenets of social ecological theory. Espelage, Bosworth, and Simon (2000) contend that there are environmental factors that contribute to bullying and may sustain bullying behaviors. These include parental physical discipline, time spent without adult supervision, negative peer influences, and perception of neighborhood safety. These factors create opportunities for observational learning and modeling, a social cognitive learning process, that contributes to the level of aggression a child may demonstrate. These contextual factors exist in varying levels in various environments.
Therefore, bullying behaviors that result from these influences can be identified as occurring over a continuum.

In refining social ecological theory, as it pertains to bullying, Espelage and Swearer (2003) posit that individual characteristics are considered jointly influenced by a variety of ecological contexts, including peers, families, schools, and community factors. Bullying, a type of aggressive behavior, is influenced by the complex interplay of these factors. Investigating how those who are involved in bullying situations perceive these contexts is the next logical step in applying this theoretical construct.

In this respect, Rodkin’s (2004) work in peer ecology, takes the work of social ecological theorists to a more specific level by looking at just one element of the ecological system and the influence it holds. Rodkin (2004) posits, “The peer ecology is a proximal ecology that the child interacts with directly” (p. 87). Because of this, the peer group affiliation has a significant influence on a child’s behavior, how he perceives others, and even how he perceives himself. Rodkin (2004) speaks specifically of the power of the group. He believes that the group’s power is exponentially stronger than the sum of the individuals who make up the group. School children can easily identify the various groups within their classroom and school, even those to which they do not belong. Grouping is a type of sorting process usually along the lines of similarity of beliefs or goals, similarity of race or ethnicity, or similarity of interests such as sports teams. In applying this concept to bullying, aggressive behavior is more likely to thrive in an environment where peers are supportive of those aggressive behaviors. So, according to Rodkin (2004), it is the group that helps to maintain aggressive bullying behaviors and the group that helps to identify targets as well. This concept of peer ecology within the larger social ecological context has significant implications for this study to the extent that interaction
between individuals and the many and varied aspects of their environment influence the existence, amount, and degree of bullying and victimization that exist in any given social arena.

The theories noted above strengthened and defined this study by providing a lens through which one can view student perceptions of bullying and the social environment from which it arises. Within the school environment, policies and practices intended to address the negative impact of bullying have evolved, either purposefully via policy development, or inadvertently, through trial and error. Social ecological theory provided the framework through which I investigated student perceptions that influence and are influenced by these policies and practices.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review explores several aspects of bullying. First, I seek to develop a conceptual definition of bullying that will guide this research. Next, it explores the characteristics of participants in bullying incidents, that is, bullies, victims, and bystanders and attempt to uncover salient factors that contribute to involvement in bullying. A discussion of the types and prevalence of bullying follows, followed by a review of literature regarding peer groups and other environmental factors affecting bullying. Additionally, I explore the policies and practices used by schools to respond to bullying incidents. Finally, I identify gaps in the literature that this research attempts to fill.

Conceptual Definition of Bullying

Bullying has been defined in a multitude of ways. Some of the earliest research on bullying was done by Dan Olweus, Psychology Professor at the University of Bergen, Norway, who began his research in the early 1970’s working with boys in Norway. Through his research he developed a comprehensive definition of bullying that includes reference to negative peer actions, repetition of those actions, and perpetration by an individual who exercises power over
the victim (Olweus, 1978, 1993). David P. Farrington of Cambridge University also explored the definition of bullying in depth and although he contested that there was no one single definition of bullying upon which all researchers agree, he did include all factors that Olweus includes plus one more: “…the absence of provocation by the victim” (Farrington, 1993). Olweus accounted for Farrington’s addition to this definition by specifying different types of bullying that may or may not include provocation (Olweus, 1978, 1993). Types of bullying are explored in further depth later in this literature review.

American researchers, Nansel et al. (2001), in their definition of bullying, further specified the nature of the power imbalance by differentiating between physical and psychological power but including both as viable elements of bullying. Physical power may include physical size or strength, whereas psychological power may include social status or popularity. Like Farrington’s (1993) inclusion of the absence of victim provocation, differentiating the nature of the power imbalance may also indicate the form bullying takes. Likewise, Griffin and Goss (2004) added that bullying takes place among individuals who are familiar with each other. This factor may be more or less related to the power factor, as there would need to be some sort of familiarity among the participants in order for a power differential to be construed.

Chris Lee (2006) explored, in depth, the idea of a definition of bullying in his study of teacher’s and how they define bullying. He examined six “strands…Intent, Hurt, Repetition, Duration, Power, Provocation” and used these as a structure in which to examine perceptions about bullying among teachers (p. 65). Lee (2006) concluded that the definitions that are commonly found in the research on bullying may not be very helpful for teachers who see a wide variety of behaviors that could be construed as bullying. His research falls more in line with
other researchers who define bullying less as a clearly defined concept but more of a continuum of behavioral interactions and/or relationships.

Rather than a discrete conceptual definition, this continuum allows for a range of actions and relationships to be considered bullying in nature (Espelage et al., 2000; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). These interactions range from verbal interactions such as teasing, to relational interactions such as exclusion, to physical interactions such as hitting, but, most importantly, these actions take place within the given social or environmental context in which intentionality, power differential, and repetition can vary among participants. This means that participants in one context can be identified as a victim whereas in another context may be identified as a bully and ultimately can move from one group to the other and to areas in between depending upon the social environment that is exerting influence at any given time (Swearer & Doll, 2001). It is this fluidity that defines the nature of bullying as interactions occurring along a continuum.

**Characteristics of Bullies**

A great deal has been written about the characteristics of bullies and their victims. The research tends to be fairly consistent and readily identifies several common traits among individuals identified as bullies and victims. The idea of a commonly held belief of the nature of bullies and victims in bullying situations is critical to gaining an understanding of how bullying plays out in schools and how students perceive bullying in the context of the school climate.

Research attempting to clearly define bullying characteristics is mostly for the purposes of prevention and identification of risk factors. There is commonality in the bullying literature with bullies characterized as aggressive, impulsive, and lacking in empathy (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Farrington & Baldry, 2010; Hixon, 2009; Olweus, 1978, 1997). They tend to be fairly popular among their classmates, generally confident or secure in their self-concept, have a need
to control or dominate others, and will turn more quickly to aggression to achieve their goals than their non-bullying peers (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Hixon, 2009; Olweus, 1993). Further, one of the most extensive studies on bullying in the United States found that compared to their non-bullying peers, children who bully may be more likely to smoke and consume alcohol at an early age, have lower academic achievement and tend to be generally involved in riskier, problematic behaviors (Nansel et al., 2001).

Other factors identified in the (Nansel et al., 2001) research point to risk factors around family environment, i.e., overly permissive parenting along with a high tolerance for aggression (Olweus, 1978). Additionally, research indicates that children who are identified as bullies have a tendency to grow into adults who continue to be aggressive, are more likely to engage in criminal activity as adults, and become abusive in their personal relationships (Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1978, 1993, 1997).

School connectedness is another factor that is common in the research on bullying characteristics. Studies out of New Zealand and Australia found that students who self-report bullying behaviors, tend not to feel connected to their school (Raskauskas, J. L., Gregory, Harvey, Rifshana, & Evans, 2010; Yoneyama & Rigby, 2006). This factor may be reinforced by the equally aggressive peers they tend to seek out within their schools and classrooms, and prevailing male-dominated cultural norms that favor aggression to achieve goals (Rodkin, P. C., 2004). This negativity towards school is often accompanied by conflict at home and negative influences within the neighborhood, which may then be carried over to aggressive peer relationships (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010).

Characteristics of Victims
Like those who bully, those who are bullied are also at risk for social and emotional problems (Nansel et al., 2001). Common characteristics found in the literature for targets of bullying include their non-aggressive nature and their tendency to be rejected by their peers (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Hixon, 2009; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1978, 1993; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Rigby & Slee, 1991). In his early research, Olweus (1978) found that victims were more anxious, insecure, and unpopular than their non-bullied peers. These factors have been confirmed as correlates of victimization along with depression, physical weakness, and low self-esteem including a tendency to blame themselves for their victimization (Cook et al., 2010; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). The low self-esteem and self-blame that characterizes victims is also worsened by repeated bullying and therefore creates a cycle of victimization that research has shown is stable over time, that is, victims of bullying tend to continue to be victims as they progress through school (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1978; Shelley & Craig, 2010; Swearer et al., 2001).

In addition to these individual characteristics found to be typical of victims, there are environmental factors that play a role in victimization. Cook et al. (2010), in their meta-analysis of bullying and victimization risk factors, found that contextual factors of negative home, neighborhood, and school environments, along with poor peer relationships are common among victims as well. Several studies have attempted to further investigate the peer relationship issues related to victimization. These studies have found rejection by, and isolation from peers to be a significant identifying characteristic of victims (Pellegrini et al., 1999; Perry et al., 1988; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005). Victims of bullying are likely to struggle with social skills and appear to peers to be socially inept or incompetent (Cook et al., 2010). This often leads to their having few, if any, friends. Research has found that having friends and positive relationships
with peers is one factor that protects children from victimization (Pellegrini et al., 1999; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005). Without friends, the neighborhood and school environment can look bleak to these children, creating a sense of negativity within and disconnect from these environments.

In addition to the above characteristics, there appears to be support for two distinct behavior patterns in victims. Olweus (1978) first identified this difference in his earliest research and it continues to be supported in the literature. One pattern of victim behavior is more common and follows the general description above of a child who is non-aggressive and seemingly weaker than those who exhibit bullying behaviors. Olweus (1978, 1993) referred to those who demonstrate victim behavior as “passive” victims because they do not appear to invite attention from the bully. Yet, they are nevertheless targeted by a bully. The alternate behavior pattern is less common and is characterized by a child who is quick to lose their temper, is more aggressive, and seemingly more annoying to others. This victim behavior profile is referred to as “provocative” (Olweus, 1978, 1993). Several studies support this particular distinction in victim behavior (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Nansel et al., 2001; Perry et al., 1988; Unnever & Cornell, 2004).

**Characteristics of Bully-Victims**

More recently, the concept of “provocative” victim has been more or less replaced by the term “Bully-Victim” (Atlas & Pepler, 2001; Cook et al., 2010; Parault, Davis, & Pellegrini, 2007; Salmivalli, 2010; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). The profile of the bully-victim is very much a combination of the characteristics of both the bully and the victim and, as such, they are “among the most disliked members of the peer group” (Parault et al., 2007, p. 149). In Atlas & Pepler’s (2001) highly-regarded observational study of classroom bullying, sixty-eight episodes
of bullying were recorded and forty-two children were identified as participating in these episodes as either a bully or a victim. Eleven of those forty-two were identified as bully-victims because they were observed as bullies in some episodes and as victims in other episodes (Atlas & Pepler, 2001). This percentage is a bit higher than is indicated in other studies but at the same time, it is likely a more reliable number due to the observational nature of the data collection as compared to most research that relies on student self reports (Cook et al., 2010; Nansel et al., 2001; Yoneyama & Rigby, 2006).

The distinctive nature of these children combining both bully and victim characteristics, is very much in line with the social ecological framework of bullying, which views bullying behavior as occurring over a continuum that includes all levels of participants in bullying incidents from the uninvolved to the bully themselves (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Swearer & Doll, 2001). Children who are bully-victims, seem to move easily from one part of the continuum to another depending upon the context of the incident, suggesting that in schools, the social climate and peer group may support the existence of bullies and victims equally.

**Role of Bystanders**

Literature on the role of bystanders in bullying episodes has its roots in early studies on bystanders to violent crimes. Research on bystanders gained momentum in the late 1960’s with the groundbreaking study by Darley and Latane (1968) where they defined the phenomena known as the “bystander effect,” the tendency of witnesses to fail to help a victim when other witnesses are present. Darley & Latane’s (1968) research was prompted by the highly publicized murder of Catherine Genovese, a New York City woman, whose death was witnessed by no less than thirty-eight people, none of whom came to her aid. The researchers questioned the psychology of this phenomenon and set out to create experimental versions of emergency
situations in order to assess the actions of the bystanders. What they found was that the response of the bystander was directly influenced by the number of people also witnessing the event (Darley & Latane, 1968). In an emergency situation, bystanders become distressed and indecisive and, when there were several witnesses present, will tend to assume little individual responsibility, will look to others to act, or will assume that someone else is already helping (Darley & Latane, 1968). This psychological process known as diffusion of responsibility, and as it is related to the bystander effect, has been replicated over and over in subsequent research (Fischer et al., 2011; Latané & Nida, 1981; Obermann, 2011; Thornberg, 2010). Two further psychological processes occur within the phenomenon of the bystander effect, audience inhibition, i.e., fear of looking foolish in front of others, and pluralistic ignorance, whereby “... each individual looks at one another for clues as to how to behave before concluding that the situation is not a real emergency because other individuals are not attempting to help the distressed individual” (Thornberg, 2010, p. 586). These processes influence a bystander’s response to an emergency situation.

Within the literature on bullying, research on bystanders supports these early studies and sheds some light on the behaviors and characteristics of a critical mass of individuals who are involved in bullying episodes, the witnesses. According to Espelage and Swearer (2003) there are many roles along the bullying continuum of behaviors and even supposedly “passive” observers are viewed as active participants in that their mere presence influences the social context in which bullying occurs. Like the bystander studies mentioned above, bullying research shows a lack of intervention on the part of its witnesses. It is estimated that bystanders are present in about 85 percent of bullying episodes and that they intervene in only about 10 percent of the cases (Atlas & Pepler, 2001; Craig & Pepler, 1998; O'Connell et al., 1999).
Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman and Kaukiainen (1996) classified bystanders into four categories based on the ways in which they participate in bullying episodes: assistants, reinforcers, outsiders, and defenders. Assistants help the bully, reinforcers give active support to the bully, outsiders remove themselves from the episode, and defenders help the victim (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). These descriptions of the bystander role are widely supported in the research studies (Easton & Aberman, 2008; Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008; Karna, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010; McLaughlin, Arnold, & Boyd, 2005). These role definitions are linked to the reasons why bystanders behave as they do but also serve to influence the nature and degree of bullying in varying ways.

Salmivalli et al. (2011) posited that bystander behavior directly influences the frequency of bullying in the classroom. They concluded that the presence of behaviors in which witnesses attempted to intervene on behalf of the victim reduced the frequency of bullying more than when bystanders support the bully (Salmivalli et al., 2011). This study provides support for the value of negative social feedback as a motivator for bullying behavior. Likewise, the presence of an outsider, a passive observer, or any witness who fails to come to the aid of the victim is perceived to be supportive of the bully. In this way, research supports the idea that unless a witness is actively defending the victim, any supportive behavior or lack of response is either directly or indirectly serving to perpetuate bullying (Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010).

Why students do not respond when they witness peer aggression against a classmate is the subject of a body of qualitative research. Thornberg (2007) found that the way in which a child defines an emergency influences the manner in which they respond, i.e., whether or not they will intervene to help. His grounded theory approach yielded seven concepts on non-
intervention: trivialization (it’s not really that serious,) disassociation (I’m not his friend or I really don’t even know what happened,) embarrassment (either on the part of the witness or the witness projecting embarrassment on the victim,) busy working priority (I had other things to do,) compliance with competitive norms (there are rules that overrule my helping,) audience modeling (no one else was doing anything to help,) and responsibility transfer (it is the teacher’s job to help the students) (Thornberg, 2007). Thornberg’s research suggests that children may not come to a victim’s defense because of confusion over competing norms in their environment, norms of loyalty to friends, obedience to teachers and rules, risk of harm to oneself, or even a sense of inability to really help the situation. Thornberg’s (2010) subsequent research further suggests that “Moral behavior is generally inhibited by the conformity fostered in school settings” (p. 585). This implies that it is the school climate and environment itself that prevents more extensive defending behavior among bystanders.

**Prevalence and Types of Bullying**

The extent of bullying occurring in and around school has been the subject of many studies of bullying. Notable among them is Olweus’s (1978, 1993, 1997) research in Scandinavia that identified 10 – 15 percent of students as being involved in bullying problems as a bully or victim. Rigby and Slee’s (1991) work in Australia as well as Whitney and Smith’s (1993) research in Great Britain confirmed Olweus’s findings. In 2001, the first major study investigating the prevalence of bullying in the United States was undertaken by the National Institutes of Heath (Nansel et al., 2001). In this study, a representative sample of over 15,000 American students in grades six through ten identified almost 30 percent as having some involvement in moderate or frequent bullying either as a bully, a victim, or both (Nansel et al., 2001). Additionally, boys were more likely to be involved in bullying than girls, with middle
school students on the whole having a higher rate of participation than high school students (Nansel et al., 2001).

More recently, in 2006, the National Institutes of Heath surveyed over 7,000 students in the sixth through tenth grade, and broke down the data into types of bullying, and found incidences of involvement in bullying to be higher still with over 50 percent of the students surveyed having some level of involvement in non-physical, verbal forms of bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Additionally, a Turkish study of fourth through eighth grade students found approximately 40 percent of the students surveyed reported some level of victimization by bullies at least once a week (Kartal & Bilgin, 2009). The differences in results in these research studies is largely a function of varying definitions and methods (Griffin & Gross, 2004).

By far, the most recent large-scale data collected on the prevalence of bullying in the United States is provided by the Centers for Disease Control in their Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey for 2009. This survey used a sample size of over 16,000 students in grades nine through twelve and in addition to reporting on a multitude of risk behaviors such as bicycle helmet use, drug use, weapon carrying, and suicide attempts, reports on students who were bullied on school property (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Just over 19 percent of the students surveyed reported being bullied in school property in 2009 with more females than males, more whites than minorities, and more younger than older students reporting positively (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

Given the prevalence rates reported, it is also important to know exactly the kind of behaviors that are classified as bullying. Bullying can take the form of physical aggression or psychological abuse. It can be specifically directed against an individual in face-to-face confrontation or indirectly targeted toward another through a network of friends and
acquaintances. Bullying can be physical, verbal, relational, or electronic with each type being as destructive as the next (Griffin & Gross, 2004; Wang et al., 2009).

The most commonly understood type of bullying is physical in nature, i.e., hitting, punching, tripping, shoving, pushing, kicking, et cetera, because it is overt and easily observable (Nishioka et al., 2011; Olweus, 1978). These kinds of violent physical actions against another person with the intention to intimidate or harm is what most people tend to visualize as classic bullying behavior. Along with this type of behavior, verbal bullying, i.e., name calling, taunting, teasing, and threats, are also common conceptions of traditional bullying behavior (Nishioka et al., 2011). Nishioka et al. (2011) reported that these overt-types of bullying are the most common with up to 60 percent of their 11,000 student sample reporting being victimized in this way at least in the previous 30 days. Research is fairly consistent in reporting that name calling and teasing are the most common forms of direct bullying (Nansel et al., 2001; Schoen & Schoen, 2010; Whitney & Smith, 1993).

Another type of bullying, identified as “relational” bullying, is less overt and is intended to damage the victim’s reputation and peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, 1996). These behaviors include gossip, spreading rumors, and purposeful exclusion of the peer from the group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, 1996; Nishioka et al., 2011). The early studies by Crick and Grotpeter (1995, 1996) that identified relational aggression as a distinct form of bullying found that these episodes were far more upsetting for female victims than they were for males. This is in supported further by subsequent studies that reported more girls than boys being involved in relational bullying (Nansel et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2009). In contrast. Nishioka et al. (2011) did not find any significant gender differences in the frequency of relational victimization as
approximately 40 percent of both boys and girls reported relational victimization in the prior 30 days.

An additional form of bullying has emerged in recent years as a result of the proliferation of personal computing and mobile electronic devices (Wang et al., 2009). Cyberbullying is essentially bullying that occurs via any kind of electronic device such as computer or cell phone and takes the forms of instant messages, text messages, emails, and communications on social media websites (Wang et al., 2009). There are some earlier studies that identified cyberbullying as a type of bullying with the electronic device being the tool used to bully or the venue through which bullying takes place (Juvonen, Jaana, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Li, 2007). However, more recent research points to unique nature of cyberbullying, the lack of research regarding cyberbullying as a unique construct, and the lack of a commonly accepted research-based measure for cyberbullying (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2011; Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2011).

Prevalence rates for cyberbullying are inconsistent mostly because frequency rates vary based upon reporting periods designated by the researchers. Raskauskas and Stolz (2007) report 48 percent of their eighty-four 13 to 18-year-old participants were victims of cyberbullying and 21 percent identified themselves as bullying others via electronic devices in the past year. Juvonen & Gross (Juvonen, J. & Gross, 2008) report that 72 percent of the 1,454,12-17-year-old respondents who participated in their on-line survey experienced cyberbullying at least once in the past year. Mishna et al. (2011) using similar aged groups in Canada, with considerably larger sample, and a shorter, three-month time period, reported 30 percent of students are involved in cyberbullying as either a victim or bully. This study, like Law et al. (2011) found that the prevalence of bully-victims is much higher in cyberbullying than in more traditional forms of
bullying (Mishna et al., 2011). This difference is not only attributed to the increasing accessibility of electronic devices, but also to the lack of face-to-face social contact, which may change the nature of the power differential, a critical element in bullying (Law et al., 2011). This lack of visible feedback may allow computer users to behave in ways they would not otherwise, bullying when they would not do so in person (Mishna et al., 2011). In this way, cyberbullying creates a new type of power imbalance whereby the one who has access to the computer and technological know-how may have the upper hand (Law et al., 2011).

School Climate

Halpin and Croft’s (1963) analogy, in reference to organizational climate is an effective explanatory device for the intangible nature of school climate. “Personality is to the individual what ‘climate’ is to the organization” (Halpin & Croft, 1963, p. 1). As personality varies from one individual to another, so does the climate of the organization. There are several factors that comprise school climate. Knowing these is helpful in gaining insight into the nature of the environment in which bullying exists.

School Climate Factors

The seminal meta-analysis of school climate literature by Carolyn S. Anderson (1982) provided one of the most comprehensive explanations of the construct, defends its existence, discusses its elusive nature, and secures its significance as a valid measure of school quality. Anderson’s (1982) construct established dimensions of school climate which include the physical aspects, existence of people/groups, relationships among people/groups, and values/beliefs. Mitchell, Bradshaw and Leaf (2010) narrowly defined school climate as follows: “the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between the students, teachers, and administrators” (p. 272). However, Anderson’s (1982) more in-depth construct seemed to be
more common in the school climate literature. The National School Climate Center (Cohen, J. & Greier, 2010) identified four essential elements of school climate. They are: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. Like Anderson (1982), Cohen and Greir (2010) reported these elements to be interconnected and inextricably linked to academic success.

In the literature there are an abundance of school climate measurement instruments (Zullig, Koopman, Patton, & Ubbes, 2010). The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) (Cohen, Jonathon, 2010) is an example of one such instrument that measures factors such as school safety, quality of relationships among the school community members, academic outcomes, discipline, social support, learning support, leadership, among others. These instruments attempt to uncover perceptions regarding climate factors because the way students feel about their school is a key indicator of achievement (Zullig et al., 2010).

**Student Perceptions of School Climate**

Students’ perceptions of their schools’ climate tend to differ from teachers’ perceptions, due, in part, to the specific roles each plays in the life of the school (Mitchell et al., 2010). Mitchell et al. (2010) found that students’ perceptions were influenced more by overall school factors such as student-teacher ratio or administrative turnover than by factors that might vary by classroom such as ineffective classroom behavior management. This was an expansion, and in fact, a reversal, of a previous study by some of the same researchers who investigated student perception of order and discipline at the classroom level (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). This study found that disorder and poor classroom management were associated with students’ perception of school climate and indicated that classroom factors have more of an influence than school level factors. Although these studies came to different conclusions, they demonstrate that
students’ perception of school climate is influenced by a variety of factors in and about the school. Some of these are discussed in more detail below.

**Safety and Disciplinary Effects**

How much support a student receives from the adults in their school and how safe a student feels in their school are both facets of school climate. Boulton et al., (2009) investigated the amount of bullying that takes place at a school and students’ perception of safety. They found “bullying is the single most common reason why pupils feel unsafe in school” (p. 255). Likewise, Kartal and Bilgin (2009) found that lack of adult supervision and intervention, i.e., adult support, is one school climate factor that allows bullying to flourish. When students perceive that the adults at their school do not care or will not respond to bullying, they feel less safe and their learning is negatively impacted (Kartal & Bilgin, 2009). Gendron and colleagues (2011) looked specifically at the bullying that takes place within a school and sought to investigate the influence bullying has on a student’s perception of the school’s climate. They found that the more socially acceptable bullying appears to be in the school, the more bullying occurs (Gendron et al., 2011). Also, they found that where school climate is perceived to be supportive to students, the less bullying that occurs (Gendron et al., 2011).

Disciplinary policies, as they are related to students’ perceptions of safety and protection from bullying, are also associated with school climate. Gottfredson et al. (2005), in their extensive national sample and comprehensive study on disorder in schools, revealed that in schools where students perceive adult disciplinary responses to misbehavior to be consistent and effective, there are lower levels of student victimization. Although this study did not look specifically at bullying, the concept of school disorder and victimization encompasses a wide variety of aggressive behaviors, which includes bullying. More recently, Gregory, et al.
(Gregory et al., 2010) investigating the role of structure, in the form of an authoritarian discipline model, and support, in the form of positive student-teacher relationships, found that both were necessary to reducing problem behaviors such as bullying in the school. Both studies utilized school climate measurement instruments and examined student self-report responses (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Gregory et al., 2010). These studies showed that students’ perception of school climate in terms of safety and adult support is associated with the nature and extent of bullying that occurs within the school.

**School Climates that Encourage/Inhibit Bullying**

Some studies have attempted to find the school climate predictors of bullying problems. For example, Ma (2002) and LeBlanc et al. (2007) found that schools with a stronger academic press, that is, higher academic standards and academic behavioral expectations, experienced less bullying in the upper grade levels, but at lower grade levels the more common predictors of bullying were amounts of supervision of students. Academic press is linked to more effective teacher planning for structured lessons, which affords little opportunity for behavioral distractions (LeBlanc et al., 2007). In other words, if students are actively engaged in learning, they are less likely to be engaged in bullying and other behavioral problems.

Another area of school climate that has been associated with bullying and victimization is school connectedness. A student showing positive school connectedness would be one who has developed strong bonds with peers and adults in the school and sense of belonging to the school community (Sukkyung et al., 2008). Sukkyung et al. (2008) found that a stronger sense of school connectedness was associated with lower levels of victimization. This finding reinforces the idea that peer and adult relationships are protective factors against bullying (Conners-
School Climate and Bullying: The Teacher’s Role

One facet of school climate, as mentioned above, is relationships among and between students and teachers. This suggests that teachers play an important role in the climate of the school. So, what is the role of the teacher in the bullying equation? Teachers influence school climate in two areas: as role models for student behavior and as responders to student behaviors (Allen, 2010; James et al., 2008; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Marshall et al., 2009). These two roles have a significant influence on the nature and extent of bullying in the school.

Teachers exert a powerful influence on students in the behavior they model on a daily basis (Roland & Galloway, 2002). In one Irish study, James et al. (2008) found that 30 percent of the students reported being bullied by a teacher. This student perception is an interesting one in that a student may perceive disciplinary action, which a teacher perceives to be appropriate, as bullying behavior. This dichotomy in student versus teacher perception regarding disciplinary action may be serving to perpetuate bullying behavior in the school whereby students may be modeling the behavior they are seeing in teachers. Teachers in their positions of authority in the school naturally are in a position of greater power as compared to their students. Teachers who use this position of power to coerce students into behaving a certain way could be crossing the line into bullying behaviors (Sylvester, 2010).

Kathleen Allen (2010) in her study of classroom management practices, linked the modeling of teacher bullying behaviors to school climate and social ecological theory. She claimed, “If adults engage in bullying one another and students, then it is reasonable to expect that students will bully one another, and sometimes adults as well” (Allen, 2010, p. 5). The
manner in which teachers interact with the students in their classroom provide a strong behavior model for children, especially the manner in which teachers interact with disruptive students. Coercive reactions by the teacher towards disruptive students send the message to other students in the class that power plays and coercion are acceptable and students who imitate these adult behaviors may ultimately display bullying behaviors in their relationships with others (Allen, 2010; Doll, Song, & Siemers, 2004; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Sylvester, 2010).

The other area in which teachers play a role in bullying is in the manner in which they respond to bullying when it occurs. A teacher’s response to bullying behaviors reflects their attitude toward bullying (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Marshall et al., 2009; Yoon, 2004). According to Yoon (Yoon, 2004), this attitude is affected by several factors, the perceived seriousness of the bullying, the teacher’s level of empathy toward the victim, and their belief in their own ability to manage student behaviors. Likewise, the response of the teacher to the bullying incident is likely to affect student perceptions of safety in the classroom (Yoon, 2004).

Similarly, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008) found that teacher beliefs are powerful predictors of whether and how they intervene in bullying incidents. According to this study, teachers beliefs about bullying generally fall into one of three categories: (a) assertive, i.e., if a child can stand up for themselves then they will not be bullied; (b) normative, i.e., bullying is developmental, part of growing up, and it builds character; and (c) avoidant, i.e., bullying will not happen if kids just avoid the bullies (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008) Teachers who subscribe to avoidant beliefs are more likely to actively help a student who is being victimized and provide them with effective strategies to steer clear of bullies (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008).
Finally, there are a variety of ways in which teachers respond to bullying (Doll et al., 2004; Holt & Keyes, 2004; Marshall et al., 2009). Marshall et al. (2009) studied in-depth interviews of thirty teachers, grades 4 through 8 about their own beliefs about bullying and their experiences in managing bullying situations. Through this qualitative study, the authors identified a two-dimensional model of teacher responses to bullying based on the teacher’s intent and involvement, where intent was classified as either punitive or constructive, and involvement was classified as being either direct or indirect (Marshall et al., 2009). Although these researchers were not able to establish one approach as more effective than another, they did identify the wide range of ways in which teachers may respond to bullying. According to Rodkin and Gest (2011), the effect of a teacher’s response is a function of the social dynamic in the classroom and the climate of the school. All of these are part of the puzzle that determines how effective any particular teacher response or anti-bullying policy/program might be.

**Anti-Bullying Programs and Policies**

In many schools, effective responses to bullying go beyond the efforts of individual teachers and incorporate the work of school boards, administrators, counselors, school psychologists and other support staff within the school. These efforts generally take several forms, state-level anti-bullying laws, district-level anti-bullying policies, and school-based prevention and intervention programs. In many states and countries, formalized laws and policies have been legislated to address the problem of bullying in schools, such as that which was legislated in the state of Massachusetts ("An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools 2010," 2010). These laws dictate that schools develop a comprehensive policy regarding how bullying will be identified, and addressed within the school community (Notification of bullying or retaliation regulations, 2010; Terry, 2010). School districts are then required to develop a policy
that includes information on how bullying can be reported to the school, how the school will notify families of bullies and victims, and how the school will investigate and respond to a finding of bullying. According to Terry (2010), South Carolina’s Safe School Climate Act, which is specifically written to address “harassment, intimidation, or bullying” has failed to produce any real improvement in the culture of South Carolina Schools (p. 96). This study begs the question as to whether policies and laws alone can stem the tide of bullying in American schools.

In an effort to augment the new laws, many schools integrate the use of a formal anti-bullying program, which can take the form of prevention programs, intervention strategies, or both. Over the last few years, two meta-analytic reviews have been published that attempt to determine which programs are showing promise in reducing bullying. Merrell et al. (2008) initially found 40 studies that met their program criteria, which were that the programs be: school-based, bullying-related, and in English. They then narrowed their included studies further to only those that used an experimental or quasi-experimental research design, and that reported effect size. Consequently, their review was narrowed to 16 studies, which included over 15,000 study participants and included some of the more widely known bullying intervention programs such as the Olweus program, BullyBusters, Bullyproofing Your School and Expect-Respect program (Merrell et al., 2008) Overall, they found that none of the programs resulted in any significant change, positive or negative, relative to the level of bullying in the school.

These disappointing results were challenged by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) who found 53 studies that met their criteria: programs designed to reduce bullying, program measured intervention groups against control groups, and studies that measured effect sizes. Unlike the Merrell et al. (2008) review, they went beyond only those with randomized experimental or
quasi-experimental designs believing that those institutions which would be willing to do such an exercise may be under-representative of the larger population (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Further, Ttofi and Farrington (2011) examined specific elements of each program and then compared these to the findings of other programs, thereby determining which elements of programs were more or less effective.

The findings of Ttofi and Farrington (2011) are in stark contrast to those of Merrell et al. (2008). They were able to identify effect sizes and isolate those effects to specific program elements. What they found was that programs that included parent involvement, firm disciplinary actions, and increased supervision of children in unstructured school settings were most effective in reducing bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Those programs that included peer-based elements such as mediation or empowering bystanders showed significant effects for increased victimization (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). The results of this meta-analytic review suggest that school-based programs can be effective at reducing bullying and that previous studies that show contradicting results are a result of limited scope and under-representation of specific types of studies.

**Gaps in Literature**

This literature review identified dozens of studies that help school personnel to identify the nature and extent of bullying in their schools based upon student self reports, teacher and school personnel surveys. However, there is little in the existing literature regarding how students perceive the specific policies, practices, and actions of their school as being effective or ineffective in combating the bullying problem. This is significant since the bullying problem is most often examined as it exists between students in the school. Most studies are quantitative and correlational in approach rather than qualitative and descriptive. There is a lack of research
that examines the lived experiences of the students themselves, and their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about the work that is being done around them regarding the bullying problem. What is missing is the voices of students and their perspective on what works, what does not work, and how policies and practices of the adults in the building affect them and their learning.

Chapter III: Research Design

Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to examine bullying in ABC Middle School (fictitious name) in the context of the current school climate. In order to achieve this goal, this research is intended to uncover student perceptions about three school climate factors: the nature and extent of bullying at one middle school, the anti-bullying policies and practices in place at the school, and impact these policies and practices have on bullying behaviors. This research is intended to answer three specific questions.

Question 1. What are student’s perceptions about the nature and extent of bullying that occurs in the school?

Question 2. What are student’s perceptions about the policies and practices that are in place to reduce bullying in school?

Question 3. What are student’s perceptions about the effects of formal school policies and practices have on the nature and extent of bullying in school?

Question 4. What are student’s perceptions about the effectiveness of adults in preventing bullying or intervening after it has occurred?

Methodology

The research approach I used in this study was a mixed methods procedure that included elements of both quantitative and qualitative research traditions. In order to examine student’s
experiences with bullying and adult responses to it, I gathered quantitative data first to drive the qualitative portion of the study. Creswell (2009) refers to this as “Sequential Exploratory Design” (p. 209). Figure 1 illustrates this model.

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<tr>
<th>QUAN Data Collection</th>
<th>QUAN Data Analysis → qual Data Collection</th>
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*Figure 1. Sequential Explanatory Design (Creswell, 2009)*

The quantitative portion of this study included identifying and analyzing beliefs, behaviors, and events related to bullying in ABC Middle School by means of a survey instrument and statistical analysis of the data collected via the survey. This methodology stems from the first research question, which requires measurement of quantities of events and behaviors and comparisons among a body of categorical data. In a mixed methods study such as this one, the research question itself determines whether a quantitative or qualitative research design will be used (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006).

The second, third and fourth research questions are all qualitative in nature requiring me to identify and analyze data regarding students’ perceptions of bullying and adult responses to bullying in their school by means of a focus group approach. These questions fall within the qualitative tradition by virtue of their exploratory and experiential nature. On the whole, this study lent itself to predominantly qualitative analysis because I wanted to understand the student experience regarding bullying and their interactions with adults around matters of bullying. The only way to do this is to ask how and why questions regarding the specific experience. Also, given that the goal of this study was to obtain a rich and overall more in-depth and nuanced
understanding of the student experience than that which can be obtained through hypothesis
testing or predicting an outcome, it was essentially a qualitative endeavor.

The larger part of this study flowed from a social constructivist approach whereby
researchers make sense of the social world by interacting with individuals, examining the variety
of meanings individuals create, and then analyzing the patterns of meaning that emerge in order
to develop understanding of the experience. This was both inductive and emergent in that I
began with broad ideas and questions that surfaced from the survey data and used the
participant’s experiences to identify emergent patterns. The data collected from participants
often required moving back and forth between data collection and data analysis in order to
identify themes as they surfaced from the analysis, another hallmark of qualitative research.
However, the overall process of identifying and measuring the relationships among the survey
items, then collecting textual data directly from the setting in which the phenomenon occurs lent
itself to a mixed methods methodology.

Inherent in the characteristics of mixed methods inquiry is the unique role of the
researcher as the collector of data (Creswell, 2007). In this research, I used a survey instrument
to gain initial descriptive data then used that data to develop focus group questions. In
developing questions and interacting with the focus groups, I became part of the process in that
my interpretation was influenced by my personal characteristics, past experiences with the
phenomena being studied, and connections to the setting or participants. Although these
personal characteristics and experiences could be construed as a potential bias, they lent depth to
the study as a valuable source of insight into the phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By
examining student perceptions of bullying and adult responses to bullying, I intended to develop
a richer understanding of the issue and in this way, add to the body of knowledge regarding this social phenomenon.

**Site and participants.** My study site was ABC Middle School, the only public middle school serving grades seven and eight in a central Massachusetts town, with approximately 925 students enrolled. The school is fed by a grade five and six middle school, also the only public school that serves grade five and six in the district. I am currently the principal of this school and have been serving in the role since August 2011. I used purposeful sampling within this site.

Although studying this particular school could be construed as a sample of convenience, it is important to note that it is also a purposeful sample. Miles and Huberman (2002) posit that qualitative research requires identifying boundaries of the study, i.e., what phenomena is being studied, who are the individuals who can provide data regarding the phenomena, and in what setting does it make the most sense to study the phenomena. These criteria made it necessary to purposefully select the participants. Because of these criteria, I selected this specific school district and participants for the following reasons. First, this school district developed and implemented a district-wide anti-bullying policy in 2010. The policy is available online, and in each school’s student handbook. Parents and students are required annually to sign-off attesting that they have read and understand the policy. The policy includes instructions regarding how to report bullying incidents to the school and allows for individuals to report anonymously. These particular characteristics made this school district and students a purposeful sampling because they provided the appropriate setting, process, and population in which to seek answers to my research questions.

Further, during the spring of the following year, the district conducted bullying intervention training for all faculty, staff, coaches and bus drivers based upon the Massachusetts
Aggression Reduction Center’s research at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts (Englander, 2007, 2009, 2010). This organization has conducted research on the topic of bullying, and they develop comprehensive training modules on bullying intervention and prevention. The training workshop developed by the district information was included in an online version of civil rights training, which was required to be renewed by every teacher and staff member annually. Together, the policy and the training provided the adults in the school district with the tools needed to respond appropriately and consistently when bullying incidents occurred. With such a well-defined and actively working anti-bullying policy, this school district had a suitable student population for a study in which student perceptions of an anti-bullying policy and adults responses to bullying could be examined.

Secondly, this school of approximately 925 students included a substantially large population of students in the very age group that tends to experience high levels of bullying. Research shows that bullying activity tends to peak during the middle school years and then drops off during high school (Nansel et al., 2001; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Maxwell (2005) states that one goal of purposeful sampling is to achieve “representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, and activities selected” (p. 89) The large population allowed for significant quantity of responses to the initial survey and a large variety of eligible participants for the smaller focus groups which made the sampling both representative of a suburban middle school and purposeful as an age group that typically experienced bullying.

Lastly, the research questions revolved around how students perceive the existing policies, practices and procedures in place in the school to combat bullying. In order to collect student perceptions of these, I needed to study a school where these existed. ABC Middle School was one such school with formalized policies and practices. Here again, is an example of
another of Maxwell’s (2005) possible goals for purposeful sampling where there is a need to “deliberately examine cases” that relate to the phenomena being studied (p. 90). Care was taken within the body of the research to not identify the name of the school or community in which it is located in order to protect the confidentiality of the site and participants.

The participants in the study included approximately 450 grade eight students who were surveyed initially using The School Climate Bullying Survey (Cornell, 2011). Findings from this survey disclosed descriptive data regarding students’ perceptions of their school climate and the extent to which bullying occurred, and so forth as noted above, but it also provided data from which to draw focus group questions. These questions focused on student perceptions of school anti-bullying policies and adults practices around those policies.

Participants were comprised of students from ABC Middle School. This school was selected for two salient reasons: (a) there was a formal Anti-Bullying policy in place in the district and students’ perceptions of such a policy were being examined; (b) this group of middle school-aged children experiences the highest levels of bullying, which made them the appropriate age-group.

The population from which the participants were drawn included approximately 450 grade eight students. Their parents were asked for permission for them to participate (Appendix B.) Upon receiving parental consent, students were asked for assent (Appendix C) to participate at the time they were surveyed using The School Climate Bullying Survey (Cornell, 2011) (Appendix A.) This survey disclosed descriptive data regarding school climate and bullying but also provided data from which to draw to create focus group questions. From this surveyed population, I sought voluntary participants for the focus groups. The number of volunteers
dictated how many focus groups of 10-12 students I used. I planned to conduct a minimum of three and maximum of five focus groups.

**Data Collection**

The data for this study was collected in four phases: 1) survey data collection, 2) survey data analysis, 3) focus group data collection, and 4) focus group data analysis. Each of these phases is described in detail below.

**Phase I: Survey data collection.** For the first research question regarding the frequency and nature of bullying in the school, I used The School Climate Bullying Survey (SCBS) (see Appendix A) developed by Dewey Cornell (2011). The data that resulted from this survey were student self-report data that were descriptive in nature. In addition to providing responses regarding student’s perceptions of the nature and extent of bullying, the survey also produced basic demographic data, data describing the individuals to whom the students might report bullying, the extent to which students were willing to seek help from adults, and what students’ prevailing attitudes were towards aggression in the school. Analysis of this survey data drove development of focus group questions regarding student’s perceptions of the formal school policies and adult responses to bullying.

I chose the SCBS (Cornell, 2011, 2012) for several reasons, the first of which was brevity. With only 53 questions, students were able to complete the survey fairly quickly thereby causing less of a disruption to the typical school day. It was easily converted to a computer-friendly format making data collection and analysis more efficient. Another reason for selecting the SCBS was that it asked students to report on bullying incidents that occurred only within the past month. Cornell (2012) in his description and research summary of the SCBS, reports that the one-month time frame, as opposed to other instruments that ask students to look
back over the past several months, produces more reliable frequency rates. Additionally, the SCBS included validity-screening items such as, “I am telling the truth on this survey,” and “I am not paying attention to how I answer this survey.” Cornell, Klein, Konold and Huang (2011), in studying the effects of validity screening items on adolescent survey data, contend that these kinds of items help to more clearly identify invalid responses and ensure that more participants are telling the truth. The SBCS has shown to be a reliable instrument in numerous studies measuring bullying and school climate factors (Ashbaughm & Cornell, 2008; Branson & Cornell, 2009; Cornell et al., 2011; Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Williams & Cornell, 2006). Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for the two subscales of the SBCS used in this study: The Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale (α = .77) and the Willingness to Seek Help Scale (α = .87) (Klein, Cornell, & Konold, 2012)

The survey (Appendix A) was administered in a computer lab at the school via the online survey tool Survey Monkey (2012). A schedule for coming to the lab was sent to the teachers who cycled students through the lab to take the survey. I sent a schedule to grade eight teachers indicating the time they are to bring their classes to the computer lab. These were set at intervals of twenty minutes. Teachers were notified of students who did not have permission to participate in the survey. Teachers had these students go to the Media Center to read for the period of time the permitted students were in the lab. This was the protocol our school used for students who did not have consent to take the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012) which was given every spring to grade eight students. The media teacher and/or her instructional aid monitored these students in the media center.

When students arrived in the lab, the assent form (Appendix C) was read aloud to students. They were asked to indicate verbal agreement to the assent form before they took the
survey. This form explained that the survey was anonymous, and that students could choose not to answer a question or questions, or stop answering questions at any time with no consequence. It explained to participants that if, as a result of their participation, any individual felt that he or she needed to report a bullying incident, he or she would receive the full support of the school under the provisions of the district’s anti-bullying policy. This included investigation of the incident, and notification of the incident to parents of both aggressor and the victim. This also included the notification that any official investigation of bullying incidents could result in disciplinary action against aggressors.

Also, although it was unlikely that a student might be uncomfortable with answering the survey questions, I provided an information sheet along with the assent form to explain how a student could access counseling support in the event they experienced any kind of uncomfortable feelings or thoughts as a result of participation in the survey.

Students logged to the computer network using their individually assigned logon codes. They were instructed to access the survey URL and then complete the survey. Three trained undergraduates actively monitored students to ensure they completed the survey and logged off the network when they were finished. It took each student no longer than twenty minutes to complete the survey. Enough sessions were scheduled so all the grade eight students who were approved to participate could take the survey. The survey had a time restriction so the survey site was not accessible for unsupervised entry beyond the set data collection time period. This was restricted to part of one school day when students were in the lab working on the survey.

**Phase II: Survey data analysis.** Analysis of survey data consisted of frequencies of all survey items including response rates and percentages of each response. Further, chi square tests, independent *t* tests, and one-way analysis of variance tests (ANOVA) were run to identify
associations between responses and to compare mean scores on the subscales. The results that emerged from the survey, especially those related to questions around reporting and adults’ responses, helped to create the focus group discussion guide, which further explored student perceptions of bullying and adult responses in the school.

**Phase III: Focus group data collection.** My research questions that inquired about student perceptions required qualitative data collection procedures in the form of questioning the participants. I gathered data via focus groups to elaborate upon the themes that emerged from the survey. Conducting focus groups is a type of qualitative research design that allows the researcher to collect data on participants’ perceptions, attitudes, opinions and beliefs when time may not allow for extensive individual interviewing, when there is a substantial population of individuals whom have experienced the phenomena, and when the actual dynamic of group interaction has potential to yield significant data related to the research questions (Atlas & Pepler, 2001; Creswell, 2007). It is common in qualitative research to use a focus group in combination with survey methods to collect data, but more common for the focus group to inform the survey rather than using the focus group to elaborate on a survey, as I did in this study (Morgan, 1997). In this case however, I decided upon this research design in order to add richness and depth to survey responses.

A focus group was the means by which I elicited nuanced responses to some of the more salient topics covered by the survey, as determined by the survey results. This enabled me to more closely examine students’ perceptions regarding bullying and adult responses to bullying. I chose focus groups as the means of qualitative data collection because they could efficiently produce a great deal of individual experiential and perceptual data on a given topic, and the social dynamic that is inherently characteristic of a group provided meaningful data in and of
itself (Morgan, 1997). This is especially true of the phenomenon of bullying, which itself occurs within a social context. Other forms of qualitative data collection such as interviewing or observational techniques were less favorable given time constraints in addition to the fact that they were or not likely to produce any more meaningful data.

Group composition is an important factor when conducting focus group research. Morgan (1997) suggests that group participants be carefully chosen based on specific characteristics that will meet the goals of the research study. He refers to this as “segmentation” (Morgan, 1997). In other words, group participants are purposefully selected because they are similar or because they differ in some way, depending on the goal of the research. Whether or not a more homogeneous or a more mixed group of participants is likely to provide richer data depends upon the issue and research purposes. For this study, I used three focus groups, one all male, one all female, and one mixed because I was unsure of the extent to which gender composition might influence the group’s discussion of the topic of bullying, if at all.

Creswell (2007) recommends several steps in the collection of focus group data, including ensuring participant responses are adequately recorded, designing a discussion guide, identifying an appropriate location, disclosing purposes, and obtaining consent. I will address these steps individually.

Focus groups volunteers were solicited via a letter to parents notifying them of the study, and calling for participants (Appendix B). Each volunteer was assigned a random number. I recorded this number on the consent form as I received them. More students volunteered than were needed for the focus groups, so I chose participants randomly by number.

The focus groups were held in a conference room at ABC Middle School during the school day. In order to minimize the disruption of the student’s regular schedule, I tried to
schedule the focus groups so they abutted the student lunch period. Students ate lunch together in the conference room during the focus group sessions.

Participant responses and group interactions were recorded via word-processed notes and audio recordings. Participants were notified of the audio recording ahead of time. Audio recording were used for transcription purposes and to ensure accuracy of word-processed notes. A focus group discussion guide (Appendix D) ensured consistency among focus group procedures, especially around those procedures to ensure confidentiality. Descriptive questions were created from the survey analysis to help delve into issues surrounding the school’s practices and how students perceive adults in this school respond when bullying occurs. I conducted three focus groups, two single-gender groups and one mixed gender group, each comprised of 11 - 13 students who volunteered to participate. Student volunteers were solicited via a letter to parents notifying them of the study, and calling for participants (Appendix B). Letters requesting consent were sent by email to all parents and guardians of grade eight students explaining the purpose and process of the study. Parents were asked to return the signed consent form indicating whether their child was permitted or not permitted to participate in either the survey, the focus group, or both. They were asked to return the signed form to the school by email or with their student. I encouraged parents to contact me for any additional information they might need. Parents were notified that they could withdraw their child from the study at any time with no consequence and that similarly, their child could choose not to participate at any point with no consequence.

Focus groups were held during school hours in order to avoid excluding any students who were unavailable after school hours. I anticipated having to run up to five groups in order to ensure reaching a point of saturation with the data collected, that is, the point at which no new
data is being revealed within focus group discussions (Harrell & Bradley, 2009; Morgan, 1997). I found that I reached this point after holding three focus groups.

A focus group discussion guide (Appendix D) was used to ensure consistency among focus group procedures. Descriptive questions, which were expected to emerge from the analysis of survey data, helped delve into survey findings to gain a deeper understanding (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). [Maxwell (2005) cautions that when conducting interviews, the researcher not simply rephrase the research questions into interview questions as this is not likely to reveal any meaningful data other than what is already known regarding the phenomena. Rather, the researcher needs to use an open ended and probing questions to elicit meaningful responses.]

For example, if a student explained that one teacher told them to ignore the bully, I would want the student to elaborate on how this made them feel and, if they did ignore the bully, how helpful was that advice. This helped to uncover information about how helpful the adult response was to the student. Survey data was important in identifying these kinds of themes or patterns of responses and organizing them into a discussion guide that would reveal more in-depth perspectives and perceptions.

**Phase IV: Focus group data analysis.** Data analysis involved qualitative research processes for reduction, coding and interpretation of the data. The general procedure involved a series of steps although these steps were not distinctly linear. These qualitative data analysis steps required me to engage in a interactive process of analyzing, organizing, analyzing and reorganizing the data as themes emerge (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used a qualitative data analysis software program, ATLAS/ti, to assist in the analysis process.

Data analysis began with transcription of notes and audio recordings of focus group discussions. I read through these notes and annotated them for early thoughts, ideas, themes and
patterns regarding the questions I used in my discussion guide. Following this, I worked on developing a coding process. Creswell (2009) suggests an iterative process of selecting one set of transcriptions of notes and reviewing it to answer the broad questions, “What is this about?” in order to get at the core meanings behind the words (p. 187). From these broad topics, more descriptive categories were identified, abbreviated and analyzed for associations. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest starting with an “etic” coding process, i.e., an initial list of broad categories/codes that emerge from the research questions and conceptual framework as conceptualized by the researcher. After creating a list of these categories, I added codes that emerged from the survey data and applied these to the transcript data as initial codes. I added “emic” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) codes from the focus group transcripts, as these themes evolved from the participants own words. Creswell (2009) recommends using this coding process as a way to develop a detailed description of the “setting or people as well as the categories or themes for analysis” (p. 189) This is the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) that illustrated the school setting and perspectives of the students who I was studying.

Figure 2 shows a timeline and sequence for data collection and analysis activities.
Validity & Credibility

Maxwell (2005) discusses the issue of validity in qualitative research as a question of how the researcher’s conclusions could be wrong. In other words, validity of data establishes the standard by which the conclusions are reasonable and accurate. Identifying and dealing with threats to my study’s validity is critical to the strength of my conclusions and ultimately the truth-value of this research. The most critical threats to the validity of this work were in the areas of personal bias and reactivity. Personal bias threats revolve around my own personal values and expectations and how these might influence the conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 2005). Reactivity revolves around the influence my presence and actions have on the methods I used and the participants with whom I worked (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) contends that it is virtually impossible to eliminate these threats, but rather “the goal is to use [them] productively” (p. 109).
There are several reasons to suggest that my own personal bias may affect my interpretation of the data and consequently the conclusions of this study. I am the principal of the students who will be participating in the study. It is reasonable to suggest that a principal wants to present his or her building and program in the best possible light. While this might be construed as problematic with quantitative research given the inherent bias of being both principal and researcher, in the realm of qualitative research, it is not an absolute necessity to endeavor to separate my role as principal from my role as researcher, but rather to acknowledge and address the potential for biased interpretation. Norman Denzin (1989) contends, “All inquiry reflects the standpoint of the inquirer” (p. 3). I addressed this personal bias in several ways. First, I used a consistent and reliable protocol and discussion guide for the focus groups discussions. In these protocols, I avoided using leading questions that might cause participants to respond in a contrived manner. I also checked transcripts and notes of the focus groups against audio recordings to ensure accuracy and I used a published survey, the SBCS (2011) that has been psychometrically tested for reliability and validity (Cornell, 2011). Additionally, I conducted some member-checking whereby I read portions of transcripts back to students and asked them to verify that I interpreted them correctly. Also, I had two fellow doctoral candidates, one of whom is a middle school principal, read transcripts and discuss their interpretations in order to establish inter-rate reliability.

Creswell (2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000) and Maxwell (2005) recommend triangulation of data sources as another way to test for validity. Triangulation of data involves analyzing multiple data sources to compare patterns and themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Agreement among these themes across data sources provides a level of justification for the validity of the data and the conclusion the researcher draws from them. The multiple sources I used are the
survey data, the focus group data, and secondary sources such as the anti-bullying policy on file in the school. These were analyzed for convergence of themes and both are reported out in the study.

In the detailed report of the findings for this study, I am using thick and rich description in which to ground the data as a method for providing validity (Geertz, 1973). The focus group transcripts regarding student perceptions and experiences provided fertile data for direct quotations and meaningful description of the survey data. Creswell (2009) contends that this type of descriptive narrative “transports the readers to the setting and give[s] the discussion an element of shared experiences” (p. 192). Using this descriptive writing immerses the reader in the lived experiences of the participants.

A more significant concern to the validity of my study was reactivity or the influence of my presence on the participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This can have a multitude of effects on the validity of the data. As the principal of the building, my moderating the focus groups might have affected student participants to respond in a way that might not have been authentic. Rather than expressing genuine feelings, perceptions, attitudes, or beliefs, students might have responded in a way that they felt they were being helpful simply in deference to the authority that the building principal represents. They might not have been truthful if they were concerned about disciplinary actions that might have resulted from their answers to questions or they might have felt they have to uphold some sort of perceived expectation. The group process in and of itself might have impacted the responses on the participants in the same sort of way. There is a tendency of individuals to react to a situation or individual that may lead them to hide their true feelings and respond in a way that is not authentic (Maxwell, 2005) I addressed these issues by creating ground rules for the discussion that ensured a level of confidentiality and
safety to discuss issues and perception openly and honestly. The confidentiality measures I used included the following:

- The survey responses were anonymous, i.e., no names were collected on the survey instrument.
- Online data was password protected.
- Printouts of survey data and focus group notes and audiotapes are kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home and will be destroyed after three years.
- Only myself and my advisor have access to all of the raw data.
- A trained note-taker assisted in the focus group data collection. This individual was not an employee of the school and identified student focus group participants only by number within the body of notes.
- In the transcripts and quotes from the Focus Groups, participants were not identified names. Links to actual names of the participants are kept in locked storage, separate from the focus group notes.
- Students were asked to refrain from using actual student or teacher names in their discussion.
- Where needed, fictitious names are being used in the final report of findings.
- The school name and any identifying characteristics are not included in the final report of the findings.
- I also looked at the district anti-bullying policy, and the training materials used to train staff. These were used for the purposes of triangulation. In other words, these secondary data sources were used in conjunction with the survey and focus group data to establish agreement among themes across the data sources. This
provided a level of justification for the validity of the data and the conclusions the researcher draws from them. These secondary data sources were used for information on the ways in which adults have responded to actual bullying incidents and the ways in which they have been trained to respond. This data also informed my specific questions about adult actions and practices that were used for the focus group discussions. To ensure confidentiality with this data I did not use teacher names, student names or other descriptors that might be connected to an actual bullying incident.

Although not likely to entirely eliminate this threat, explicit ground rules spelled out in the focus group discussion guide (Appendix D) helped to expose the threat potential, assurances made to the participants verified that the purposes for the focus group were not personal in nature, care was taken to minimize outside repercussions of the focus group discussions, that the function of the focus group had no outside purpose other than research, and that the utmost confidentiality protocols were being adhered to. With these procedures, reactivity threats were likely to be diminished.

Protection of Human Subjects

The ethical considerations inherent in this study stem from my position as principal in the school where I conducted my study. The standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) also require my adherence to a specific code of ethics. As a leader in the institution where my study is centered, I am obligated to ensure that my position of power does not coerce participants to volunteer. Additionally as an educational researcher, it is critical that I maintain the integrity of the data and openly communicate all findings of the study. These two
main factors guided my adherence to the ethical standards required of a researcher working with human subjects.

Clearly, the choice to conduct my research within the school community where I hold a position of power could have impacted the findings of the study. AERA (Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association, 1992) Guiding Standard II is designed to protect the “…research populations and also the integrity of the institutions within which the research occurs” (p. 2). I was cognizant of the conflict that exists between my role as a researcher and my role as a principal so as to retain the integrity of the data and my conclusions.

As a researcher, I engaged volunteers from the student population in my building. Children have special protection under the laws governing Human Subject Research regarding beneficence, respect and justice (NIH Office of Extramural Research, 2011). The ethical principal of respect refers to the treatment of participants, especially those who are considered “vulnerable populations” (NIH Office of Extramural Research, 2011) such as children. Although children can agree to participate, it is parents who must provide permission for their child to participate via the informed consent process. The informed consent forms communicated to parents of participants that the purposes for the focus group were not personal in nature, and that care would be taken to minimize outside repercussions of the focus group discussions. Participants were given contacts for counseling resources in the case that they found themselves upset by the discussions or repercussions of the discussions. They were also told the steps that would be taken to assure confidentiality, and that the function of the focus group had no outside purpose other than research. These assurances addressed the ethical principals of beneficence, i.e., maximizing positive outcomes and minimizing negative outcomes, and justice i.e., those
who bear the risk of research are those who will benefit from it and procedures are fair and nonexploitative (NIH Office of Extramural Research, 2011).

Likewise, I made sure that all my findings were communicated openly to the participants and institution. There was a possibility for example, that my study might uncover negative attitudes and perceptions about anti-bullying practices and policies in our district, which would need to be communicated directly. Additionally, there was a possibility that long-standing practices that had been widely supported and encouraged might be found lacking in their efficacy. In order to ameliorate questions of selectivity in reporting, these findings were reported with fairness and accuracy.

I received approval to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Northeastern University and consent for my study from the superintendent of school district in which ABC Middle School was located. All documents presented to the IRB were also presented to the superintendent of schools for full disclosure and approval.

**Conclusion**

The problem of bullying continues to plague schools despite the best efforts of state legislators, school administrators, teachers, parents and students. The introduction of anti-bullying laws and policies demand that schools do more than just acknowledge the problem. The growing knowledge of its devastating effects requires that schools take action to mitigate its impact. Schools must begin to arm themselves with information and develop organized plans to prevent bullying in our communities and intervene immediately when it occurs. Developing effective responses to bullying requires that school personnel learn more about what works and what does not. One way to do this is to talk with students about what they experience. The lived experiences of students may reveal some clues about how adults can be more effective in
combating this growing problem. This study was intended to uncover some of those lived experiences and examine the perceptions of students regarding adult responses to bullying.

Examining bullying through the lens of social ecological theory helps us to understand the reciprocal nature of individual-environment interaction, or in this specific study, the interplay of students, practices and policies regarding bullying. The social context of bullying, i.e., the peers involved, the peers who appear to be uninvolved, the environment in which it occurs, the adults who exist within that environment, the norms that exist among the students and adults in the environment, the action or inaction by adults, and the learning that takes place as a result of the experience, all interact to create a dynamic climate that is unique to each event or incident of bullying. Peeling back the layers of student experiences by examining students’ thinking and perceptions might help schools to cultivate school climates that are more effective in mitigating the devastating effects of bullying.

Insofar as this research study, mixed methods methodology employing the use of surveys and focus groups as the primary source of data collection and analysis, was most appropriate because it complimented the group context of the phenomenon of bullying. Focus group research is as much about the interplay of individuals in the group as it is about the content of the discussion topic (Hollander, 2004). Studying individual perceptions of a group phenomenon within the social context of a focus group helped to reveal more than just the ideas of individuals. Group influences behind bullying were highlighted as well. It was student perceptions within that group context that comprised the thick description resulting from this study.

This project adds to the body of knowledge about bullying and how adults respond to it by investigating the perceptions of students in one school. Because there is, as of yet, no magic bullet to eliminating bullying in our schools, continued study is necessary. Ultimately, learning
what students believe is effective in responding to bullying may go a long way to making all
schools not only safer places for learning, but also places where children learn the lessons of
strong character and respectful community.

Chapter IV: Research Findings

Reporting of Research Findings and Analysis

This section presents a summary of the findings of the data analysis. Sections are
organized by research question. Quantitative findings are presented first followed by the
qualitative findings. Within each section, a table is presented that identifies the survey questions
and corresponding focus group questions that yielded data to answer the research questions.

The four research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are students’ perceptions about the nature and extent of bullying that occurs
   in the school?

2. What are students’ perceptions about the policies and practices that are in place to
   reduce bullying in the school?

3. What are students’ perceptions of the effects that formal policies and practices
   have on bullying in school?

4. What are students’ perceptions about the effectiveness of adults in preventing
   bullying or intervening after it has occurred?

Study Context

The purpose of this research was to examine bullying in ABC Middle School in the
context of the current school climate. In order to achieve this goal, this research is intended to
uncover student perceptions about three school climate factors: the nature and extent of bullying
at one middle school, the anti-bullying policies and practices in place at the school, and impact
these policies and practices have on bullying behaviors. The National School Climate Center (Cohen, J. & Greier, 2010) identifies four essential elements of school climate. They are: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. Bullying impacts school climate affecting not only students’ sense of safety but also, healthy relationships, the atmosphere of learning and the prevailing environment in which learning occurs. Cohen & Greir (2010) argue that these elements are interconnected and inextricably linked to academic success.

Survey responses created a baseline of data from which the researcher explored student perceptions of the nature of bullying in ABC Middle School. The School Climate Bullying Survey (SCBS) (Appendix A) developed by Dewey Cornell (2011) was the survey instrument used for this study. The data that resulted from this survey were student self-report data that were descriptive in nature. In addition to providing responses regarding student’s perceptions of the nature and extent of bullying, the survey provided basic demographic data, as well as data describing the individuals to whom students might have reported bullying incidents, the extent to which students were willing to seek help from adults, and students’ prevailing perception of bullying that existed in the school. Additionally, the survey data served as a basis for writing questions that could elicit more elaborate responses from the focus groups.

Survey participants. There were 209 participants in this portion of the study out of a population of 447 students. All survey respondents were current students at the survey site, a New England suburban middle school. Students were all in grade 8 at the time of data collection and as such, they were between the ages of 13 and 15 years old. Five surveys were eliminated because they did not meet validity question standards, resulting in 204 responses. One respondent left the gender question blank. This survey was discarded as well resulting in a final sample of 203, comprised of 118 girls and 85 boys.
This school, with approximately 447 grade eight students has a substantially large population of students in the very age group that tends to experience high levels of bullying. Research shows that bullying activity tends to peak during the middle school years and then drops off during high school (Nansel et al., 2001; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Maxwell (2005) states that one goal of purposeful sampling is to achieve “representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, and activities selected” (p. 89). The large population allowed for a 47 percent response rate to the initial survey. Despite reminders via email and notices to students, the response rate was not as high as I had hoped. This could be due to student complacency, parents simply not getting around to responding to the emails, or the general business of the end of the school year rush. In any case, the sample was from a population representative of a Massachusetts middle school and purposeful as an age group that typically experiences bullying (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2012).

**Focus group participants.** There were thirty-five total focus group participants. Three focus group sessions were held, one all male, one all female, and one mixed gender. Focus group sessions were held over the course of two weeks in May and June of 2012. Participants were selected randomly from a pool of 77 grade eight students who volunteered to participate. All but two of these students also participated in the survey. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the student participants.

Table 1

*Demographic Data for Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
<th>Black %</th>
<th>White %</th>
<th>Asian %</th>
<th>Other Race %</th>
<th>Survey (n)</th>
<th>Focus Group (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>69.8%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 209
Coding

Several coding strategies were used to analyze the qualitative data collected from the focus groups. The coding of the focus group data began with transcribing the focus group audio files. Once transcribed the data was loaded into ATLAS/ti software where I organized and analyzed my data. I first read through the transcripts using Creswell’s (2009) broad “What is this about?” approach, making annotations marking notes for areas for follow-up, and memos about salient words, phrases, and patterns of responses (p. 187). My first round of coding involved assigning a descriptive word or phrase that emerged directly from the words of the participants and from my notes and memos. After this initial phase of coding, I created a list of broad categories from the topics addressed in the survey and focus group questions. The second round of coding consisted of applying these broader categories to the focus group transcript data. Finally, I created even larger coding groups from the research questions and created code families that linked together similar codes. One of the advantages of using the ATLAS/ti software was that I could look at each round of coding individually and/or in relation to the other rounds of coding. In this way, the software allowed me to extract codes that co-occurred with multiple broader categories enabling me to analyze responses from various perspectives. This also facilitated identification of themes as they emerged from different segments of the data.

Research Question 1: What are Students’ Perceptions about the Nature andExtent of Bullying in the School?

The first research question asked participants about their perceptions of the nature and extent of bullying in the school. The question presupposed that a condition or variable, i.e., bullying, exists in the school. This question was intended to help the researcher develop a clear picture of bullying behaviors in the school including: (a) the frequency of bullying, (b) the form
bullying most often takes, i.e., verbal, physical, social, or cyber, and (d) where bullying is most likely to occur. Survey responses created a baseline of data that I explored further in the focus groups regarding student perceptions about the nature of bullying in the school. Table 2 shows the survey questions and corresponding focus group questions that guided the analysis for this research question.
Table 2

*Data Analysis Guide for Research Question 1*

**Research Question 1: What are student’s perceptions about the nature and extent of bullying in the school?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Items</th>
<th>Focus Group Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Items 1-10 refer to the frequency of bullying or being bullied by others generally as well as the extent to which physical, verbal, social and cyber bullying has occurred in the past month.</td>
<td>• Questions: What do you think of the survey results on questions 1 - 10? Do they surprise you? Which ones? Why? Why Not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Items 11 – 15 ask students who they have told about being bullied.</td>
<td>• Taken together, what conclusions can you draw from these results? What do these results tell you? What do these results tell you about bullying at this middle school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Items 16 – 24 ask about the locations where bullying occurs</td>
<td>• Why do you think kids tell a friend more often than an adult?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Why do you think a student might tell a parent rather than a friend?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• According to survey results, kids are least likely to tell a teacher. Why do you think this is so?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Why do you think that 55 percent said that students do not tell teachers when other students are being bullied, given that survey results that most kids believe that a teacher would try to help?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale

- Item 25: Bullying is a problem at this school.
- Item 28: Students here often get teased about their clothing or physical appearance.
- Item 32: Students here often get put down because of their race or ethnicity.
- Item 44: There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics at this school.
- Item 47: Students in this school belong to groups that don’t get along with one another.

- The statement “Bullying is a problem at this school” received almost an even split with half agreeing and half disagreeing. What might explain that split?

Survey results. The School Climate Bullying Survey includes 53 items, 21 of which, when combined, comprise three school climate scales: Willingness to Seek Help, Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying, and Aggressive Attitudes. As this study was focused on determining the prevalence of bullying and help-seeking student behaviors however, items having to do with students’ aggressive attitudes were not a focus of the data analysis.

Frequency of bullying. The questionnaire’s first ten items asked respondents to identify the extent to which they had experienced bullying in the past month. These questions were divided into five sections with two questions each, first asking how often the respondent had been bullied and the second question asking often the respondent had bullied others. Sections were comprised of questions first asking about the extent of bullying occurrences overall, as well as questions asking about specific types of bullying, i.e., physical, verbal, social, and cyber bullying (Appendix A.) In each section, types of bullying were first defined and students were then asked to identify on a Likert Scale, how often this type of bullying had occurred in the last
month with response choices as follows: A) never, B) once or twice, C) about once per week, and D) several times per week. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Survey Results for Frequency of Bullying or Being Bullied on the School Climate Bullying Survey (SBCS) (Cornell, 2011)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Male&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Female&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Been Bullied</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bullied Others</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Been Physically Bullied</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Physically Bullied Others</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Been Verbally Bullied</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Verbally Bullied Others</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Been Socially Bullied</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Socially Bullied Others</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Been Cyber Bullied</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Cyber Bullied Others</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>n = 85  
<sup>b</sup>n = 118

Survey results showed that the number of respondents who claim to have bullied or been bullied in items one and two are not consistent with the number of respondents who claimed to
have bullied or been bullied in the more specific categories of physical, verbal, social and cyber bullying in items three through ten. Although the reason for this is not known, one explanation for these inconsistent results could be the way in which the survey items were presented. In other words, students were presented only with a general definition of bullying prior to responding to the first two questions; as subsequent questions were presented a delineation and definition of specific types of bullying were provided, perhaps enabling students to more accurately identify with particular types of bullying and connect these definitions with more specific personal experiences.

Because of the small percentages of students who had bullied and had been bullied, the results were collapsed into two variables with the responses to A) Never, and B) Once or Twice a month combined into twice or less per month, and C) about once per week, and D) several times per week combined into once or more a week. Table 4 shows the collapsed survey results.
Table 4

**Collapsed Survey Results for Frequency of Bullying or Being Bullied on the School Climate**

*Bullying Scale (SBCS) (Cornell, 2011)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Male(^a)</th>
<th>Female(^b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less than twice in the past month %</td>
<td>Once a week or more in the past month %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Been Bullied</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bullied Others</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Been Physically Bullied</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Physically Bullied Others</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Been Verbally Bullied</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Verbally Bullied Others</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Been Socially Bullied</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Socially Bullied Others</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Been Cyber Bullied</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Cyber Bullied Others</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)\(n = 85\)  
\(^b\)\(n = 118\)

Considering the few students who had bullied and had been bullied, collapsing the data as noted above was a reasonable way to facilitate statistical analysis and reporting of findings.

Responses to the first ten items regarding incidents of bullying were collapsed into two categories of responses, i.e., less than once in the past month, and once or more per week in the past month. Fisher exact tests, employed when sample sizes are small, were conducted to determine whether there were any significant associations \((p > .05)\) between frequency of
bullying, by type of occurrence, and gender (Table 5). While there were some slight differences between the percentage of boy and girls who had been bullied and had bullied themselves, results of the analyses did not show any statistically significant differences across gender. In other words, differences across gender were slight and occurred by chance. It would appear that for students in this sample, bullying experiences were similar for boys and girls.

Table 5

Fisher Exact Test Comparison of the Type of Bullying Experiences across Gender on the School Climate Bullying Scale (SBCS) (Cornell, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Maleᵃ %</th>
<th>Femaleᵇ %</th>
<th>Fisher Exact Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Been Bullied</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>p = .581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bullied Others</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>p = .239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Been Physically Bullied</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>p = .652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Physically Bullied Others</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>p = .406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Been Verbally Bullied</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>p = .832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Verbally Bullied Others</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>p = 1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Been Socially Bullied</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>p = .246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Socially Bullied Others</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>p = 1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Been Cyber Bullied</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>p = .652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Cyber Bullied Others</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>p = .574</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ᵃn = 85 ᵇn = 118

*** p < .001  ** p < .01  * p < .05

Although no significant differences were found between bullying experiences and gender, upon further analyses a significant association was found between being bullied and bullying others (p < .001). In other words, Fisher exact tests show that those participants who reported having been bullied differed significantly in their reports of bullying others from their counterparts who reported no bullying incidents. Similarly, those participants who reported bullying others differed significantly in their reports of having been bullied from those who did
not report bullying others, $X^2(df = 1, n = 207) = 41.666, p < .001$. It is important to note that a significant percentage of the students who reported being bullied also reported bullying others (31.2 percent), though it is equally important to note that this is a relatively small group ($n = 5$).

**Telling.** In order to get a sense of students’ help-seeking behavior, students were asked to respond to whether they had told anyone that they had been bullied in the past 30 days at school. Twenty-five respondents ($n = 203$) reported telling someone they were being bullied. Chi square tests, employed to analyze categorical data revealed a significant association between gender and whether or not a student told anyone that they were being bullied, $X^2(df = 1, n = 51) = 4.151, p = .042$. Twenty-eight percent of the males told someone versus 57 percent of the females told someone. In addition, independent samples $t$ tests, conducted when looking for mean differences between groups showed a statistically significant difference between males and females on telling behaviors $t(49) = -2.08, p = .039$, with girls more likely to have told someone that they had been bullied.

An independent samples $t$ test also revealed a significant association between gender and telling a friend $t(189) = -3.09, p = .002$, with girls showing a greater likelihood of telling a friend that they had been bullied; fifteen percent of females versus one percent of males. However, no statistically significant correlations were found between gender and telling a teacher or gender and telling a parent. Both boys and girls displayed similar tendencies in regard to whether or not they told a teacher (males = one percent vs. females = one percent) or a parent (males = one percent vs. females = one percent) that they had been bullied.

Chi square tests were run to determine whether there was an association between the type of bullying (physical, verbal, social, cyber experienced and to whom the student reported. The results for physical bullying were surprising in that this was the only one of the four types of
bullying that was not significantly associated with telling behavior (Friend, \( p = .061 \), Parent, \( p = .160 \), Teacher, \( p = .191 \)). Tests conducted for students who experienced cyberbullying found no significant association with telling a parent (\( p = .191 \)) but found significant correlations between experiencing cyberbullying and telling a friend (\( p = .002 \)) or a teacher (\( p = .005 \)). Chi-square tests conducted on the other types of bullying showed statistically significant relationships between verbal bullying and telling a friend (\( p < .001 \)), teacher (\( p = .014 \)), and parent (\( p < .001 \)). Also, significance was found with social bullying and telling a friend (\( p < .001 \)), teacher (\( p < .001 \)) and parent (\( p = .002 \)). This indicates that respondents who were verbally or socially bullied are far more likely to tell someone than respondents who were physically bullied or cyber bullied.

Of the 203 students who responded to whether or not they had told anyone they had been bullied in the past 30 days, 27 said they were bullied and did not tell and 25 reported that they had told someone. According to the questions asking about whether they had told a friend, parent or teacher however, 30 students reported telling a friend, 17 reported telling a parent and 8 said they had told a teacher. In other words, while 25 students reported being bullied and telling someone, 55 students reported telling specific people. This is seemingly inconsistent, until one looks a little deeper. It may be that the 30 students who responded that they had told a friend believed that the first question asking whether they had told anyone was referring to a formal complaint and therefore they answered that they had not, but then, as it became clear that questions were not asking about formal complaints necessarily, they went on to report that in fact, they had told a friend. This would make sense as the 25 students who reported telling a teacher or parent could be the same students who reported they had told someone, again,
believing that question was asking about whether they had formally registered a complaint about being bullied

**Locations where bullying occurs.** This set of items asked respondents to identify the location where bullying took place. Chi square tests were conducted to determine whether there was an association between the type of bullying a student experienced and the location in which that bullying took place. Findings were mixed with a few significant associations. Verbal bullying, for example, was significantly associated with being located in the hallways \((p = .05)\) and classrooms \((p = .002)\). Social bullying was significantly associated with being located in the classrooms \((p = .014)\) and cyberbullying was significantly correlated with students being on their way to school \((p = .045)\). Of these, the most pronounced association was verbal bullying in the classroom \((p = .002)\). For other types of bullying and locations, the lack of statistical significance \((p > .05)\) indicates that the various types of bullying happen in a wide variety of locations. Thirty-three respondents \((n = 203)\) identified the location of bullying to be “other.” Of these, respondents were asked to name these “other” locations. There were a few responses that stood out, i.e., the bus \((n = 3)\), and a local park \((n = 7)\) being most common. Students identified a local park by name. Not surprisingly, this was a common gathering place for middle school students in this community.

**Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale**. The Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying scale was designed to examine the degree to which students believed there was a prevailing atmosphere of teasing and bullying in their schools. Items on the survey pertaining to the scale were combined to calculate a response value ranging from 0-4 with higher values indicating students’ belief in a prevailing atmosphere of bullying. These values were split at the mean \((M = \)
1.79) with those above the mean in higher agreement and those below the mean in lesser agreement. The numbers of respondents in each value range are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Survey Results: Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale (SBCS) (Cornell, 2011)

Figure 3 indicates that among girls, there was greater agreement that there is a prevailing atmosphere of bullying at the school, though further analysis, employing an independent-samples \( t \) test, comparing the means of the two groups showed this was not statistically significant \( (p = .147) \). Additional independent-samples \( t \) tests helped to analyze differences among individual response items and scores. These are reported in more detail below.
Do scores on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale differ by whether students reported having been bullied or having bullied others? Upon comparing means among students who reported that they had been bullied and those who reported that they had not, a statistically significant difference was found between these two groups, $t(201) = -2.42, p = .004$. Further analyses were conducted to examine whether students who reported that they had been bullied are significantly more likely to agree that there is a prevailing atmosphere of teasing and bullying in the school. Results indicated that in fact having been bullied was significantly associated with higher agreement on the Prevalence of Teasing Bullying scale.

On the other hand, mean scores on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying scale of those students who reported that they had bullied others did not differ significantly from mean scores of students who reported that they had not bullied others ($p = .634$). Not surprisingly, findings suggest that those students who reported having been bullied were more likely to agree that there was an atmosphere of bullying in their schools, while students who reported not being bullied may not notice others being bullied. That students who bully others were not in agreement with a prevailing atmosphere of bullying is puzzling however, as the fact they reported having bullied suggests an awareness that bullying did, in fact, take place, but that bullying did not characterize the prevailing atmosphere of the school. Taken together, this means that students who had been bullied were more likely to perceive that bullying characterized the atmosphere of the school while those who bully did not perceive it that way.

Do scores on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale differ by whether or not students they told anyone about being bullied? Students who told someone that they were being bullied did not differ by score on Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale from those who were bullied but did not tell anyone ($p = .881$). This indicates that telling someone about being bullied
was not related to a student’s perception about the prevailing atmosphere of bullying in the school.

*Do scores on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale differ by a student’s response to whether teachers make it clear that bullying is not tolerated at the school?* Students who reported that teachers made it clear that bullying was not tolerated at school did not differ by score on Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale ($p = .081$) from those who did not believe so. This indicated a student’s perception of teachers’ tolerance of bullying was not related to student’s perception about the prevailing atmosphere of bullying in the school.

*Are there any difference in scores across ethnicities on the prevalence scales?* A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) allows comparison of means when there are more than two groups. An ANOVA test was run to compare mean scores on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale for each of the ethnicities that were reported by students. The survey questions identified six ethnic group options, American Indian/Alaskan, Asian, Black, White, Multi-racial, and Other. This ANOVA test showed no significant difference between groups, $F(4, 195) = 1.375, p = .244$. A Tukey Post Hoc test was then run to compare the mean scores for every possible pairing of ethnicities included in the ANOVA which also showed no significant differences ($p > .05$). This was not surprising considering the homogeneity of the sample being all grade 8 students from the same school.

**Focus group results.** Phase II of the data collection involved three focus groups, which were run in order to elicit more elaborate discussion than possible when conducting a survey. Also, focus groups enabled me to elicit nuanced responses to some of the more salient topics covered by the survey, as determined by students responses, and more closely examine students’ perceptions regarding bullying and adult responses to bullying. Focus groups are an effective
means of qualitative data collection because they can efficiently produce a great deal of individual experiential and perceptual data on a given topic, and the social dynamic that is inherently characteristic of a group provides meaningful data in and of itself (Morgan, 1997). This is especially true of the phenomenon of bullying, which itself occurs within a social context.

It was not known whether the gender composition of the groups would impact the responses given so two single gender and one mixed gender focus groups were held. The participants of each group were selected randomly from a pool of 77 students ($n = 209$) who specifically volunteered to participate in the focus group portion of this study. This pool of focus group students was made up of volunteers from the 209 students who consented to participate in the study. Table 6 shows details of each group.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of Students ($n$)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>Mixed Gender</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$n = 77$

Focus groups met one time only in the school at mid-day. Students were seated at a large conference table equipped with place cards at each seat indicating the participant’s number, a copy of the Student Assent Form (Appendix E), and a selected portion of the survey results (Figure 3). The Focus Group Discussion Questions (Appendix D) were developed from the survey findings in order to elicit more detailed responses regarding student perceptions. The researcher used the discussion questions as a guide to generate discussion. These were not handed out to participants. These questions guided the discussion for each focus group. Two
iPads equipped with the iTalk App recorded the focus group discussion while a note taker took notes of the discussion in a Word document.

**Focus group results: Common themes related to students’ perceptions about the nature and extent of bullying in school.** The focus groups enabled the researcher to present selected survey findings to students and elicit detailed responses regarding their perceptions of the survey results. Since the survey did not include any open-ended responses, the focus groups discussion helped to provide some insight into the survey results. The first part of the discussion asked students to respond to a print out of the survey results (Figure 4) that identified how often students reported they had either been bullied or bullied others in the past month.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33%</td>
<td>Have been bullied once or twice or more in the last month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Bullied once or twice a month or more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59%</td>
<td>Have been verbally bullied once or twice or more in the last month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 %</td>
<td>Have verbally bullied once or twice or more in the last month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37%</td>
<td>Have been socially bullied once or twice or more in the last month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Have socially bullied once or twice or more in the last month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>Have been cyber bullied once or twice or more in the last month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Have cyber bullied once or twice or more in the last month</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Survey Results Distributed to Focus Group Participants*

As a discussion starter, students were asked what they thought of the survey results. The discussion that ensued encompassed a wide variation of responses ranging from students who were surprised by the extent of bullying reported to those who were not at all surprised. Discussion ventured into speculation about how a student might answer the questions on the basis of whether they were involved in a bullying incident. Additionally, participants discussed
at length the advantages and disadvantages of telling others about being bullied. Participants discussed a wide variety of issues related to their perception of the type and amount of bullying that took place in the school. Common themes among the discussion included the following:

- Confusion about the definition of bullying, i.e., teasing versus bullying
- Skepticism: Disbelief in the credibility of the results
- Personal knowledge of bullying incidents as an indicator of the severity of the problem
- Hesitancy to formally report bullying

**Confusion about the definition of bullying: Teasing versus Bullying.** When asked to draw conclusions about the results in Figure 4, several students in the boys’ focus group commented that they did not believe peers really understand what constitutes bullying. In the words of one male participant,

> I think people are definitely confused about what the definition of bullying is. If they see the word bullied, I feel like kids don’t really think about verbal attacks. I think more they think about in the movies. They think physical attacks. They think, ‘Oh verbally is being bullied?’ so then they write. ‘Yeah. I’ve been verbally bullied.’

This confusion about the definition of bullying was the reason results were inconsistent according to this student and other focus group participants. Another male participant noted, “One thing that confuses me, if you look at the people who say they’ve been bullied in general it says 33 percent. Then, [when the survey questions get] into more specifics, the number goes up to 60 percent. That number is kind of confusing.” Several other male students concurred with this saying that sometimes their peers do not really know whether they are being bullied or not. One student said, “I mess with my friends all the time. Some kids might take it more seriously
than others. Another student agreed, “Some people see things but they don’t really know what is going on. They see two friends joking around and think maybe one is bullying the other, so they might take it as a lot of bullying is going on in the school but it’s really just two friends having a good time.” A student summarized, “It depends on how the person means it and how it’s taken.” This comment raises an interesting question. Is it possible that a person could intend to bully yet the target doesn’t see it as bullying behavior or, the person does not intend to bully but the target perceives himself to be bullied? Clearly, students struggled with a clear understanding of the definition of bullying, which then would have significant implications when trying to figure out how to deal with it.

Adding to the confusion was the students’ discussion that teasing and bullying were really two separate behaviors. These behaviors could look similar to someone observing an interaction between two people, as one male participant noted, “Some people take jokes too far. Some people think they are just being funny. Other people think they are just having fun with them when they’re really being bullied, but they don’t understand that they are.” The blurred lines between bullying and teasing were not only unclear to targets but also to aggressors according to a female focus group participant. “Sometimes people can’t even tell that they’re verbally bullying…they don’t recognize it so they don’t like stop themselves so it occurs more often.” This begs the question of whether students perceive someone can be a bully even if their actions are not consciously intended to cause harm? A male participant seemingly concurred.

I bet every single person has at least bullied once not knowing they were bullying.

Like if they make a comment to their friend that was supposed to be joke but the friend took it a different way than you meant it. So, I guarantee that everyone has bullied once but they haven’t realized it.
Students repeatedly referred to the “I was just kidding” excuse often given by students for their behaviors although they did not seem to truly know how to tell the difference. A male participant suggested, “I think there is a difference between bullying and joking around.” However, he did not provide any elaboration on how he can tell the difference. Another student responded to that comment, saying, “People don’t realize the difference between joking and bullying.” One fellow participant attempted to explain the difference, saying, “It depends on what your reaction to the situation is.” A fellow participant disagreed by saying, “Just kidding still hurts.” The idea of “unintentional bullying” is an interesting finding especially considering the students were provided with a definition of bullying on the survey that included a reference to specific actions committed “on purpose” (Cornell, 2011).

Also part of the confusion regarding the definition of bullying, was the element of how one reacted to an aggressive behavior. Students in the female focus group talked about the notion of “standing up for one’s self” as being a determinate of whether an individual was actually being bullied. A female focus group participant noted,

I think bullying is defined by whether it’s a mixed power thing. But then if someone stands up for themselves this is not considered bullying because they stood up for themselves. Then they might have equal power. Still, basically, it’s not bullying if you stand up for yourself which I think is really true. So a lot of people might not see what exactly bullying is.

Another participant disagreed,

Like if someone stands up for themselves, people are like ‘Oh, that’s not bullying because they stood up.’ But, a lot of people disagree with that because that’s still
bullying, still trying to make the person feel bad, just the other person is mart

enough to stand up for themselves.

This disagreement about the behaviors that constitute bullying was consistent across all focus
groups. Students tried to describe or define bullying in terms of how the target perceived the
behavior, how the target responded to the behavior, how others perceived the incident, and even
who knew about the incident. All of these contributed to the confusion students reportedly
experienced while trying to understand bullying in the world of peer interactions.

_Skepticism: Disbelief in the credibility of results._ There was an overall theme that the
numbers of students reporting that they had been bullied were lower than what students
perceived actually takes place. Some participants attributed this to hearing a great deal of rumors
even though it had not ever happened to them. One female stated, “I’ve heard some stuff but it’s
never really happened to me exactly.” Another female alluded to the rumor mill making the
problem of bullying seem worse than what the survey results indicated. She stated, “Actually,
these numbers are smaller that what I expected ‘cuz all the things you hear, you expect there
would be more bullying than this. But, it’s better that the numbers are smaller.” These
responses seemed to indicate that students perceived there to be more bullying than was
indicated on the survey.

This disbelief in the credibility of the results was also noted in regard to the survey results
having to do with cyberbullying. “I personally think that the number of people getting cyber
bullied would be more than people getting verbally bullied because I think people hide behind
their computers.” Additionally, one student noted that there was physical evidence of
cyberbullying where screen shots or printouts can be seen unlike verbal bullying where there was
no physical evidence. One female expressed skepticism, saying, “I think it either means that
there is a lot of dishonesty or there’s a small group of bullies who are reaching a wide variety of people.” One student spoke specifically to the results for verbal bullying. Fifty-nine percent said that they had been verbally bullied once or more in the last month. This participant noted, “I think some people just make a small joke and it gets taken a bit too seriously so I’m not really sure the number should be that.” Another student noted that was it not surprising that verbal bullying was higher because it can pass unnoticed by others. This was related to the idea that one might intend a verbal remark as a joke but it might be taken as a form of bullying. The statement that verbal bullying can go unnoticed supports the theme of skepticism because if one does not notice that he or she is being bullied but others do, then it may go unreported despite the perception that it is occurring. Overall, students expressed the belief that some results did not reflect what they see or hear was happening in school.

Personal knowledge of bullying incidents as an indicator of the severity of the problem.

This theme evolved from students discussing the extent to which survey results meshed with what they see or hear about bullying in the school. In the male focus group, students questioned whether knowing about a bullying situation necessarily means one is involved in the situation. One student expressed this confusion, by saying “No one wants to add themselves to the conflict. If you tell someone, then the other person might think, ‘Well, you’re in it now because you told me’ and so now you’re going to get bullied too.” This was reinforced by another participant, “Exactly, you want to stay out of it but you still want to help and if you help, that just got you back into it.” This was further clarified by fellow participant, “Except you are also involved if you knew about it.” And finally one more participant agreed, saying, “It’s kind of like a lose-lose.” It seemed that the nature of the rumor mill in this middle school was such that if one claimed knowledge of an incident, then one would somehow be linked to that incident.
Many of these students expressed the belief that just knowing about the incident meant you were involved. The broad perception of what it meant to be involved in bullying may have overinflated a student’s perception of their own involvement and may have lead them to believe there was more bullying going on than what is being reported in the survey.

_Hesitancy to formally report bullying._ The researcher posted the following survey results, in Figure 5, on a whiteboard in the conference room where the focus group discussions took place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12% (n=52)</td>
<td>respondents who reported being bullied said they told someone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15% (n=196)</td>
<td>respondents said they told a friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9% (n=196)</td>
<td>respondents said they told a parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4% (n=196)</td>
<td>respondents told a teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5. Who did you tell that you bullied?*

Participants in each of the focus groups were asked a series of questions about their telling behavior in an effort to gain a more nuanced understanding of their perceptions than that which is conveyed in the survey alone. Questions are as follows:

- **Why do you think kids tell a friend more often than an adult?**
- **Why do you think a student might tell a parent rather than a friend?**
- **Survey results suggest that kids are least likely to tell a teacher. Why do you think this is so?**
- **Why do you think that 55 percent of students reported that they do not tell teachers when other students are being bullied, given the fact that survey results also suggest that most kids report they believe that teacher would try to help?**
Students in the focus groups had much to say about survey results and the extent to which most of those students who report being bullied and had told someone about it, said they had told a friend rather than a teacher or a parent. Participants speculated as to the reasons why telling a friend about a bullying incident might be preferable to telling a teacher or a parent. Some of the reasons had to do with the level of trust they report feeling they have with their friends. Several students reported that they felt a peer understands the situation, will give practical advice, and will provide support. Some of their comments to this point were,

- You are close to them [friends] and you feel you can trust them

- They feel like their friends are the same level as them, that they’ve really experienced the same stuff.

- A friend might not tell anyone. You’ll feel good about it. No one’s getting in trouble or anything do you’re OK with telling a friend.

- A friend gives you tips. Sometimes talking to someone about it helps.

In addition to this, one participant suggested that telling a friend might be a low risk way of talking about a difficult situation. “It may help to ease the victim’s mind to say such and such happened to me. Maybe they haven’t told anyone yet so maybe it’s a weight off their shoulders.” Lastly, and most importantly, they reported that friends were less likely to go to an authority figure, i.e., telling a friend is not “snitching.” On participant explained it this way, “…we’ve been told since we were younger that tattletaling is not good but if you tell a friend, it’s not tattletaling. But if you tell a parent or teacher it is.” The need to avoid any semblance of tattletaling or snitching seemed to be a significant motivator for students to tell a friend rather than any adult.
On the other hand, students had equally compelling reasons why students might not tell a friend about a bullying situation. Students reported that sometimes they struggled with knowing whether or not they could trust a peer. This theme was more apparent in the female focus group than in the others. Several female participants discussed this trust issue. “I know a lot of people that like have met someone and they don’t like trust that person but they have told them a lot of stuff. I’m kinda surprised most people would tell their friends.” A fellow participant agreed with this, “Your friend might spread it around so it might be like bad to tell your friend because you can’t always trust them.” These students expressed that it was not always a good idea to confide in a friend because they were taking the chance of that person breaking their confidence and sharing the problem with someone else.

Another risk that surfaced during this discussion about whom to tell was the risk getting friends involved in what was already a bad situation. This sentiment was expressed primarily by boys who reported feeling that the friend could make things worse, just in the name of trying to help. “It’s not helpful if the friend wants to hurt the other kid [the bully]…like if he wanted to fight the other kid [the bully], that wouldn’t be helpful.” Other boys said that friends would try to help but their advice was not always the right course of action to take. “Another thing that is not helpful is when they say ‘Oh, you should go pop him in the face!’” Likewise, several boys discussed a hesitancy to tell a friend because the friend might minimize the issue, leaving the target feeling invalidated.

When your friends say ‘Suck it up. It’s not that big a deal.’ You want to hear ‘Oh, that’s awful! I’m going to help you out!’

That’s is not a true friend if they say to suck it up.
If your friend says ‘He’s kidding, just move on with it. He’s not really serious.’ That is not helpful.

Overall, students in all focus groups expressed the belief that telling a friend is a double-edged sword, a move that could make you feel better initially but could potentially cause more problems in the end.

Table 7 shows quotations from focus group participants about reasons why they would or would not tell a friend about a bullying situation.
Table 7

Quotes about why students are likely to tell or not tell a friend about a bullying situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason to tell a friend</th>
<th>Reasons not to tell a friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• …because they are more comfortable and you’ve known them for so long. You trust them more than an adult who might not understand what you’re talking about.</td>
<td>• I know a lot of people that have met someone and they don’t trust that person but they told him a lot of stuff. I’m kind of surprised most people would tell their friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• …we’ve been told when we were younger that tattletaling is not good but if you tell a friend it is not tattletaling.</td>
<td>• Your friend might also spread it around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I think it depends on how bad it is because if it’s like just one time, most people will keep it to themselves.</td>
<td>• In some cases they’ll try to get revenge. They’ll go and beat them down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Our friends are really close to use so we feel that we can actually talk to them and they would understand more of what we are going through.</td>
<td>• Yeah, ‘cuz if you tell a friend you’re like OK this is happening and like they confront the bully and something else will happen and that can cause a whole ‘nother problem coming into play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I think that a lot of people are at that age that they think your parents will just embarrass you so they go to their friends.</td>
<td>• I trust my friends but I feel like it would get worse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A friend might not even tell anyone. You’ll feel good about it. No one’s getting in trouble or anything, so you’re OK telling a friend.</td>
<td>• A friend might try to do something about it and that might not always be the best situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A good friend already knows and will tell you how to avoid the bully.</td>
<td>• Friends, I guess, they don’t like really know how to give you advice or know what to do exactly with a situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• They feel their friends are the same level as them that they’ve really experienced the same stuff.</td>
<td>• It’s not helpful when you tell a friend and they just don’t really care about it and it really just makes it worse for you because you anted them to actually care and help you through it but then they don’t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Maybe you’re afraid you don’t want to get that person who bullied you in trouble for something so you just tell a friend so they won’t get the school involved.</td>
<td>• When your friends say suck it up. It’s not that big of a deal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not helpful when kids what to hurt the other kid. It would stop the bullying but it wouldn’t be a good thing to do.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Likewise, students also discussed many concerns about what could happen if they told a parent about a bullying situation. Students reported many risks associated with this. One fear was that parents might go off and do something to make the situation worse, such as bringing the situation to school administrators. This part of the discussion in the mixed gender was very lively with many students participating.

They drag the school into it or call the principal and say ‘Oh my God! My little kids is getting bullied!’ and now everyone’s…in trouble.

[You get in] more trouble than just bullying when administration gets into the situation.

[You] feel like a snitch.

If all the people that were bullying got in trouble then they would probably find out who got them in trouble and it would be worse.

They would have something more to tease you about or they would just give you a look and you feel like you’ve got them in trouble.

[You become] more of a target.

At that point you feel it would be better if you did nothing at all than make it worse by doing that [telling a parent.]

This exchange illustrated the perception that if anyone found out that a student told his parent, that this made them seem weak in the eyes of their peers. There was real fear that if parents said or did something, then it would be embarrassing and just bring on more trouble for the target.

Students expressed skepticism that parents could be very helpful in other respects. This included reporting that parents really did not understand peer culture or norms. One student
reported “[Your] parent doesn’t really know what life is like in school.” Another student agreed, “The parent is not the same age so kids might think that they don’t understand what exactly is going on.” These students seemed to express the idea that there was a generation gap that was getting in the way of the parent truly appreciating what the student was experiencing. This was especially noted by several female group participants when discussing cyberbullying:

When our parents were growing up it was much different, like cyberbullying wasn’t even a topic because computers weren’t invented. But now parents don’t really know the full gist of everything [texting on social media], like how it work

Yes, we have more contact to each other. We are constantly in contact so it’s good, but it also means that bullying can happen faster and it gets worse faster, so they don’t really understand the same things we go through ‘cuz when they were kids they didn’t have cell phones and Facebook.

It’s just proof that when our parents were younger they didn’t go through anything like this. They don’t really know ‘cuz they didn’t experience [bullying] like this.

These real concerns that the participants reported in the focus group discussion helps to explain some reasons why the survey results showed fewer respondents would report bullying to a parent than they would to a friend.

On the other hand, students in all focus groups reported a variety of reasons for why they might choose to tell a parent rather than a friend or a teacher. Parents provide support, protection, care, comfort, sympathy, and good advice. In the words of one participant, “Your parents know what’s best for you and like what can happen. They know you better and they try
to understand best they can.” Students generally agreed that parents were more trustworthy than friends or teachers and they would take time to work through it and really understand the situation. One student explained how parents represented a balance between the casual peer relationship and formal teacher-student relationship. “They are the middle ground. They won’t be as laid back about it as your friend would be and won’t be as intense about it as a teacher would be.” Lastly, there was a sense that parents would always act with their child’s best interest in mind and do whatever they can to stop the bullying. There was a sense that parents were important allies when it came to talking about bullying. The quotes in Table 8 illustrate these and other reasons for choosing to tell or not tell a parent.
Table 8

*Quotes about why students might tell or not tell a parent about a bullying situation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons to tell a parent</th>
<th>Reasons not to tell a parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I know a lot of people who say their mom is like their best friend. You feel like you can tell them anything.</td>
<td>• They sometimes like try to go to like the administration but to the kid that doesn’t always seem like a helpful thing, ‘cause then other kids find out and they think like ‘Oh. You told.” And the tattling thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The person who is being bullied might feel more comfortable talking to the parent…because I feel more comfortable talking to my mom than my teacher. She knows me more than my teacher and I know she won’t like tell one of the principals so I can just keep it between me and her.</td>
<td>• And you’re like a wimp. You actually told you’re parents you’re being bullied?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I can always tell a parent something but a friend like might do something about it and that might always be the best situation.</td>
<td>• They could use it as another thing to bully you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When they act concerned then you realize someone cares, like when they get mad or angry then you know someone cares.</td>
<td>• I think a lot of people are at that age that they think your parents will just embarrass you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I think a lot of time they try to understand the situation and like they ask you questions or how it’s going.</td>
<td>• I feel like if I told my mom if I was being bullied or something, she would come into the school and would make a big deal about it and I know everyone doesn’t want to be a snitch around school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Your parents know what’s best for you and like what can happen. They know you better and they try to understand best they can.</td>
<td>• The parents would just tell the teacher too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents know how to comfort you.</td>
<td>• Parents don’t really know what life is like at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents have been through it before and they know what to do.</td>
<td>• When our parents were growing up it was much different like cyber bullying wasn’t even a topic because computers weren’t invented but now parents don’t really know the full gist of everything and how it works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You’re with you family outside of school and no one will really know that you’re telling them.</td>
<td>• We don’t need our parents. We want to be independent and responsible. We want to handle things ourselves. There is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• They know how to protect you best.

• Parents, even thought their generation was a lot different, and there were different types of bullying, they can give you a lot of advice.

• Maybe they feel like they have a shoulder to dry on, so-to-speak. Their parents will understand them more and be more sympathetic.

• They are the middle ground. They won’t be as laid back about it as your friend would be and won’t be as intense about it as a teacher would be.

• a fine line between what you should do and what you shouldn’t share with your parents.”

• They might get mad that you didn’t tell them right away. There might be a whole lot of bottled up emotions that they go ballistic on you.

• They probably don’t think they can trust an adult.

• Adults will get people in trouble. It’s an overreaction. They don’t understand.

• They freak out, like they overreact...they go crazy on a little thing that happens like if someone called you a name...and then they call and drag administration into it and then they make a huge deal when you are just trying to talk to them and complain about it.

Participants were then asked to comment on the survey results that indicated students were least likely to tell a teacher. In the analysis of the focus group data, there were 12 statements coded, “Reasons to report to a teacher,” and there were 42 statements coded, “Reasons not to report to a teacher,” indicating that focus group participants had far more reasons to fear reporting to a teacher than to either a friend or a parent.

Of the few reasons students reported that they would tell a teacher the most common was the belief that a teacher really would try to help them, albeit they were skeptical about how helpful they actually would be. “They’ll do something to help but it might not be always what you want.”

Some reported that they could trust a teacher to keep them anonymous. Some suggested that choosing to tell a teacher depended upon the relationship they had with the teacher. This
relationship was important to one very articulate boy who said that his parents have taught him to trust in his teacher because they spend so much time with students. “My parents call my teachers ‘third parents’ because when you think about it, you almost see your teachers as much as you see your parents…so it’s like you see someone the same amount of time as your parents but you still don’t want to tell them because you’re still not somewhat related to them so it feels more different than telling your parents.” Despite their apparent respect for teachers, focus group participants reported more reluctance to tell a teacher than they did to tell a friend or parent.

Subsequently, the participants had considerably more to say about why one would not tell a teacher. Table 9 lists some of the responses that are representative of those reasons. Some of the responses like the “third parent” comment noted earlier showed that students struggled with this question. It seemed that they want to believe that telling a teacher would be the right thing to do, but there was a great deal of personal risk involved and they were generally unsure whether the outcome would be truly helpful.
Table 9

*Quotes about reluctance to tell a teacher about a bullying situation*

- We are not comfortable. You have to be with them for the rest of the year and like giving them all of your personal information. You really only ask for help on school stuff.”

- They’ll do something to help but it might not be always what you want.

- If you tell a teacher or parent, they might want to do something about it even if you tell them not to and it puts you in a more tough situation.

- But like teacher don’t totally get what’s going on, like how serious it can be.

- It’s not the teacher’s fault. It’s the lack of time we have with them.

- Through your whole education everyone’s just telling you like ‘Oh, yeah. Your teacher will always help you or listen to you so I guess you expect them to help but they may not be able to help in a way that you want them to.

- I think that some people don’t tell teachers because teachers have more power than the friend. If they tell a teacher then you’d be known as a snitch and the teacher could actually get them in trouble for something.

- Teachers really don’t try to comfort you. They just say okay and then they go get the bully in trouble.

- I feel teachers almost make it worse.

- You don’t really get to know your teachers and there’s a point in like every relationship where you think ‘Okay, I’m comfortable with this person and I can talk to them about anything…’ You don’t really get that with teachers, at least not with every teacher.

- They always tell you that if anyone is bullying you, tell us right away. We’ll get them in trouble. But if you [teachers] tell them [students] that at the start of the year, then you are sort of lowering your chances because kids have that feeling that they don’t want to be a snitch…so you aren’t really sure if you want to go tell a teacher.

- My parents call my teachers ‘third parents’ because when you think about it, you almost see your teachers as much as you see your parents…so it’s like you see someone the same amount of time as your parents but you still don’t want to tell them because you’re still not somewhat related to them so it feels more different than telling your parents.

- It’s just that they have not been in the same position as us in a long time so they might not exactly remember how to and how not to react.
• If you don’t like the teacher like these kids who hate teachers and they don’t even want to talk to them in class so why would they want to tell them about that?

• Maybe the teacher is part of the problem of why they are mad or something. Teachers make them stressed out.

• You have more trouble than just bullying when administration gets into the situation.

• The teacher might make a big deal too.

All of these comments about who students chose to tell or not to tell about a bullying situation and why they do so revealed the strength that peer norms and peer culture have on students. Peer norms strongly discouraged kids from seeking help from adults even when they might be faced with a potentially dangerous situation such as bullying.

**Research Questions Two and Three:** What are student’s perceptions about the policies and practices that are in place to reduce bullying and the effects that these policies and practices have on bullying in school

While research questions two and number three have been discussed separately in previous chapters of this paper, analysis of the data showed that student responses were intertwined. In order to explain student’s reported perceptions of the policies and the effects of those same policies, findings may be more clearly reported if presented together.

To review, each of these research questions were designed to illicit specific but related data about anti-bullying policies and practices in the school. The second research question was designed to uncover what the policies and practices meant to students, how they viewed them, how they saw teachers or staff using the practices as they responded to bullying. The third research question was intended to learn how knowledgeable students were about existing policies and practices and whether students perceived that the current policies and practices have had an impact on bullying in their school. This question also was designed to learn to what extent
students have connected specific actions on the part of school personnel as an attempt to prevent and/or intervene in bullying incidents. Table 10 shows the applicable survey questions and corresponding focus group questions that guide the analysis of the findings for this research question.
Table 10

Research Question 2 and 3: What are students’ perceptions about the policies and practices that are in place to reduce bullying and the effects that these policies and practices have on bullying in school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Focus Group Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Willingness to Seek Help Scale</td>
<td>• Eighty-six percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that If I tell a teacher that someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 26: If another student was bullying me I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school</td>
<td>• Fifty-five percent said that students do not tell teachers when other students are being bullied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 29: Students here try to stop bullying when they see it happening</td>
<td>• Why do you think that is, given that most kids believe that a teacher would try to help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 30: If another student brought a gun to school, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.</td>
<td>• Eighty percent of the students surveyed say that adults at this school make it clear that bullying is not tolerated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 33: Teachers here make it clear to students that bullying is not tolerated</td>
<td>• How do they do that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 34: If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.</td>
<td>• What are some ways a teacher might respond? What ways are helpful? Why? What ways are not helpful? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 37: If I tell a teacher someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help.</td>
<td>• Do teachers understand what is a helpful response and what is not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 38: There are adults at this school I could go to if I had a personal problem.</td>
<td>• Can anyone identify something they know about the Anti-Bullying policy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 40: Students tell teachers when other students are being bullied.</td>
<td>• Does anyone know any of the ways an individual can report bullying?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Item 41: The teachers at this school genuinely care about me doing well.</td>
<td>• Does anyone know anything about what the school is required to do when bullying is reported?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does anyone know what the rights of the bully are?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Does anyone know what the rights of the victim are?
• Does anyone know who the school has to notify when bullying is reported?

**Survey results.** The survey questions used to answer this research question are taken from the School Climate Bullying Survey (Cornell, 2011). The item content of this survey includes The Willingness to Seek Help scale. This scale indicates the willingness of students to seek help from others, especially teachers in the school. In addition to reporting out the full scale results, specific items were compared to further analyze the survey results.

**Willingness to Seek Help Scale.** This scale was comprised of nine items embedded within the survey. Each item provided four response options: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. Responses to the nine survey questions were combined into one scaled score, with response values ranging from 0-9 with higher values indicating more willingness to seek help. These values were collapsed and split at the mean \( M = 6.74 \) to create a dichotomized variable with students whose response scores were above the mean reporting they were more likely to seek help than those students whose response scores were below the mean.

Figure 6 presents students’ willingness to seek help by gender. While it appeared that in general, girls were more willing to seek help than were boys, independent-samples \( t \) tests showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the scores of boys and girls \( (p = .485) \). Additional statistical tests were conducted in an effort to analyze differences among individual response items and scores on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale. Frequencies, means and standard deviations are reported in table 11.
Figure 6. Survey Results: Willingness to Seek Help Scale (SBCS) (Cornell, 2011)
Table 11

*Frequencies on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale* (Cornell, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>6.95</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been bullied</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not been bullied</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullied others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not bullied others</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying is a problem at school</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying is not a problem at school</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told a teacher or adult</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not tell an teacher or adult</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers make it clear that bullying is not tolerated</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>7.05</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers do not make it clear that bullying is not tolerated</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( n = 204 \)

*Means comparisons for scores on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale.* Several statistical tests were conducted in an effort to analyze differences among individual response items and scores on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale. First, independent samples *t* tests showed there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for students who had been bullied versus students who had not been bullied \( t(200) = 2.17, p = .032 \). Further tests comparing scores between those who had reported bullying others and those who had not \( (p = .179) \), between those who had reported believing bullying was a problem at school and those who had not \( (p = .289) \), and between those who had reported telling someone about being bullied and those who had not \( (p = .271) \), did not show any significant differences in scores \( p > .05 \). Differences between scores on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale, indicating whether a student had reported believing that teachers made it clear that bullying is not tolerated at school, and those who had
not, however, did show a statistically significant difference $t(200) = -5.32$, $p < .000$. It seemed that students were more willing to seek help either when they themselves had been bullied or when they perceive that the school did not tolerate bullying.

*Are there any difference across ethnicities on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale?* A One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) allows comparison of means when there are more than two groups. In conducting an ANOVA examining differences in mean scores across ethnicities on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale, no significant differences were found, $F(4, 194) = 2.264$, $p = .064$. Within groups there was only one statistically significant difference between pairings for the Black and Asian groups ($p = .039$.) According to Tukey Post Hoc tests, run to compare the mean scores for every possible pairing of ethnicities included in the ANOVA, the Asian group’s mean ($M = 7.473$) was higher than the Black group’s mean score ($M = 5.375$) indicating that the Asian group was most likely to seek help and the Black group less likely to seek help when compared to each other. Other pairings showed no significant differences in their seeking help scores ($p > .05$). This indicates that there is really not much difference across ethnicities, with the exception of the difference between Blacks and Asians. Given the small size of these groups however, this finding is not particularly robust.

**Focus Group Results: Common themes related to students’ perceptions of the policies and practices that are in place to reduce bullying and the effects these policies and practices have on bullying in the school.** In conducting focus groups, as noted above, to begin our discussions, I presented survey findings in order to elicit detailed responses regarding student perceptions of the anti-bullying policies and practices in place at the school. For this topic, I presented findings related to policies and practices.
Participants discussed the myriad of policies and practices that they believed were in place to intervene in bullying situations and prevent bullying. They also discussed how effective they believed those policies and practices to be. Common themes among the discussions included the following:

- Lack of Effective Teacher Response
- Fear of Getting in Trouble
- Confusion about Formal Anti-Bullying Policies

*Lack of effective teacher response.* Focus group participants described a variety of ways in which teachers respond to reports of bullying. Many participants reported that teachers responded by talking to students, indicating by their words and tone of voice that bullying was unacceptable. In the words of one male participant, “One thing happened with cyber bullying this year …one of our teachers was just like ‘Yeah, it’s really getting me mad that we have kids who are doing this stuff I told them not to.’” A female participant agreed,

I think what would happen is they would talk to you of course. Then they might talk to other teachers before they confront the bully. They might ask other teachers what they would do before they would actually do something and then I’m not sure if they would go right to administration as it’s not their number one priority.

Another female reiterated, “I think they would give you advice and then watch to see what happens to see if it gets better and how you deal with it.” The students identified a sense that teachers truly want to help but there seemed to be little faith that these responses would be truly effective. “They definitely won’t leave it alone. They’ll say something. They will respond but not in the way you want them to.” Further agreement was noted by one additional participant, “I
think we expect them to help but they don’t exactly know what to do.” The most likely response from the teacher that participants reported, however, was to bring the issue to the attention of school administration. They reported that this was an undesirable response. Students attributed the lack of effective response by the teachers to several factors, i.e., not having enough time, not knowing the students well enough, overreacting to the situation, or even not liking the target enough to want to help him or her. The perception they reported was that teachers should respond but rarely did they respond in a way that was beneficial to the target. Table 12 shows quotes that illustrate the reasons why students reported that teachers did not effectively respond to bullying.
Table 12

Quotes about how teachers respond to bullying

- They might think the teachers don’t tolerate it but if nothing happened and they’re still being bullied, they might feel like no one’s doing anything, that it’s all for show.

- I honestly think they don’t have enough time to go through this whole thing so that’s why they send it to administration.

- If it gets worse then they might step in and then go to administration.

- I think most teachers would just go straight to administration rather than waiting it out.

- Some teachers handle it better if they have been teaching a few year. If you’re a really new teacher then you may not know what to do.

- The older the teacher gets, they sort of lose that sense of knowing how to deal with issues like this. But the younger teacher can sort of understand what kids are going through and so they might have better skills.

- They would go straight to administration.

- They would go straight to the bully and then they would get you embarrassed.

- I think it would be better if the teacher you told would go and confront the kid rather than telling administration so not everyone would know about it.

- You have more trouble than just bullying when administration gets into the situation…at that point you feel it would be better if you did nothing at all than make it worse by doing that.

- They would drag you and the bully to talk to each other and you’re thinking, ‘Oh my God. That doesn’t need to happen.’

- If the teacher does not like that kid specifically when that happens then the teacher is probably not going to help.

Fear of getting in trouble. Over and over again, students stated that teachers would ultimately refer the matter to administration, and, student after student, in all three focus groups, expressed that this would be the worst possible outcome for the target. In the words of one student, “You don’t want the school involved. You don’t want to get into trouble.” It was
unclear what the student feared more, retaliation, being known as a snitch, or being implicated in having done something to bring the bullying on to him-or herself. Table 13 shows quotes demonstrating students’ fear of getting in trouble, which encompass all of the aforementioned potential negative outcomes.

Table 13

Quotes that question the effectiveness of teacher responses.

- Whether they are helpful or not depends on their relationship with students.
- Is it a tattling situation? Will people get mad at me or like make fun of me for telling an adult?
- You think, should I tell a teacher? Should I not tell? Should I keep it to myself?
- Lots of times when you’re a kid, you go up to a teacher and tell them something and they might be like, ‘Oh don’t tattle. It’s not good to tattle.’ So, as older kids, you don’t know what to do.
- They always tell you that if anyone is bullying you, tell us right away. We’ll get them in trouble. But if you[teachers] tell them [students] that at the start of the year, then you are sort of lowering your chances because kids have that feeling that they don’t want to be a snitch…so you aren’t really sure if you want to go tell a teacher.
- Adults will get people in trouble.
- The teacher might do stuff that doesn’t help. Like I forgot when this was but it was a while ago I was being bullied but I told the teacher…and the teacher put me next to that person, like made me sit next to that person trying to make us resolve it and it didn’t help, didn’t help at all.

Confusion about the Anti-Bullying Policy. Students were asked a series of questions to uncover exactly how much they know and understand about the district’s formal anti-bullying policy (Appendix G). Much of what they reported knowing about the policy was fairly accurate demonstrating that they have a high level of awareness that the policy is in place to help targets of bullying. One female participant stated, “If you are being bullied, you can go to almost any
adult and they will look into it and help you.” Another element of the policy that students identified was the idea that it is in place so that students know what bullying is, so they can understand they are not supposed to treat other kids in that way. “If you bully, you’ll automatically get some kind of punishment.” A female participate elaborated, “I remember signing something saying that you are not going to bully someone and if you do you’ll get in serious trouble.” A male participant noted, “We pretty much had to read it over and make sure we agreed to the rules of not being bullied.” In addition, they accurately identified that it covered all types of bullying and that there were severe consequences for bullying others.

Clearly, students’ demonstrated understanding of anti-bullying policies and procedures are in line with their stated reasons above, for not wanting to tell a teacher. In other words, they were aware that the policy required teachers to refer the matter to school administration.

Another student accurately noted some of the more specific elements of the policy, demonstrating a clear sense of the variety of ways bullying could be reported, i.e., anonymously through a school website, by notifying a staff member of administrator, by making a online report, or by going to the police. Three students however, inaccurately stated that the school had a hotline. This misconception may have some connection to the assent form that students had in front of them during the focus group discussions. The assent form had several references to counseling services and a bullying hotline for students to access in the event that the focus groups discussion triggered any kind of distress for participants. These references on the assent form may have caused this confusion.

Students also reported a variety of actions required by the school staff when bullying was reported. This is indicated by their responses that came more in the form of questions than answers. Some individual responses included, “Tell Administration? Police? Guidance
Counselors?” One very articulate male noted, “The teachers have to report that stuff. I think they are contractually obligated to tell someone. If something escalates and the administration finds out that they knew something about it and didn’t stop it, it could turn out really bad and they could lose their job.” Most responses indicated that the students were confident that staff had to notify administration or some sort of authority.

There was less confidence in responses when students were asked to whom they believed school administrators are required to report incidents of bullying. Several students prefaced their responses with “Maybe” in many cases. “Maybe [the superintendent]?” and “Maybe the parents?” Another student noted, “I think they have to go to [the school resource officer].” Lastly, “Maybe the teachers [so] they’d know to be on the lookout for the person bullying someone.” Only one participant responded correctly that the parents of the both the target and aggressor were required to be notified of an incident demonstrating that while they are aware of the teacher’s requirement to notify administration, they seem to lack information on some of the policy’s specifics about notification and communication on the part of school administration.

When asked if they were aware of the rights of the bully, one student seemed confused by this question, asking “What do you mean, rights?” almost in disbelief that a bully should be afforded any. When the question was rephrased, “What is the bully entitled to?” students still seemed unclear. “Innocent until proven guilty?” was the response from two students. Two other students asked similar questions, “Are warnings given or are they taken down without warning? Maybe they are given a warning but they are being watched?” One student felt that the bully should not have to respond, “They can be quiet about it. They don’t have to say anything bout what is going on.” Additionally, one student said the bully could take the fifth amendment and another noted that they could get a lawyer. Another student noted, “a fair inquiry to see if
something actually did happen.” When asked whether the bully had a right to know that a report
had been made, one student responded,

    I think so…the not knowing that they are bullying. They might think they are
    picking on someone as a joke. You might not know you are bullying so the
    person should have a right to know that they are being accused of bullying so they
    can be given a chance to back off.

    Indeed, there was no consensus among any of the focus groups that the anti-bullying
policy had provisions for protecting the rights of the accused aggressor.

    Participants were also asked if they had any sense of the rights of the victim or target.
The responses to this question ran the gamut from remaining anonymous to formally pressing
charges. One male participant thought about this from an empathetic point of view.

    Know what’s going to happen, what will happen to you, what will be done to help
    you. Like find out what in the future will happen to the other person, what
    punishment they will get and what will they do to make sure it doesn’t happen a
    second time. That’s what I would want to know.

Other participants reported the victim was entitled to counseling, could file a lawsuit, or even get
some kind of compensation. A final word from one participant seemed to capture the essence of
what one should expect from the school when one reported being victimized, and that is,

    “Safety.”

**Research Question 4: What are student’s perceptions about the effectiveness of adults in
preventing bullying or intervening after it has occurred?**
This research question was designed to uncover whether students perceive that adults can help them stop bullying, and if so what action adults should take to help improve school climate in terms of school connectedness, relationships between students and teachers, and overall feelings of safety. Table 14 shows the focus group questions that guided the analysis of the data for this research question. There were no survey items that corresponded to this research question.

Table 14

Research Question 4: What are students’ perceptions about the effectiveness of adults in preventing bullying or intervening after it has occurred?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Focus Group Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do teachers understand what is a helpful response and what is not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you think teachers need to know about bullying?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you think teachers need to know about how to respond to someone who reports that they are being bullied?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you think a teacher or adult should do when a student reports being bullied? How is this more helpful than the current practice?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Results. There were no specific survey questions related to this research question. Much of what students’ responses to survey questions revealed in regard to what adults should know or do about bullying lay in the responses to the questions related to a student’s willingness to seek help. These findings indicate that if a student perceives that an adult does not tolerate bullying or that an adult will try to help, the student is more likely to seek help from that adult. However, the survey did not provide any insight into what students believe adults should know about bullying as it occurs in the school nor did the results indicate what
specific actions students perceive to be most helpful. This level of detail was discussed in the focus groups.

Focus Group Results. After discussing the survey results and describing what they know about the district anti-bullying policy and efforts they perceive adults are making to mitigate problems associated with bullying, the focus group discussion showed that, for the most part, students remain doubtful that teachers and adults really have a handle on the issue of bullying and the realities that students face when interacting with peers. Related to the discussion about what adults or teachers should know or do about bullying, the following themes emerged from the focus group:

- Adult Action will not Affect Bullying
- Realities of Peer Culture: What adults Don’t Get
- Autonomy: Taking Control of the Bullying Issue

Adult action will not affect bullying. A great deal of discussion in the focus group revolved around what adults did not know about teens and bullying. Several comments had to do with students playing lip service to adults but then reverting back to bullying behavior once the adults were out of sight or earshot. In one participant’s words, “Some people are afraid to get in trouble so when adults are there, they will treat them nice. Once the adult leaves then they’re just going to bully again.” This was referenced over and over again, that is, the idea that students would comply with the rules and expectations of adults and teachers while they were present, “…but once the adult leaves then they (kids) don’t care.” This leads to the conclusion that students seemingly feel safer from bullies when adults were present but one student expressed doubt whether just the presence of adults was enough. “If they [adults] really want to that bad
they can make it stop. But some adults, they don’t really care about it.” To this student, it was not about presence, it was about perseverance and caring.

Not only was presence and caring needed to convince students that adults would help, but some students reported that bullying was human nature and adults could not change that fact. One female participant noted, “No matter how much the teacher can say don’t bully anyone, like sometimes there’s just people who ignore it and you really can’t stop that no matter how much you tell them.” A fellow participant agreed,

I think that’s because it is in our nature to judge people and that judgment it is taken to heart in different ways by different people so something to one person might be bullying, to another person it might even be a compliment. It really varies….and there’s no way to stop it because we judge people and that’s what we do.

The lack of faith these students’ indicated, suggested that insofar as adults stopping bullying goes, as they see it, it is not a matter of adults not caring or not trying hard enough. Rather, according to these students, it is simply a fact of life that some people bully and the hard work of teachers and adults cannot change that. Table 15 shows quotes that illustrate the participants sharing around this theme.
Table 15

Quotes about adults’ inability to stop bullying

- Kids are going to do what they want to do. No one can put a stop to that.
- There’s a difference between helping and trying to help.
- You can try whatever you want but it might not always do something [to help.]
- Maybe our definition of helping is different from other people’s [definition.]
- I really think there isn’t anything [adults can do], ‘cuz it’s between us and unless we figure out how to solve it, it will always happen.
- If you think about it, to help you want the bullying to stop…even if it stops for like a month it could start up again so they might think for that one month the teacher helped but if it started up again, it really didn’t help.
- They’ll say something. They will respond but not in a way you want them to. We expect them to help but they don’t exactly know what to do.
- They might think the teachers don’t tolerate it [bullying] but if nothing happened and they’re still being bullied they might feel like no one is doing anything and it’s all for show

Realities of Peer Culture: What adults don’t get. Focus group participants reported believing that adults and teachers really do not understand peer culture and norms. In their eyes, knowing more about their lives and culture would assist adults in being more helpful in combating bullying. They reported that adults should know more about the following:

- Locations where bullying is happening
- Actions that would be more helpful in specific locations
- Willingness to listen to teens
- Taking interest in teens’ lives
- The importance of relationships to teens.
- Teens appreciation that there are no simple answers to the problem of bullying
Students expressed the idea that knowing that adults and teachers understood these things would go a long way towards helping kids come to terms with difficult issues like bullying. Each of these themes are explored in more detail below.

First, students reported wanting teachers to know that they appreciated their presence and paying attention to the interactions of students. One student cautioned, “I think that most of the time [bullying] happens between classes or in classes…teachers don’t see what’s happening in the hallways…they think we are just getting our books.” Another student agreed, “Most teachers just stay in their classrooms and wait for the next class to come in. They don’t realize how much can happen in a minute or two.” These comments really speak to a student’s need to feel that the teacher is paying attention to everything that is going on in the class and out in the halls. Students reported wanting to feel safe and that this reassurance came from knowing that teachers were aware of what was going on inside and outside the classroom.

Along with presence and awareness, students reported that relationship building was also an important factor that adults did not seem to truly understand. In other words, students’ responses indicated they believe that building relationships requires talking and listening and taking a keen interest in students’ lives. One student expressed this idea by saying, “I think every teacher should sit in on a group like this and understand what kids think about what is helpful.” Another said, “Well, no matter what it is, you talk about it, you feel better about it. Like if somebody else knows, you feel better about it even if nothing is going to be done, you still have to tell someone.” Students reported being keenly aware of whether they perceived a teacher to “like” them or not. This could help or hinder teachers’ ability to build the kinds of relationships that students reported made a difference in their ability to deal with tough peer issues. One student notes, “If they know you better they know how to help.” Another student
agreed, “Whether they are helpful or not depends on their relationship with students. A teacher that doesn’t exactly like students, they might not do as much.” One boy provided even more clarification, “If a teacher does not like that kid specifically when it happens then the teacher probably cannot help.” Building these relationships, taking the time to talk to and listen to kids, and demonstrating a caring, approachable role, were all factors that students reported adults should understand were important when helping students deal with issues such as bullying.

Lastly, students reported that adults should know that teens understand there are no easy answers to the problem of bullying, but that being validated is critical. Likewise, they reported that targets needed to know that bullying was not their fault. “They should tell the target it is not their fault they are being bullied because sometimes they can overreact and get the target in trouble so they should start by making it clear that it is not their fault.” Also, students discussed the idea that adults should avoid jumping to conclusions and making assumptions. Several students made comments about the need for teachers to hear the whole story before making any decisions. “They should approach [it] on level ground, not immediately make assumptions but hear both sides of the story before making a judgment.” Students acknowledged that there were no easy answers and that it was hard for adults to fully comprehend their peer culture. “They don’t realize what we are going through. Us being a teenager isn’t that easy. Being a kid isn’t easy and on top of that being bullied is even harder. They don’t understand the situation we are in.” By building strong relationships and creating an environment of caring and respect adults could contribute to making the complexities of peer culture and bullying more bearable for kids.

**Autonomy: Taking control of the bullying issue.** A final theme that emerged from the focus groups dealt with actions adults should take not only to prevent bullying from happening and but also to intervene when it does. This was a difficult part of the conversation not only
because students seemed to struggle with identifying specific actions but they were also quite critical of actions that adults had taken in the past that they perceived were misguided or even made matters worse. Students debated the effectiveness of the school’s attempt to raise awareness about tolerance and bullying through a specific multi-faceted program that had been initiated that school year. They spoke about teachers needing to respond in a way that matched the severity of the bullying problem. Lastly, they emphasized that targets should have a say in how a bullying problem is handled. These common themes, all related to an adolescent’s need for autonomy are explored further in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Much of this part of the discussion was closely related to the previous theme, what adults do not know about youth culture. Students seemed to express the feeling that if adults really understood teens, then they would respond to bullying issues in a way that is more acceptable to them, which would allow teens to exercise more autonomy over the situation. “I think they need to pay more attention and see actually what’s going on for a day and what people are going through and like how to deal with it.” Another student mentioned the difference in their relationship with teachers as opposed to their relationships with peers as factors that limit an adult’s capacity to fully relate to students. “They are not really the same power level as the kids so they really can’t talk to us in the same way and a kid won’t want to talk [to them] the same way they do with friends.” A participant suggested, “Walk a mile in our shoes. Teach them [teachers] how to figure out how kids feel and help us cope.” Another agreed with this approach. “They should approach us on a level ground, not immediately make assumptions.” This idea of meeting kids where they are rather than taking an authoritative approach was reiterated by many of the focus group participants.
Another course of action to combat bullying that the focus group participants discussed was a recent school initiative designed to raise awareness of bullying and intolerance. The program was multi-faceted in that it included gender specific student assemblies, documentary films, parent forums, small group discussion groups, visual art workshops, displays of student work, and student presentations all related to bullying, tolerance and kindness. Students seemed to think this approach was more powerful because much of it was facilitated by the students themselves, thereby giving them a sense of control.

The way they did the girl movie thing I think it's really good when there are a lot of kids who are involved in trying to stop bullying rather than teachers because they'll listen to the kids more than they listen to someone who's just trying to tell them what to do.

Students made many references to this program as sending a powerful peer message, yet the effects of which were short-lived. “Telling kids not to bully isn’t going to stop them. You need to do something about it. The …movie did something for about a week, then everyone started bullying again.” Another student agreed, “Five minutes after we walked out of the auditorium they were hugging and kissing everyone and then the next day it was back to normal.” And yet another student expressed skepticism, “The thing is that all these campaigns of things that we've been doing they haven't lasted. They've had maybe a lasting effect of about three days maximum. None of them have actually worked for a long time period.” Although the element of student-centeredness of this approach was reported to be a step in the right direction, students seemed doubtful that the approach was truly effective.

Despite what students perceived as temporary effects of the program, students also reported that teachers needed to do more to help students take control of a bullying situation.
“They need to take classes about it…classes about how to deal with the child in need of help without making it worse.” Another student added, “What it’s like to be a child in 2012.” This idea of empathy, “getting it,” really knowing and understanding the real world of kids resurfaced again and again.

Lastly, while discussing what teachers should do to prevent or intervene in bullying, students talked about teachers needing to respond in a way that matched the severity of the bullying problem. To do this, they reported, adults needed to consult the target. “The person talking to the target should get both sides of the story and maybe not make assumptions right from there but try to go to a higher authority with both sides of the story to see what happens.” This fear that an adult would make some sort of an impulsive move to worsen the situation came up in the discussion time and again. To avoid this possibility, students suggested that teachers ask questions about the severity of the problem. “I think they should ask the victim what would be helpful in this situation because if it is just name-calling it would be easier for the student to stand up for himself but if it is abusive bullying then you might need to get the police involved.” Another student agreed, “They [should] ask how bad it is because maybe they don’t want severe consequences if it’s not that bad.” For many participants, it seemed that there were fuzzy lines of distinction between what was just a bad situation and what was truly serious, and that somehow the adult would need to get a handle on this if he or she was to effectively help the student. Like other suggestions, this recommendation put the target in the center of the problem-solving indicating that students wanted to retain some semblance of control over the situation in order to preserve their social status among their peers.

The theme of autonomy was supported by the participant’s emphasis that targets should have a say in how a bullying problem is handled. This again was related to their perceptions that
adults are incapable of really understanding the complexities of bullying behavior and the impact it has on kids. The quotes in table 16 illustrate this theme.

Table 16

*Quotes related to the theme of autonomy.*

- I would want them to do something but I would want them to ask me first.
- I would want them to comfort me and tell me it would be ok. Just saying that would make me feel better.
- I would want them to act like a parent and actually do something about it instead of just saying you would tell someone.
- I’d love them to keep everything private.
- I think it would be helpful for the teachers to say, ‘You know what? Come to us if you have a bullying problem and you can tell us what you want us to do, like if you want us to make this a big deal we will tell administration…whatever you feel comfortable with.
- They should give the person a warning. Bring them aside away from everyone and say ‘Yeah, I’ve heard you’ve been bullying some people. Could you please stop because if you don’t we’re going to take it much more seriously’ instead of going ‘Bam!’ right into it.
- Listen to what the person who gets bullied wants. Listen to what they have to say and how they feel about it without immediately assuming they’re pissed or they’re wicked sad and then get the other person in trouble of something.
- I definitely think the person who is the victim should get to tell the adult, ‘You know what? I don’t want you to tell anyone’ and I think they should have to listen to that side.
- I think they should actually think about what is going on before they react because sometimes they overreact. You should think about it more and realize that it might not be as bad as we originally thought.
- They should interview the victim and ask them who’s doing what and why and what they’re doing.
- I think they should know exactly what happened just so they know what to do. They should ask all the people that were involved.
The fear of the unexpected consequences that might impact their peer relationships or their place in the social world, seemed to require that teens have a certain amount of control over the outcome of telling adults about a bullying situation. It is almost as if, unless the student can predict what will happen as a result of adult’s action, they would rather suffer the consequences of the bullying instead. This would at least protect their image among their peers, even if it did not stop the abusive behavior towards them.

Overall, the net result of the focus group discussion for this research question showed that students do not always trust adults to make the best decisions for a target. Respecting peer culture and norms, maintaining social stature within the peer group, and having control over oneself and the outcome of bullying situations seemed to take precedence over fears of bullying and safety. The focus groups indicated that adults were not knowledgeable about the strength of these forces and the significant role they played in a student’s life, therefore adults and teachers could not be trusted to respond to claims of bullying in a way that would preserve a student’s social standing among his or her peers.

Chapter V. Discussion

This section provides a summary of the problem of practice and methodology, a review of the findings, examination of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and review of the literature and discussion of limitations of this study. Finally, it will define the significance of the study in the field and suggest next steps for further study.

Summary of Problem

The problem of bullying in schools is an issue of national importance. Research points to an abundance of negative impacts on students involved in bullying including school avoidance, fear of harassment, depression, propensity towards future criminal activity, substance abuse, and
poor psychosocial adjustment (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Fox & Boulton, 2005; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1978, 1993). The individual effects of bullying contribute to school-level problems such as truancy, violence, reduced time on learning, and poor academic performance (Johnson, 2009; Nansel et al., 2001; Parker-Roerden et al., 2007). These individual and school-level effects require the attention of teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents who often spend an extensive amount of time and effort to address and resolve bullying incidents between students (Marshall et al., 2009; Newgent et al., 2009).

In Massachusetts, two high profile bullying incidents, both resulting in the death of a school-aged child, brought the issue to the forefront of national educational and political media attention (Miller, C. D., 2010; "Mother says bullies drove her son to suicide," 2009). In response to these and other tragedies associated with school bullying, Massachusetts has become one of the forty-nine states that has enacted anti-bullying legislation (StopBullying.Gov, 2012). The Massachusetts law requires school districts to develop a policy to address bullying incidents, create an intervention process, and train all faculty, staff, and students in bullying prevention ("An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools 2010," 2010). The content of the state law and its requirements for school districts points to the need to reduce bullying in schools, thereby reducing its negative impacts.

The central Massachusetts school district investigated for this research developed its anti-bullying policy using an inclusive process that enabled parents, students, teachers, administrators and community members to participate in developing the policy. In partnership with community agencies, the district held public forums to educate the public about the problem of bullying and then created a committee including representatives from each of the stakeholder groups to
develop a draft policy that would meet the state’s requirements. This school district fulfilled the state-mandated requirement with the school committee approving the policy in December 2010.

With the policy in place for two years, this research sought to uncover not only student perspectives about bullying in one of this district’s middle schools but also, to determine what these perceptions revealed about the effectiveness of the district’s anti-bullying policy. The four research questions that drove this study are as follows:

1. What are students’ perceptions about the nature and extent of bullying that occurs in the school?
2. What are students’ perceptions about the policies and practices that are in place to reduce bullying in the school?
3. What are students’ perceptions of the effects that formal policies and practices have on bullying in school?
4. What are students’ perceptions about the effectiveness of adults in preventing bullying or intervening after it has occurred?

**Review of Methodology**

This descriptive study employed a mixed methods design. The research questions required collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, which was completed over a three-month period, from April to June 2012. Data was collected in two phases. Phase one data collection consisted of an online survey of grade eight students from ABC Middle School. Students responded to approximately fifty-three question on the well-established School Climate Bullying Survey (Cornell, 2011) (Appendix A.) This survey provided descriptive student-reported data on the nature and extent of bullying in the school. The survey narrative specifically defined bullying in general and four specific types of bullying behaviors: physical,
verbal, social, and cyber-bullying. With an established definition of bullying behaviors, questions asked students how frequently they had been bullied or had bullied others over a period of one month and asked about their perception of the overall prevalence of bullying behaviors in their school. Also, the survey asked questions about students’ willingness to seek help in bullying situations, specifically whether or not they sought help, and from whom. Initial review of the survey results in the form of frequency statistics on each question provided baseline data from which focus group questions emerged for the second phase of the data collection. Further statistical analysis of the survey data generated the quantitative portion of this study. Fisher exact tests were run to identify any significant associations among the types of bullying experienced by gender. Chi-square tests were run to determine the extent to which there were any significant associations between the type of bullying experienced and the person to whom students reported.

Individual survey items were also combined to form well-established scales, known as the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale and the Willingness to Seek Help Scale (Cornell, 2011) (Appendix A.) Independent samples t-tests were run to compare mean scores on a both scales between a variety of pairings. These included the following:

- Male versus female
- Students who reported they had been bullied or bullied others versus those who did not
- Students who reported they told someone they had been bullied versus those who did not tell.
- Students who reported they perceived teachers were tolerant of bullies versus those who perceived teachers were intolerant of bullies.
The second phase of data collection included focus group discussions, which provided an opportunity to further explore the survey results. After an initial review of the survey data, I developed focus group questions that would elicit more detailed information regarding student perceptions of bullying, to whom they might report and why, and their perspectives regarding helpful adult responses. These focus group questions helped to fill the gaps often left with closed-ended survey questions that typically ask “what” and “how many,” enabling the researcher to more clearly connect more nuanced findings to the research questions.

To that end, three focus groups of eleven to thirteen participants were held. Focus group data was recorded and later transcribed; it was analyzed employing a technique that included an iterative processes of reading, annotating, memo-writing, and reviewing transcripts for emerging themes and patterns. Finally, both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed together in an effort to identify connections to each research question. The findings were then grouped and presented by research question, each of which was followed by a presentation of the corresponding quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

Summary of Findings

Research question 1 summary of findings. Survey results indicate the extent to which students at ABC Middle School experience bullying. About 33 percent of students reported having been bullied at least once in the past month, and eight percent of those same students also reported that they had been bullied at least once in the past week. About 20 percent of students reported having bullied others at least once in the past month with about three percent of those same students reporting that they had bullied others at least once in the past week. Further analyses of these findings found no significant differences between boys and girls in the amount of bullying experienced; however, those who reported having bullied others were more likely to
have been bullied than those who reported never having bullied others. In terms of prevalence of various types of bullying on which students reported, incidences of verbal bullying were highest, followed by social bullying, then cyber bullying, leaving physical bullying as the least prevalent.

In the area of “telling” behaviors, that is whom students told they had been bullied and why, relatively few students (12 percent) responded that they had told anyone (n=204). When asked more specifically about whom they may have told, the number of positive responses increased with fifteen percent (n=196) reporting they had told a friend, nine percent (n=196) reporting they had told a parent, and four percent (n=196) reporting they had told a teacher. It is uncertain whether this inconsistency was a result of misunderstanding of the questions, but it seems likely that when prompted with more specific questions, respondents were able to answer with a more specific response. Within these responses, it was clear that girls were more likely to tell a friend than were boys but that both girls and boys were equally reluctant to tell a parent or teacher that they had been bullied.

When looking at telling behaviors by type of bullying, a few significant associations were found. Students who experienced physical bullying reported they were least likely to tell someone else about their experience while students who reported that they had been socially bullied were more likely to tell another about it. In all types of bullying however, students reported being less likely to tell a teacher than tell a friend or a parent. This finding was explored further in the focus groups and is summarized further later in this section.

Students were also surveyed about the locations in which bullying was likely to occur. Student reports indicated that the most common location of bullying was the school hallway followed by the cafeteria. Further analyses showed verbal and social bullying were highly and
significantly associated with the classroom while cyberbullying was significantly associated with “on the way to school.” While this is seemingly counterintuitive, one way this could occur is through texting while students are riding the bus to school. The “bus” however was not among the options indicated in the list of locations where bullying takes place.

Results from analyses that examined prevalence of teasing and bullying by gender demonstrated that girls scored higher than boys, indicating that they were in greater agreement that there is a prevailing atmosphere of teasing and bullying in the school. This association was not significant generally speaking. Students who reported that they had been bullied scored significantly higher on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale than those who did not report being bullied. Students who admitted bullying others did not show any significance in their scores as compared with the scores of students who reported they had not bullied others. Whether a student told anyone that they had been bullied versus those who had not told anyone did not seem to generate any significant difference in scores on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying scale nor were there any significant difference in the scores of students who reported that teachers were not tolerant of bullying versus those who reported teachers were tolerant of bullying.

Survey data alone does not paint a particularly robust picture, but analyses of focus group discussions having to do with the nature and extent of bullying served to elaborate upon survey responses for this topic. There were several themes that emerged out of the focus group data, 1) confusion about definition of bullying, 2) skepticism about the survey results, 3) students’ personal knowledge of bullying incidents as an indicator of the severity of the problem, and 4) hesitancy to formally report bullying. These will each be summarized.
Students participating in focus group discussions generally reported that they believed bullying to be far more extensive than survey results indicated. Some expressed the belief that this may be due to a pervasive rumor mill, which they felt was constantly feeding them information on things happening in school that they perceived as bullying incidents, while others indicated that the self-reporting nature of the survey lent itself to students’ answering dishonestly, thereby painting a picture suggesting less bullying in the school than actually occurs. Whatever the case, focus group participants in all three of the groups were equally surprised by what they considered to be reports of bullying that were too low.

Not entirely separate from this overall sense of disbelief in the extent to which bullying actually occurs in the school as compared to what was reported in the survey, students in each of the focus groups debated the definition of bullying. Debates involved discussion around a number of important and contentious criteria: the extent to which teasing is, in fact, bullying; and the question as to who or what determines whether a behavior is a bullying incident, the reaction of the target, the intent of the aggressor, the perception among bystanders, or even the number of people who know about the incident. Students’ disagreement was striking within each of the three focus groups despite a clear, written definition of bullying on the survey (Appendix A).

Further, and related to participants’ skepticism regarding the extent of bullying indicated in the survey, was the importance students placed on their personal knowledge of bullying incidents that had occurred in the school. Indeed, there were many comments from participants revolving around what they reportedly knew to be true versus what the survey revealed. They repeatedly expressed the feeling that their knowledge of an incident meant that they were somehow personally involved in a bullying situation. In other words, they seemed to think, that knowing about an incident and personally drawing a conclusion about an incident suggested an
objective reality that the incident was in fact bullying. That is, if a student perceived that an incident was bullying, they did not see it as their perception but rather a fact, which speaks to their heated discussions about the definition of bullying. This tendency to create fact out of a personal perception may overinflate what students see as actual bullying situations.

Quite possibly the most important findings of this study relates to students’ thoughts about who they might tell about a bullying incident and why. Survey findings showed that only a few respondents tell others when they experience bullying. Only 15 percent reported telling a friend, nine percent reported telling a parent, and four percent reported telling a teacher (n=196). Focus group participants elaborated on these results extensively explaining that it was their close, usually trusting, relationships with peers and the need to avoid anything that could be construed as tattletaling that would account for these results. What was noteworthy here was that students did not seem to make a connection between the trust they place in their peers (as opposed to adults) with sensitive information and the rampant rumor mill that they perceive as factual. It seems that when it comes to adolescents, they expect others to keep sensitive information private yet they also seem to be compelled to share what they know with peers whom they consider trustworthy. But, of course, those peers then also feel compelled to share, and so the rumor mill inadvertently begins.

Focus group participants also discussed the survey results having to do with the extent to which they tell parents about bullying. Most participants agreed that of the three options, friend, teacher, and parent, the parent was probably their best choice because their parents love and care for them. However, they saw their parents’ responses as being somewhat unpredictable. Without really knowing the course of action mom or dad would take, telling them was not a reliable option. Participants reported fearing that their parents would embarrass them somehow
by making a “big deal” about the situation. And even worse was the possibility that the parent would go to school administration, who would then discipline the bully and “out” the target. Participants were far more likely to take their chances on reporting to a friend.

Although participants’ discussions indicated they felt parents’ responses may be unpredictable, conversely they indicated that teachers’ responses were completely predictable and therefore the least likely of the options. In other words, focus group participants predicted that telling a teacher would get someone in trouble and they equated that with being a “snitch.” There are few greater fears among middle school students than that of being labeled a snitch.

**Research question 2 and 3 summary of findings.** After analyzing the data on nature and extent of bullying in the school, I turned my attention back to the survey to examine student’s perceptions about the policies and practices that are in place to reduce bullying in the school. Respondents’ scores on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale informed this analysis. Mean scores on this scale indicated that both girls and boys are equally willing to seek help in bullying situation. Independent samples t-test comparing the mean scores of various groups showed some significant findings. It seemed logical that students who had been bullied would score higher on the Willingness to Seek Help scale, indicating more willingness to seek help, than those who had not been bullied. Yet, there were no significant differences in the mean scores for student who reported that they had told someone that they had been bullied versus those who did not tell anyone. Seemingly, telling someone about being bullied was not related to one’s willingness to seek help. In contrast to this, respondents who reported believing that teachers do not tolerate bullying scored significantly higher on the scale versus those who reported that teacher seemed to be tolerant of bullying. This means that how students perceive a
teacher’s tolerance or intolerance for bullying will impact whether or not a student will seek help from teachers when they are being bullied.

The focus group findings regarding participants’ perceptions of teacher’s policies and practices around bullying revealed three major themes: 1) lack of effective teacher response, 2) fear of getting in trouble, and 3) confusion about formal anti-bullying policies. Participants reported that teachers should respond to bullying but rarely did they respond in a way that helped the target. Students perceived that few teacher practices were effective because most of these practices resulted in the school becoming involved, leading to them being labeled a snitch. Lastly, participants reported believing that the formal anti-bullying policy required staff to notify administration whenever they learned of a bullying situation. They also reported believing that the policy was in place to help keep schools safe. However, there was little recognition that the policy was in place not only to protect the target but to help the bully as well. Given participants’ acknowledgement that they understand members of the staff are required to report to administration, paired with their reluctance to report to adults, one has to wonder just how effective this policy is.

**Research question 4 summary of findings.** Focus group findings related to the last research question addressing students’ perception about what adults should do about bullying revealed three major themes: 1) adult action will not affect bullying, 2) realities of peer culture – i.e., what adults don’t get, and 3) autonomy – i.e., taking control of the bullying issue. The focus groups’ discussions revolved around participants’ doubts that adults truly could be effective in stopping bullying.

Students generally conveyed a sense that adults really could not help prevent bullying or even intervene successfully when it did happen. According to the student focus group
participants, adults were far too disconnected from the adolescent world to appreciate the issues with which teens struggle. Focus groups participants talked about how important it was for adults to truly know them, build relationships with them, pay attention to the little things, and most of all, listen to them. Students expressed doubt that anti-bullying programs were helpful. They encouraged a less authoritative approach by adults, teachers especially, who should take time to learn more about the “world” in which their students live. They reported that adults should go so far as to ask the target what he or she would like to see happen. Participants expressed the need for more autonomy, or at least to partner with adults, in the process of dealing with bullies. This would allow them not only to retain some control in a situation that often makes an adolescent feel out-of-control, but also to preserve his or her status in the social world of peers. This need to gain independence and “handle things myself” makes sense developmentally, whereby young adolescents are at an age where they learning to become more self-sufficient.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework

Social cognitive theory. This section offers my interpretation of the findings of this study through the lens of social cognitive theory and social ecological theory. To begin, social ecological theory has roots in Albert Bandura’s (1986, 1989, 2001; 2001; 1961) social cognitive theory which advances the basic premise that behavior, cognition and environment are interacting, bidirectional forces with each one influencing the other. Social cognition tells us that learning happens as a result of these interacting influences. Bullying and victimization are learned behaviors that exist within a social context and as such influence and are influenced by many environmental and social factors. These factors include the reinforcement of the learned behaviors along with the child’s own self-efficacy or sense of their own capability to deal
effectively with the events they experience in their environment (Bandura, 1989, 2001).

Espelage and Swearer (2000; 2004a; 2001; 2004b) are best known for the application of social ecological theory to research on bullying whereby they posit that bullying is not personality based but rather is rooted in environmental influences (Espelage et al., 2000; Swearer & Doll, 2001; Swearer & Espelage, 2004)

Bullying behaviors, such as those reported by students in this study can be viewed through the lens of social cognitive theory whereby children imitate the models they observe and the feedback they receive either reinforces or inhibits their behaviors (Allen, 2010; O'Connell et al., 1999). Young adolescents constantly seek approval from their peer group. Peer approval leads to popularity and respect. This need for peer approval motivates them to behave in certain ways, i.e., imitate those behaviors that they perceive are receiving peer approval. For example, students might make a joke to get a laugh out of their friends, often because they had observed others receiving that positive response in similar situations. This imitation of models can be said of a multitude of school behaviors whether it is studying, walking in line to the cafeteria, playing at recess, and even being quiet in the library.

The tendency to imitate models was evident in focus group discussions of behaviors that students use to gain respect from other peers. They discussed the idea of joking around with friends and getting a laugh out of their peer group, sometimes at another friend’s expense, but with little consciousness that their behavior could be construed as bullying. “I mess with my friends all the time, then some kids might take it more seriously...some people take jokes too far...some people think they’re being funny....” Focus group participants articulated that students imitate the behaviors they see being reinforced among their peer group. This peer approval can often reinforce what might become negative, bullying behaviors. Illustrative of this
idea, as one male participant noted, “Everyone wants to be on top so they are going to bully people.” Popularity among one’s peers is a powerful motivational factor. When teens observe peers being positively reinforced for a behavior and then they perceive that person as having the respect of their peers, students are motivated to imitate that behavior. Sometimes the behavior is in fact negative and can be construed by others as bullying.

Another key tenet of social cognitive theory, the concept of self-efficacy, is substantiated in this study as well. Bandura (2001) theorized that self-efficacy was closely related to personal agency, i.e., the degree to which one feels able to control events that unfold in the environment, and, ultimately the degree to which one feels able to control one’s own role in that environment. In expressing why they hesitate to report bullying incidents to adults, focus group participants were essentially expressing the importance of self-efficacy. In other words, if a student does not report an incident of bullying, then they have greater control over what happens as a consequence. Once the student reports to an adult in the school however, with the knowledge that any staff member is required to take action, students may realize they can no longer control the outcome, essentially losing their sense that they are personally able to deal effectively with the events they experience in their environment. Indeed, focus group participants expressed the fear that they will appear weak and vulnerable to their peers, and perhaps worst of all, become known as a snitch. One male participant stated, “Kids would rather deal with it themselves.”

The pressure is seemingly great for teens to look as though they can handle anything that comes their way. As one female participant noted, “...you’re like a wimp. [Other kids would say], ‘You actually told your parents?’ You should just like deal with it yourself.” Bandura’s (2001) construct of self-efficacy and personal agency provides some explanation for the power of this motivational factor, especially as it relates to “telling” behaviors.
Social cognitive theory including the concepts of self-efficacy and agency support the notion that students who exhibit bullying behaviors or refuse to report being bullied do so even in the face of certain adult interventions. This relates directly to the environmental influences that could be interpreted as motivational factors for adolescent behaviors. Findings of the well-known prison experiment conducted by Haney, Banks and Zimbardo (1973) suggest that society and environment are extremely powerful forces in shaping the roles that individuals take on in any given situation, even one in which the participant is determined not to be influenced. Just as the “prisoners” and “guards” promptly took on the prisoner/guard roles in the well-known experiment, in the current study, one participant’s comment suggests that in school there is no avoiding the tendency to bully or be bullied. “The thing is, that all these campaigns and things that we’ve been doing, they haven’t lasted...None of them have actually worked for a long time. And I think that’s because it is in our nature to judge people and that judgment is taken to heart. There is no way to stop it because we judge people and that’s what we do.” Another participant agreed, “Everyone wants to be the alpha dog. Everyone wants to be the biggest, baddest, toughest person. They want to have power over everyone else.” Just as the volunteers for the prison experiment fell quickly into their guard/prisoner roles, these students seemingly concurred that when it came to bullying in school, the powerful environmental influences that determined the roles of target, bully, and bystander were nearly unavoidable.

In the same way, participants in my study easily identified bullying situations they had witnessed and noted how difficult it was to remain uninvolved. Participants explained that as soon as someone says something about witnessing a bullying situation, that comment just made matters worse, especially if the witness chooses to tell a teacher. “No one wants to add themselves to the conflict [but it is sometimes unavoidable] if you tell someone, then the other
person might think, ‘Well, you’re in it now too ‘cuz you told on me.’ and so now you’re going to get bullied too.” The simulated prison experiment provides some explanation that even when applied to a school situation, powerful social forces such as the need for power, the need to be part of a group, the desire to help a peer, and the tendency of individuals to judge others, all exert influence over how all the individuals within that school environment perceive their roles. As in the prison experiment, the environmental influences in the school play a key role in determining the social roles students will assume.

Like the simulated prison experiment above, the findings of Milgram’s (1963, 1965a, 1965b) well-known obedience studies are based in social cognitive theory and are substantiated by the findings in this research. In these experiments, Milgram (1963, 1965a, 1965b) created conditions under which a researcher instructed a participant to give electrical shocks to another individual. Unbeknownst to the participant, the shocks were not real, and the person supposedly being shocked was an accomplice of the researcher. Iterations of this experiment included a bystander who would act to encourage or discourage carrying out the directive of the researcher. Milgram (1963, 1965a, 1965b) found that participants were highly likely to give the shocks at the instruction of the researcher without questioning the command and were even more likely to go along with the command when a bystander was encouraging them to do so. He concluded that roles of an authority figure or high-status figure, as well as the actions of bystanders exert a powerful influence on the behavior of individuals.

Similar to the obedience studies, participants in my study noted how the role of a peer with significant social status and/or the actions of bystanders could influence their own behavior or the behavior of others. In their words, “It’s kind of a lose/lose. You want to help but you don’t want to be that person to ruin it and get into it….No one wants to add themselves to the
conflict.” This is a powerful indicator that bystanders would rather stay silent than get involved. For many, in the absence of any disagreement, one assumes agreement. Seemingly, even with the acknowledgement that the victim of bullying really needs help, a bystander might be reluctant to assist because of the strong social forces, such as peer disapproval that dictate otherwise. This relates back to the forces that motivate student behavior such as peer approval, peer respect and popularity.

Participants also noted that when teachers are not paying attention, more bullying happens. “Most teachers stay in their classroom and wait for the next class to come in. They don’t realize how much can happen in a minute or two.” This inability or unwillingness of teachers to closely monitor students in the place where most bullying occurs can be interpreted as tacit approval for the bullying behaviors that occur when hallways are left unsupervised. Students seemed to be expressing that they assume a behavior is acceptable until they are told it is not. If teachers are not actively discouraging bullying, then bullying can thrive. If teachers, who are the authority figures, akin to the researcher in the obedience experiments, give tacit consent, this will unwittingly encourage a behavior that is otherwise unacceptable. What this means for the current study, is that a teacher’s or bystander’s response to a bullying behavior within the environment in which it exists will influence whether or not that bullying behavior persists.

**Social ecological theory.** In addition to social cognitive theory, this research is supported by social ecological theory (2000; 2004a; 2001; 2004b). Espelage and Swearer’s (2000) research on social ecological theory as it applies to bullying posits that there are environmental factors that contribute to bullying and may, in fact, sustain bullying behaviors. Two such environmental
factors, time spent without adult supervision and negative peer influences, both identified as being important influences are especially relevant to this study.

Espelage and Swearer (2000) found that students who lacked adult supervision were more likely to engage in bullying behaviors than their adult-supervised counterparts as were those who belonged to peer groups that were involved in negative behaviors. In particular, as has been noted previously, focus group participants specifically remarked that bullying thrives when adults are not paying attention in the hallways, even in small group work within the classroom with the teacher out of earshot. According to survey data, respondents reported the two most common locations for bullying to take place as the hallway and the cafeteria, both locations with minimal amounts of adult supervision. Negative peer influences, especially those that encourage bullying behaviors and those that discourage reporting of dangerous situations to adults can exacerbate bullying. Focus group participants discussed the powerful norm against snitching that exists among peers. Although not as obvious as negative peer influences that might outwardly encourage illegal behavior, this is nonetheless a negative peer influence in that students are being influenced to ignore a potentially dangerous situation. One participant noted that one would get into “more trouble than just bullying when administration gets into the situation.” This norm is seemingly reinforced even when a victim is clearly in need of adult intervention. “Adults will get people in trouble. It’s an overreaction. They don’t understand.” These ecological factors, the level of adult supervision and the degree of negative peer influence, as they exist in the school and have been specifically noted by study participants, both influence the nature and extent of bullying.

Along with lack of adult supervision and negative peer influences, Philip Rodkin (2004; 2011) further defines peer ecology as the most significant influence on a child’s behavior
because this is the most immediate context within which the child interacts. The findings of this study provide evidence of Rodkin’s (2004; 2011) conclusions about peer ecology. Rodkin explains that the peer group has the most significant influences upon a child because it is this group that defines the child within the school environment. It is also within this group that teens exert their power and influence in order to gain the peer approval and acceptance. Whether this is by actively seeking out approval, i.e., making jokes, talking about personal issues, or gossiping about others, or by avoiding undesirable behaviors, such as snitching, participants in the focus groups admitted that their peers were their most important allies, despite their acknowledgement that their parents are those whom they trust the most. It is with the reinforcement that they received through their peers that students make decisions about how to respond to other influences in their school environment. With the peer group being the most immediate context within which the student interacts during the day, this makes peers, both, important allies, in other words, those whom they look to for support and approval, and important influences, those to whom they react or respond. Although there was no discussion in the focus groups about students actively supporting bullying, the reluctance to confront bullies or get involved on behalf of a peer who is being victimized, as previously noted, is one of the factors that enables bullying to exist and allow targets to be identified within their social arena. The findings of this study provide further evidence that the peer group exerts powerful influences over a child’s behavior and helps to explain why bullying continues to exist despite adults’ efforts to prevent it.

**Summary of the Theoretical Framework in Relation to Findings.** The findings of this study confirm the main concepts of Social Ecological Theory and Social Cognitive Theory. Findings from surveys and focus groups confirm that bullying does exist within the school environment and that there are a great many factors that influence bullying and victimization.
Findings also suggest that the multitude of policies and practices that are used to combat bullying may not be all that effective without adults’ understanding of the peer context and social environment in which students exist on a daily basis. If bullying exists because it is supported by the peer context, one could argue that adults, being outside that peer context, have little influence on the nature and extent of bullying that takes place in the school. However, adults who dictate the climate of the school environment ought to be able to use this key ecological factor in the battle against bullying. With social cognitive theory and social ecological theory in mind, it seems that strong leadership in developing a school climate that discourages bullying behavior among peers and supports students to actively defend victims would take advantage of the forces of authority figure, environment, and peers, that exert such a strong influence on a young adolescent’s behavior within the school context. Given the extent to which the both theories assert these factors influence and are influenced by each other, such an approach may meet with success.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature**

The following section will provide an analysis of the findings from this study within the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. As a reminder to the reader, Table 17 lists the areas of literature presented in Chapter Two, along with numerous subthemes. In this section, findings from this study will be presented within the context of the three main themes.
The Nature and Extent of Bullying. The literature review presented several iterations of definitions of bullying. For the purposes of survey validity, the researchers included a definition of bullying along with definitions of each type of bullying. Figure 7 includes each of these definitions.
The general definition of bullying used in the survey lacks some of the distinctions, such as repetition and provocation, that are identified by some of the seminal bullying researchers such as Olweus (1978, 1993) and Farrington (1993). But repetition is included in the subsequent survey definitions of the various types of bullying. Although the concept of “lack of provocation” is not specifically included, the element of “bullying being purposeful” is included in the definitions of the specific types of bullying.

This importance of the ways in which bullying is defined in this study is noteworthy. As noted previously, focus group participants discussed at great length, and with a considerable amount of disagreement, what they perceive as an accurate definition of bullying. This debate continued despite being reminded that the definition was printed on the survey itself. Dialogue focused on the uncertainty around verbal bullying and whether joking around really qualified as

**Definition of Bullying:** Bullying is defined as the use of one’s strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person on purpose. Bullying can be physical, verbal or social. It is **not bullying** when two students who are the same strength or power have a fight or argument.

**Physical bullying** involves repeatedly hitting, kicking, or shoving someone weaker on purpose.

**Verbal bullying** involves repeatedly teasing, putting down, or insulting someone on purpose.

**Social bullying** involves getting others repeatedly to ignore or leave someone out on purpose.

**Cyber bullying** involves using technology (cell phone, email, internet chat and posting, etc.) to tease or put down someone.

*Figure 7. Definitions of Bullying in the SCBS (Cornell, 2011)*
bullying, whether it was the intent behind the words or the way in which the words were received that qualified a comment as verbal bullying, and finally, whether one stands up for oneself that determines if bullying has happened or not. Participants had many different ideas about this.

Given the wide range of beliefs participants reported about the behaviors that constitute bullying, it seems clear that more education is needed to help students differentiate between peer conflict and bullying, since resolutions to bullying versus peer conflict require different approaches. This is a critical finding considering the peer context in which bullying occurs and given the extent to which peers play such a fundamental role in adolescent’s behavior.

Unlike the definition of bullying, characteristics of bullies, victims, and bully-victims did not enter into either the survey results or the focus group results. Participants did not seem to focus on the characteristics that would classify an individual as one or the other. This might be due to the instructions participants received at the beginning of the focus group sessions where students were asked not to use names of other students within the discussion. Another reason this might have occurred is to prevent any semblance of “snitching.” Participants repeatedly emphasized the strength of this peer norm throughout the focus group discussions. Because of these, they might have avoided labeling in order to prevent any one person from being identified.

Despite avoiding labeling others, survey respondents were asked to classify themselves as a bully or target. About 33 percent of them reported having been bullied at least once in the past month, and eight percent of those reported that they have been bullied at least once in the past week. About 20 percent reported having bullied others at least once in the past month with about three percent of those having bullied others at least once in the past week. A significant finding was that those who reported having bullied others were more likely to be bullied than those who report never having bullied another. Like Espelage and Swearer’s (2004; 2004) conceptual
framework of bullying occurring on a continuum rather than existing as two discreet constructs, the survey reveals this to be true of a portion of the respondents at this middle school. The same individual could be identified as a victim in one context and a bully in another context depending upon the social environment that exists in that moment (Swearer & Doll, 2001).

Findings on the perceived role bystanders may play at ABC Middle School were predominately from the focus group discussion. Participants spoke extensively in all three focus groups about witnessing and hearing about bullying incidents. The fear of being involved, even as a bystander, was equated to getting in trouble according to one student. “Just stay out of it. You’re not in it. Don’t get involved and that way you don’t get in trouble.” Students perceive that “being involved” increases the chances of repercussions but did not seem to indicate responsibility either for the incident or for the victim.

This reluctance on the part of the participants to become involved when another student is being bullied, echoed all of the literature on bystander behavior (Darley & Latane, 1968; Fischer et al., 2011; Latané & Nida, 1981; Obermann, 2011; Thornberg, 2010). Like many of these studies, the focus group participants tended to avoid becoming involved in any bullying incident because they did not want to be labeled as a snitch, be embarrassed by other kids or adults, become the bully’s next victim, betray a friend, or get in trouble with parents or teachers (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Gini et al., 2008; McLaughlin et al., 2005; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli et al., 2011).

The risk of getting involved that these participants identified was strikingly similar to Thornberg’s (2007) research on non-intervention in which he theorizes that there are powerful group norms at play that overrule any inclination to assist a bullying victim. Although one might argue that human decency dictates that one helps another who is perceived to be in danger, given
the research noted above, the lack of responsibility for a peer’s safety reported by participants is not altogether unexpected. It is commonly understood that young adolescents are at developmental stage where they are predominately self-centered. Therefore, they may be far more concerned about the impact on themselves rather than the safety of another. This indicates the need to help teens develop a stronger altruistic attitude, a sense of responsibility for the safety of their peers, whereby they will respond by reaching out and helping a peer in need rather than turning inward and protecting their own self-interest.

A last area of literature reviewed within this section on the nature and extent of bullying, focused on the prevalence and types of bullying in schools. There was difficulty in comparing frequency rates of bullying among studies because, as previously noted, each study employed a different definition of bullying and a different time period for reporting. For example, two of the most widely referenced measures of frequency of bullying are noted in Table 18 along with the SCBS (Cornell, 2011) used in this study.
Table 18

Comparison of Bullying Definitions, Reporting Periods, and Frequencies in Three Measures of Bullying in Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Bulling Behaviors among US Youth (Nansel et al., 2001) (referred to as the NIH study)</th>
<th>2012 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Study (YRBSS) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012)</th>
<th>School Climate Bullying Survey (SCBS)(Cornell, 2011) as analyzed in this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition</strong></td>
<td>“We say a student is being bullied when another student or group of students, say or do nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a way her or she doesn’t like. But is not bullying when two students of about the same strength quarrel of fight.” (p. 2095.)</td>
<td>“Bullying is when 1 or more students tease, threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove, or hurt another student over and over again. It is not bullying when 2 students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or tease each other in a friendly way.” (p.4.)</td>
<td>“Bullying is defined as the use of one’s strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person on purpose. Bullying can be physical, verbal or social. It is not bullying when two students who are the same strength or power have a fight or argument.” (p. 2.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporting Period</strong></td>
<td>“…during the current term” (p. 2095)</td>
<td>“Have you ever been bullied…” (p.4)</td>
<td>“…in the past month” (p.2.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
<td>Once or twice = 24.2</td>
<td>In the past twelve months = 20.1</td>
<td>Once or twice = 26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes = 8.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>About once per week = 3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weekly = 8.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Several times per week = 3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>n</strong></td>
<td>15,686</td>
<td>15,425</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the definitions of the YRBS and SCBS contain more specific behaviors and are similar whereas the NIH study definition does not specify behaviors and is considerably different from the other two studies. However, all three studies clearly emphasize what behaviors are NOT considered bullying. These varying definitions may cause a respondent to indicate they were bullied under one survey but not bullied under another survey. Also important to note is the differences in reporting periods. These range from a school term, to the past 30 days, to the past 12 months. A respondent may indicate having been bullied in the past year but not in the past month or they might indicate they were bullied in the past month but not in the past week. This also is likely to impact the frequencies reported by respondents. Given these differences, it is almost impossible to determine if there is more or less bullying happening at ABC Middle
School than across the country. What can be inferred from this however, is that studies need to be reviewed carefully for the indicators of definition and reporting period if the frequencies are to be clearly understood.

Similar to the differences demonstrated in the studies shown in Table 19, I found that participants’ perceptions of the definition of bullying was a key factor in how prevalent they perceived the problem of bullying to be. Clearly, with the above limitations in mind, it would be unreasonable to compare the findings of my study to those of the other larger scale studies. It would be necessary to duplicate this study with similar populations in similar middle schools in order to determine whether the frequencies reported in this study stand out.

School Climate. The literature on school climate helps to define the environment in which bullying exists. Students’ perceptions of the school climate are important because the way students feel about their school environment is a key indicator of achievement (Zullig et al., 2010). Research indicates that students’ perceptions about school climate are impacted by how they feel about not only the school environment but their immediate classroom environment as well (Koth et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010; Zullig et al., 2010).

The findings of this study related to school climate are indicated in several key items in the survey and in the overall Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale within the survey. As the reader may recall, the findings demonstrated that students were fairly evenly divided in their belief that there is a prevailing atmosphere of bullying in the school. Further analysis showed that respondents who reported having been bullied were more likely to be in agreement that there is a prevailing atmosphere of bullying in the school. This means that those who reported being bullied felt there was climate of bullying in the school likely making them feel less safe than they would feel if their perceptions of school climate were more positive. Similarly, the literature
points to students’ perception of the amount of bullying that takes place in the school as having a considerable impact on their perceptions of safety within the school (Boulton et al., 2009; Kartal & Bilgin, 2009).

Yet, in contrast to the responses on the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale, other survey responses did not indicate that students felt unconnected to adults or unsafe in school, both critical school climate factors. Survey responses indicated overwhelmingly, that students believed teachers would help them if they reported being bullied, and agreed that there were adults in the school to whom they could go if they had a personal problem. Additionally, most of the respondents agreed that teachers genuinely cared about their doing well. These are powerful indicators that students feel safe and cared for in this school despite their concerns about bullying. These results are not clearly consistent with the findings of Gendron, et al. (2011) conclusion that in a school climate, which is perceived to be more supportive of students, less bullying will flourish. It is not clear why half of the respondents indicated that there was a prevailing atmosphere of bullying in the school, yet most respondents, upwards of 85 percent, reported believing they felt supported by the adults in the school. These two sets of survey responses are seemingly in contradiction to one another. The answer to this may lie in the wording of the questions. It may be that in reading the objectively-phrased statement, “Bullying is a problem at school” (Cornell, 2011, p. 3) respondents were projecting bullying to be a problem for others as opposed to themselves. Whereas, in reading the subjectively-phrased statement, “If I tell a teachers that someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help” and “The teachers at this school genuinely care about me doing well” (p. 3) respondents might have answered the question in terms of their own personal experiences rather than what they might have heard from others. Since the focus groups reported what they believed to be the
underreporting of bullying, the responses to these questions might indicate that although they individually feel safe at school, they remain unconvinced that there is less bullying happening than they are personally willing to believe.

Unlike the Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Scale, scores on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale were not as evenly distributed and may indicate some areas of concern in terms of school climate. These scale items indicate the degree to which students are willing to seek help from the adults in the school. Teachers and adults in the school building influence school climate in two areas: as role models for student behavior and as responders to student behaviors (Allen, 2010; James et al., 2008; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008; Marshall et al., 2009). The mean score on the Willingness to Seek Help Scale indicated that students were more likely to be willing to seek help. This may be interpreted as students feeling a close connection to teachers and feeling teachers are likely to help them. Likewise, survey findings revealed almost 90 percent of respondents agreed that teachers at this school make it clear that bullying is not tolerated. These findings would lead one to believe that teachers are a strong mitigating factor in addressing bullying at the school. Likewise, the body of research focused on how adults can protect students from bullying indicates that caring adult support and consistent disciplinary responses both contribute to student’s perceptions of safety in schools (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Gregory et al., 2010).

Despite these findings regarding the support and caring survey respondents reportedly received from teachers in the school, focus group participants expressed skepticism regarding how helpful a teacher could truly be to a student who is being bullied. One participant clarified, “I think we expect them to help but they don’t exactly know what to do.” Another student expressed that teachers are too far removed from peer culture to know what would be a really
helpful response. Students attributed the lack of effective response to several factors, i.e., not having enough time, not knowing the students well enough, overreacting to the situation, and even not liking the target enough to want to help.

All of these factors that surfaced in the focus group discussions regarding the effectiveness of adults’ responses to bullying, are part of what Rodkin and Gest (2011) refer to in their discussion of peer ecologies and youth outcomes, in which peer ecology refers to the patterns of social status and social interactions within a peer group. Themes that emerged from the focus group discussions including 1) a belief that adult action will not affect bullying, 2) that adults do not understand peer culture, and 3) that teens need to exercise a certain amount of independence in dealing with bullying situations, are all related to the concept of peer ecology in that they all ultimately refer back to how teens perceives their roles within the context of their peer relationships. That is, the adult exists outside the peer group and therefore cannot impact what happens in the peer group. Rodkin and Gest (2011) contend that armed with clearer understanding of those practices that can impact peer ecologies, teachers are more likely to be able to manage bullying in school. Like the focus group participants who struggled to identify specific actions on the part of the teacher that would reduce or prevent bullying, Rodkin and Gest (2011) freely admit that much more research is needed to clearly identify those specific teacher practices that lead to positive outcomes in reducing bullying and victimization.

**Anti-Bullying Policies and Practices.** The findings related to anti-bullying policies and practices are found mostly in the analysis of the focus group discussions. Participants openly discussed their perceptions of the district anti-bullying policy as well as their perceptions about what adults should know and do to help those who are being bullied. Noteworthy among the
findings was that many of their suggestions regarding what adults should do were contrary to the provisions of the district anti-bullying policy provisions.

In the focus group discussion, participants expressed a clear understanding of the reporting provisions in the policy. They acknowledged that teachers were required to report bullying to administration. They referred to this as “making a big deal” and therefore an overreaction. This is exactly the reason, participants pointed out, that they would not report a bullying incident. They articulated the need to be able to decide for themselves how they want a bullying incident handled. Despite reporting that they wanted to handle bullying situations themselves, they stated that they still wanted to be able to talk to a trusted adult but only under the conditions that adult will not take the matter into their own hands. Others said that they wanted to be able to decide whether or not the incident was so bad they felt an adult needed to intervene. When it comes to deciding how to respond to bullying, the desire for autonomy on the part of the target was a common theme.

However, the reporting requirements of the district anti-bullying policy does not allow for that kind of flexibility. Under the policy, administration is required to investigate all reports of bullying and notify the parents of both the aggressor and target of the incident and the plan to keep the target safe. Additionally, the policy requires that the provisions be clearly communicated to students, staff, and families. Given the participants’ awareness of this policy provision, the school district clearly has been successful in communicating this to the school community. Yet, it is these reporting requirement that are exactly the “big deal” that students reportedly want to avoid. Fear of losing face in front of peers makes the logical step of getting an adult to help a tricky option for middle school-aged students. This indicates that the state’s recommended approach to bullying prevention and intervention, as detailed in this district’s anti-
bullying policy, is not consistent with what focus group participants reported as being truly helpful to students who might be targets of bullying. The rift between perceptions of these middle school students and the requirements of the policy used by the school is likely only to impede any gains the state is seeking to make with the anti-bullying policy.

**Summary of the literature review in relation to findings.** This study both confirms and expands findings of previous studies. It confirms that there continues to be a lack of consensus on the definition of bullying which prevents comparative analysis on the prevalence of bullying, that the roles individuals play in bullying situations exist on a continuum, and that there is a great deal of uncertainty around the responsibilities of a bystander. Likewise, findings of this study, as related to previous studies on school climate, show some consistency in that students who feel connected to and cared for by the teachers at this school are likely to be more willing to seek help from the adults in the school than those who feel less connected. Insofar as the literature on anti-bullying policies, this study also showed that focus group participants are generally aware of the provisions of the district’s anti-bullying policy and understand that the policy is intended to keep students safe.

In contrast to these, are findings that show some unique aspects of student perceptions about bullying at ABC Middle School. These include the finding that half of the survey respondents reported that bullying is a problem at the school, yet most feel supported and cared for by the teachers and staff. Also, students perceived teachers wanted to help but did not always respond in a way that was truly helpful, and that despite the existence of the anti-bullying policy making students feel safe, its reporting and notification provisions may be discouraging students from reporting potentially dangerous situations.

**Validity and Limitations.**
Chapter III includes a full discussion of validity and credibility of this study including the threats of personal bias and reactivity, and reliability of data. Validity of data establishes the standard by which the conclusions of the study are reasonable and accurate (Maxwell, 2005). Reliability refers to the confidence with which the data collection instruments actually measure the target constructs. Since the School Climate Bullying Survey (Cohen, J. & Greier, 2010) instrument used in the study was one that had undergone psychometric testing for validity and reliability, as reported in Chapter Three, it was not necessary to do further reliability testing of this instrument. Validity measures concentrated on the focus group data collection and review of bullying report data. As noted previously, when comparing the survey data to the focus group data, I was careful to note disparities and probe further for reasons for such differences. The confusion over the definition of bullying is one such example of this. Care was taken to address both reliability and validity throughout this study and fully explore the focus group data to ensure reasonableness of conclusions.

The personal bias validity threat is one that had potential to impact interpretation of the data and conclusion of the study. This researcher is the principal of the school where the study was conducted. Therefore, I exercised care in using a consistent protocol in the focus group discussions to avoid leading questions that could have influenced a participant to answer in some pre-determined manner. Notes were taken by the same trained note-taker during all focus group sessions and these notes were compared to transcribed audio-recordings. Throughout the focus group sessions, responses were summarized and read back to students to ensure accuracy. Two fellow doctoral candidates read and discussed the transcripts establishing inter-rater reliability. Additional steps to ensure validity include triangulating the survey and focus group data with
bullying incident reports on file at the school, and the district’s Anti-Bullying Policy. This served to show agreement and justify conclusions.

Reactivity was another validity threat in this study whereby students might have been influenced by my presence in the data collection phase. I was concerned that students might respond to questions in a way that may not be truthful due to their desire to be helpful (or not) to the researcher who was also their principal. Care was taken to establish a consistent set of ground rules that would ensure students of confidentiality and safety. These rules were read at the beginning of the survey and focus group sessions. Students were asked to agree to them before beginning the survey and focus groups. Additionally, the discussion guides used for each focus group were identical.

The validity threat created by my role as both the researcher and principal of the school prevents this threat from being entirely eliminated and is therefore also a limitation of this study. In order to address the issue of this position of power having an impact on the findings and conclusions of the study, this limitation is addressed by the researcher’s adherence to the Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association (1992).

Another limitation of this study is its generalizability to other populations. Due to the nature of this mixed methods study and its reliance on the qualitative data from a small number of focus groups, it is not likely that this study can be replicated easily in just any middle school. According to Myers (2000), “The mission of qualitative research, as I understand it, is to discover meaning and understanding, rather than to verify truth or predict outcomes” (p. 4). The voices of the students at this middle school are clearly their own perspectives about the atmosphere they experience on a daily basis. This human experience cannot be replicated in another environment and therefore cannot be generalized to other schools or the middle school
population at large. Additionally, with only three focus groups, I received a great deal of nuanced data, but from a small number of students.

**Conclusion**

The problem of bullying continues to plague schools despite the best efforts of state legislators, school administrators, teachers, parents and students. The introduction of anti-bullying laws and policies demand that schools do more than just acknowledge the problem. The growing knowledge of bullying’s devastating effects, requires that schools take action to mitigate its impact. Schools must begin to arm themselves with research-based data and develop organized plans to prevent bullying in our communities and intervene immediately when it occurs. Developing effective responses to bullying requires that school personnel learn more about what works and what does not. By talking with students about their experiences, schools can learn more about how adults can be more effective in combating this growing problem. This study uncovered some of those lived experiences and examined the perceptions of students regarding adult responses to bullying.

Examining bullying through the lens of social ecological theory aided in understanding the reciprocal nature of individual-environment interaction, or in this specific study, the interplay of students, teacher practices, and policies regarding bullying. The social context of bullying, i.e., the peers involved, the peers who appear to be uninvolved, the environment in which it occurs, the adults who exist within that environment, the norms that exist among the students and adults in the environment, the action or inaction by the adults, and the learning that takes place as a result of the experience, all interact to create a dynamic climate that is unique to each event or incident of bullying. Peeling back the layers of student experiences by examining students’
thinking and perceptions can help schools to cultivate school climates that are more effective in mitigating the devastating effects of bullying.

This study revealed that although half the students in this school believe that bullying is a problem, they are also hopeful. They look for trusting relationships with adults as a way to navigate the complexities of their social world, even though they appreciate that adults can never truly understand their world. This study tells us that in the eyes of the students this particular school is filled with caring adults who will respond when a student is troubled. This study also tells us that bullies and victims have a great deal in common with the bullies more likely to be the bullied as well. And this study tells us that we have work to do in developing anti-bullying policies that respect the social world of adolescents and provide creative solutions that work in partnership with those who are most significantly impacted by bullying, the middle school-aged child.

**Significance of the Study**

With few studies focusing specifically on the voices of middle school-aged children, this study stands out. This project adds to the body of knowledge about bullying and how adults respond to it by investigating the perceptions of students in one school. Because there is, as of yet, no magic bullet to eliminating bullying in our schools, continued study is necessary. It provides a glimpse into a world that many adults who work with students this age witness but few truly understand. It is this researcher’s hope that this study will lend credence to those student’s voices allowing adults to hear their hopes and fears as they relate to one of the great social issues of our time. These hopes and fears should be used to drive policy and practice designed to prevent bullying and intervene when it does occur. Ultimately, learning what students believe is effective in responding to bullying will contribute to making all schools not
only safer places for learning, but also places where children learn the lessons of strong character and respectful community.

Next Steps

The findings from this study indicate some directions for future research. These include survey results that were not fully examined as well as some indicators from focus group discussions that may need further exploration. First, survey respondents were asked to identify the locations where bullying occurred. When these findings were examined by type of bullying, i.e., physical, verbal, social, and cyber, I found that the highest levels of verbal bullying occurred within the classroom. This finding needs to be examined in light of results from focus group discussions whereby students reported that adults should pay more attention to student interactions. Because it seems reasonable to think that teachers are closely paying attention to the happenings within their very own classroom, further examination of this finding may reveal data that help teachers focus their attention on the specific kinds of classroom situations that would place students at risk for bullying. Improving teachers' capacity to manage these situations would go far to enable teachers to recognize bullying situations, intervene when they see them happening, or even prevent bullying situations altogether.

Additionally, significant ANOVA findings regarding the amount of bullying experienced by some ethnic groups may be worthwhile for further exploration in an effort to determine how these ethnic groups experience bullying and understand what their perceptions are regarding the reasons for these differences. This information would arm school staff with useful information to further inform their practice around bullying intervention and prevention.

Lastly, more research is needed into how students perceive their own abilities to influence school culture and climate in a way that might bring the peer influence to bear on
bullying behaviors. This study revealed that students want to be involved in how bullying situations are handled and resolved. Students reported their desire to exercise more autonomy in deciding how a bullying incident in which they might be involved is handled. By examining ways in which schools can use peers to inform decision-making and involving them in anti-bullying program development and implementation, schools may be able to capitalize on the very influential role peers have on each other’s behavior. This approach may go far to help create a school environment that discourages bullying behavior.
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## Appendix A

### School Climate Bullying Survey©

(Grades 6-12)

Do not write your name on this survey, so that your answers remain private and confidential. Your teachers will turn in the surveys without reading them. The results of this survey will be used to improve how students get along with one another at our school. Please answer these questions honestly.

**Definition of Bullying:** Bullying is defined as the use of one’s strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person on purpose. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is **not bullying** when two students who are about the same in strength or power have a fight or argument.

| 1. By this definition, I have **been bullied** at school in the past month. | A | B | C | D |
| 2. By this definition, I have **bullied others** at school in the past month. | A | B | C | D |

**Physical Bullying** involves repeatedly hitting, kicking, or shoving someone weaker on purpose. During the past month (30 days) at school:

| 3. I have been physically bullied or threatened with physical bullying. | A | B | C | D |
| 4. I have physically bullied or threatened to physically bully another student. | A | B | C | D |

**Verbal bullying** involves repeatedly teasing, putting down, or insulting someone on purpose. During the past month (30 days) at school:

| 5. I have been verbally bullied. | A | B | C | D |
| 6. I have verbally bullied another student. | A | B | C | D |

**Social bullying** involves getting others repeatedly to ignore or leave someone out on purpose. During the past month (30 days) at school:

| 7. I have been socially bullied. | A | B | C | D |
| 8. I have socially bullied another student. | A | B | C | D |

**Cyber bullying** involves using technology (cell phone, email, internet chat and posting, etc.) to tease or put down someone. During the past month (30 days) at school or home:

| 9. I have been cyber bullied. | A | B | C | D |
| 10. I have cyber bullied another student. | A | B | C | D |

11. Have you told anyone that you were bullied in the past 30 days at school?
   - A. I have not been bullied.
   - B. I have been bullied, but I have not told anyone.
   - C. I have told someone.

If you told someone that you were bullied in the previous question, whom did you tell?

(Nota: If you choose A or B as your answer in Question 11, you should answer “No” to questions 12, 13, and 14.)

12. A. No  B. Yes, I have told a friend.
13. A. No  B. Yes, I have told a teacher or other adult at school.
14. A. No  B. Yes, I have told a parent.

15. What is the main reason why you didn’t tell anyone you were bullied?
   - A. It was not that serious.
   - B. I can handle it myself.
   - C. I did not think anyone could help.
   - D. I did not want others to think I was a snitch.
   - E. The person would hurt me even more.
   - F. Some other reason (write in )

16. Does bullying take place anywhere at school?  A. No  B. Yes  Check where it occurs below.
   17. A. No  B. Yes Going to/from school
   18. A. No  B. Yes Hallways
   19. A. No  B. Yes Classrooms
   20. A. No  B. Yes Restrooms
   21. A. No  B. Yes Cafeteria
   22. A. No  B. Yes Gym/locker room
   23. A. No  B. Yes Outside (parking lot, play field, etc.)
   24. A. No  B. Yes Other places (write in )
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<tr>
<td>25. Bullying is a problem at this school.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. If another student was bullying me, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. It feels good when I hit someone.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Students here often get teased about their clothing or physical appearance.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>29. Students here try to stop bullying when they see it happening.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>30. If another student brought a gun to school, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. If you fight a lot, everyone will look up to you.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Students here often get put down because of their race or ethnicity.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Teachers here make it clear to students that bullying is not tolerated.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>34. If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Sometimes you only have two choices – get punched or punch the other person first.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. I am telling the truth on this survey.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>37. If I tell a teacher that someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>38. There are adults at this school I could go to if I had a personal problem.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>39. If you are afraid to fight, you won't have many friends.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>40. Students who talk about being bullied.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>41. The teachers at this school genuinely care about me doing well.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>42. I am not paying attention to how I answer this survey.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>43. If someone threatens you, it is okay to hit that person.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>44. There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics at this school.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>45. Students who are bullied or teased mostly deserve it.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. Bullying is sometimes fun to do.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. Students in this school belong to groups that don't get along with one another.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>51. Are you Hispanic?</td>
<td>A Yes</td>
<td>B No</td>
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<td>52. Ethnicity/Race: A American</td>
<td>B Asian</td>
<td>C Black</td>
<td>D White</td>
<td>E Multi-racial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>53. The answers I have given on this survey are true.</td>
<td>A Yes</td>
<td>B No</td>
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Appendix B

Letter of Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Primary Investigator: [Redacted]
Doctoral Candidate: Ann M. Jones
Title of Project: Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Bullying and the Effects of an Anti-Bullying Policy

Dear Parent or Guardian:
We are inviting your child to take part in a research study because she/he is an eighth grade student at [Redacted] School. Ann M. Jones, a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University, is responsible for this study designed to see what students think about bullying and the anti-bullying policies at [Redacted] School. Ann is available by phone [Redacted] at any time should you wish to discuss the details of this study. The Superintendent of [Redacted] Public Schools, [Redacted], has given permission to conduct this study.

Your child may participate in either an online survey or a focus group interview, or both. Students will take the online survey at school in one of the computer labs under the direction of an assistant trained to help give the survey. The survey will take about twenty minutes to complete. For students wishing not to participate in the survey, they will go to the Media Center to read for the period of time the students participating in the survey are in the lab. This is the protocol our school uses for students who do not participate in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which is conducted every spring with all grade 8 students. The focus group discussions will be about one hour long, will take place during school hours, and will be recorded by hand and audio-taped. Students will receive lunch as part of participating in the focus group. The notes and audio-tapes will be safeguarded in locked storage, then destroyed after three years.

Your child’s participation in this study is voluntary. It will not affect his/her grades or prevent him/her from being promoted to high school. Your child’s responses will not bring about disciplinary consequences and will be kept strictly confidential. Your child will not be asked to identify any students, teachers, or other school staff by name or any other indentifying characteristic. Your child’s name and the names of other participants in the study will be kept confidential. Students may skip over questions in the survey/focus group or stop answering questions at any time. Although unlikely, potential risks of participation include feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable answering some of the questions either on the survey or in the focus groups and/or worrying about other participants sharing what was said in the focus group discussion. Care will be taken by the researchers to assure students of the confidential nature of the survey and discussions. All participants will receive information about how to access counseling services should they feel upset by the questions.

If you decide to allow your child to participate, your child will be asked to sign an assent form that indicates they understand: the purpose of the survey and focus group discussion, what is expected of them, their participation is voluntary, and they may withdraw at any time. Copies of the student assent forms are attached for your information.
Additionally, you may withdraw your child from this study at any time with no consequence. Results of this study will be freely available to all participants and will be reported out by Ann M. Jones in her doctoral dissertation under the title noted above.

Please sign and return this letter indicating your permission for your child to participate in one or both portions of the study.

My child may participate in the

☐ Anonymous Survey.

☐ Confidential Focus Group.

☐ My child may not participate in this study

Child’s Name: ________________________________ Team: _________ Date: ___________

Parent/Guardian (signature) ____________________________________________

Student (signature) ________________________________________________

Return to the Main Office of Oak Middle School or mail to Ann M. Jones, at Oak Middle School, 45 Oak Street, Shrewsbury, MA 01545.

Email: ajones@shrewsbury.k12.ma.us

Phone: 508-841-1210
Appendix C

Student Assent Form – Anonymous Survey

Please indicate your understanding of the following with your signature at the bottom of the page. You will receive a copy of this form to keep.

- I understand that I will take an anonymous survey about my experience with bullying at [school name] School.
- I understand that we are taking this survey because Mrs. Jones is interested in learning more about this problem as part of a research study.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in Mrs. Jones’ final report to her advisors at Northeastern University.
- I understand that this survey is anonymous, that my name will not written on the survey, and my identity will not be connected with my answers in any way.
- I understand that my participation will not influence my grades.
- I understand that I may choose not to answer questions at any time.
- I understand that I may stop my participation and be excused at any time.
- I understand that if I find myself feeling upset or disturbed by the questions on the survey, that I have received information about how to access counseling services.
- I understand that if, as a result of my taking the survey, I wish to report a bullying incident, I may do so using the procedures outlined in the [school name] Public School Anti-Bullying Policy located in my student handbook.

I assent to participate in the survey provided by Ann M. Jones as part of her doctoral dissertation study and understand the above information.

Student Signature: ______________________________ Date: ______________

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey.
Counseling Services:

Mrs. Dileo – Grade 7 School Counselor
Ms. Minio – Grade 8 School Counselor
Dr. Sefton – School Psychologist

Samaritans: Massachusetts 24 hour Teen Hotline: 800-252-8336 (statewide)

For more information:

http://www.stopbullying.gov/young_adults/being_bullied/index.html
http://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org/#/home
Appendix D

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Project Title: **Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Bullying and the Effects of an Anti-Bullying Policy**

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this group discussion.
- We are here to discuss the topic of bullying, what that looks like here at [school name] School and what kinds of things help kids to deal with bullying situations.
- We are discussing this issue because I am interested in learning more about this problem as part of a research study. The results of this study will be used in my final report to my advisors at Northeastern University.
- I will be the moderator for the discussion so everyone is able to participate.
- Our discussion will take 60 minutes.
- We will read the Assent form together before we begin. If you are in agreement, you will sign the form. If you are not in agreement, you do not have to participate and you will be excused with no consequence to you. (Read Assent form aloud and answer questions.)
- Students sign or are excused before beginning.
- You may choose not to answer certain questions. Please indicate this by saying, “Pass.” You may also stop your participation and be excused at any time. Please indicate this by saying, “Stop.”
- On the opposite side of the form is information about accessing counseling services, should you find yourself feeling upset or disturbed by the discussion that has taken place here.
- I will begin by asking general questions about the results of the survey that was conducted recently; then I will ask more specific questions about the anti-bullying rules in the school and the kinds of things you find to be helpful when adults try to help.
- At the end I will summarize what you have said and you will have an opportunity to make additional comments.

**Agenda**
- Welcome
- Describe Purposes of the Focus Group
- Describe Ground Rules
- Ask questions based on survey results. Questions will include:
  - Open-ended questions
  - Follow-up questions
  - Probing questions
  - Prompted questions
- Summarize comments
- Ask for final thoughts
- Thank participants and end session.

_Counseling Services:_

[Name] – Grade 7 School Counselor
Ms. Minio – Grade 8 School Counselor

Dr. Sefton – School Psychologist

Shrewsbury Youth and Family Services – (508) 845-6932, SYFS@townisp.com

Samaritans: Massachusetts 24 hour Teen Hotline: 800-252-8336 (statewide)

For more information:
http://www.stopbullying.gov/young_adults/being_bullied/index.html
http://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org/#/home
Appendix E

Student Assent Form – Focus Group

Student Assent Form,
Focus Group Discussion

Please indicate your understanding of the following with your signature at the bottom of the page. You will receive a copy of this form to keep.

- I understand that we will discuss the topic of bullying, what that looks like here at [Town] School, what kinds of things help kids to deal with bullying situations.

- I understand that we are discussing this issue because Mrs. Jones is interested in learning more about this problem as part of a research study.

- I understand that the results of this study will be used in Mrs. Jones’ final report to her advisors at Northeastern University.

- I understand that although Mrs. Jones may refer to me by name during our discussion, she will not use my name in the notes of this discussion. I will be assigned a code name. My name will never be connected with my assigned code in any way.

- I understand that during this discussion I should not use names of others in order to respect their privacy.

- I understand that my participation will not influence my grades.

- I agree not to repeat the discussion here outside this room because it is likely that sensitive information will be shared.

- I understand that I may choose not to answer questions at any time.

- I understand that I may stop my participation and be excused at any time.

- I understand that if I find myself feeling upset or disturbed by the discussion that has taken place I have received information about how to access counseling services.

- I understand that if, as a result of my participation, I wish to report a bullying incident, I may do so using the procedures outlined in the [School] Public School Anti-Bullying Policy located in my student handbook.

I assent to participate in the focus group discussion moderated by Ann M. Jones as part of her doctoral dissertation study and understand the above information.

Student Signature: ___________________________ Date: _____________
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this group discussion.
Appendix F

Specific Focus Group Questions Developed from the Survey Results

33% - Have been bullied once or twice or more in the last month
18% - bullied once or twice a month or more.
59% - have been verbally bullied once or twice or more in the last month
30% - have verbally bullied another once or twice or more in the last month.
37% - have been socially bullied once or twice or more in the last month
18% - have socially bullied once or twice or more in the last month.
21% - Have been cyber bullied once or twice or more in the last month
12% - have cyber bullied once or twice or more in the last month

- What do you think of these numbers? Do they surprise you? Which ones? Why? Why Not?
- Taken together, what conclusions can you draw from these numbers? What do these numbers tell you? What do these numbers tell you about bullying at [ ]?

12% of the kids who report being bullied have told someone about it
15% told a friend
9% told a parent
4% told a teacher

- Why do you think kids tell a friend more often than an adult?
- When someone tells a friend that they are being bullied, what are some of the ways a friend responds? Which ways are helpful? Why? Which ways are not helpful? Why?
- Kids tell a parent about being bullied, not as often as they tell their friends, but more often than they tell a teacher. Why do you think a student might tell a parent rather than a friend?
- How do parents respond to reports of being bullied? What ways are helpful? Why? What ways are not helpful? Why?
- The survey results say that kids are least likely to tell a teacher. Why do you think this is so?
- What are some ways a teacher might respond? What ways are helpful? Why? What ways are not helpful? Why?
- Do teachers understand what is a helpful response and what is not?
- What do you think teachers need to know about bullying?
- What do you think teachers need to know about how to respond to someone who reports that they are being bullied?

86% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that If I tell a teacher that someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help.
80% of the students surveyed say that adults at this school make it clear that bullying is not tolerated.

- How do they do that?

Yet 55% said that students do not tell teachers when other students are being bullied.
- Why do you think that is, given that most kids believe that a teacher would try to help?

The statement “Bullying is a problem at this school” received almost an even split with half agreeing and half disagreeing.
- What might explain that split?
Questions about Policies

- Raise your hand if you are aware that [redacted] has an Anti-bullying policy?
- Can anyone identify something they know about that policy?
- Does anyone know any of the ways an individual can report bullying?
- Does anyone know anything about what the school is required to do when bullying is reported?
- Does anyone know what the rights of the bully are?
- Does anyone know what the rights of the victim are?
- Does anyone know who the school has to notify when bullying is reported?
- What do you think a teacher or adult should do when a student reports being bullied?
- How is this more helpful than the current practice?
Appendix G

School Committee Policy on Bullying Prevention and Intervention
Approved by the School Committee
December 8, 2010

The Public Schools holds a core value of “respect and responsibility” and, as such, is committed to the continuous improvement of learning environments. In order to achieve these aspirations, the Public Schools is committed to providing school environments where students are not subject to bullying and cyberbullying and the effects of such actions. Acts of bullying and cyberbullying are prohibited:

(i) on school grounds; on property immediately adjacent to school grounds; at a school-sponsored or school-related activity, function or program whether on or off school grounds; at a school bus stop; on a school bus or other vehicle owned, leased or used by the school district; or through the use of technology, including use of the school district’s network for World Wide Web/internet/intranet access; use of a personal electronic device when present at the locations cited above; or use of an electronic device owned, leased or used by the school district, and

(ii) at a location, activity, function or program that is not school-related, or through the use of technology, including through the World Wide Web/internet or use of an electronic device that is not owned, leased or used by the school district, if the acts create a hostile environment at school for the target, infringes on the rights of the target at school or materially and substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school.

Retaliation against a person who reports bullying, or who provides information during an investigation of bullying, or who witnesses or has reliable information about bullying, also is prohibited.

Incidents of bullying may, in addition to being a violation of this policy, constitute a violation of civil rights laws including but not limited to Title II, Title VI, Title IX, and Section 504. Please see the anti-discrimination/harassment policies of the Public Schools for further information.

A. Definitions
**Aggressor** is a student who engages in bullying, cyberbullying, or retaliation.

**Bullying,** as defined in M.G.L. c.71, s. 37O, is the repeated use by one or more students of a written, verbal, or electronic expression or a physical act or gesture or any combination thereof, directed at a target that:

(i) causes physical or emotional harm to the target or damage to the target’s property;

(ii) places the target in reasonable fear of harm to himself or of damage to his property;

(iii) creates a hostile environment at school for the target; (iv) infringes on the rights of the target at school; or

(v) materially and substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school.

Bullying may include conduct such as physical intimidation or assault, including intimidating an individual into taking an action against his/her will; oral or written threats; teasing; putdowns; name-calling; stalking; threatening looks, gestures, or actions; cruel rumors; false accusations; and social isolation.

**Cyberbullying,** as defined in M.G.L. c.71, s. 37O is bullying through the use of technology or any electronic communication, which shall include, but not be limited to, any transfer of signs, signals, writing, images, sounds, data or intelligence of any nature transmitted in whole or in part by a wire, radio, electromagnetic, photo electronic or photo optical system, including, but not limited to, electronic mail, internet communications, instant messages or facsimile communications. Cyberbullying also includes:

(i) the creation of a web page or blog in which the creator assumes the identity of another person;

(ii) the knowing impersonation of another person as the author of posted content or messages, if the creation or impersonation creates any of the conditions enumerated above in clauses (i) to (v), inclusive, of the definition of bullying; and

(iii) the distribution by electronic means of a communication to more than one person or the posting of material on an electronic medium that may be accessed by one or more persons, if the distribution or posting creates any of the conditions enumerated above in clauses (i) to (v), inclusive, of the definition of bullying.

Cyberbullying may include conduct such as sending derogatory, harassing or threatening email messages, instant messages, or text messages; creating websites or posting comments on websites that ridicule, humiliate, or intimidate others; and posting on websites or disseminating embarrassing or inappropriate pictures or images of others.

**Hostile Environment,** as defined in M.G.L. c. 71, s. 37O, is a situation in which bullying causes the school environment to be permeated with intimidation, ridicule, or insult that is sufficiently severe or pervasive to alter the conditions of a
student’s education.

**Retaliation** is any form of intimidation, reprisal, or harassment directed against a person who reports bullying, provides information during an investigation of bullying, or witnesses or has reliable information about bullying.

**Target** is a student against whom bullying, cyberbullying or retaliation has been perpetrated.

B. **Bullying and Retaliation Are Prohibited and Will Lead to Discipline**

The Public Schools absolutely prohibits bullying, cyberbullying and retaliation as defined above. Students who engage in bullying or retaliation will be subject to disciplinary action; however, disciplinary action taken must balance the need for accountability with the need to teach appropriate behavior. The range of disciplinary action includes, but is not limited to, one or more of the following: verbal warnings, written warnings, reprimands, reflective writing assignments intended to educate the aggressor, detentions, Saturday school, short-term or long-term suspensions, or expulsions from school as determined by the school administration, subject to applicable procedural requirements. Nothing in this policy is intended to prevent the school administration from taking disciplinary action against a student for conduct that does not meet the definition of bullying or cyberbullying, as defined above, but nevertheless is inappropriate for the school environment. Disciplinary actions will be in accordance with administrative disciplinary policies and applicable state and federal laws.

C. **Reporting Obligations and Methods**

**Reporting by Staff:** A member of school staff, including, but not limited to, an educator, administrator, school nurse, cafeteria worker, custodian, bus driver, athletic coach, advisor to an extracurricular activity or paraprofessional, shall promptly report any instance of bullying or retaliation s/he has witnessed or become aware of to the school principal or designee. As with other situations requiring behavior management, staff members will intervene as needed to stop the problematic behavior and then communicate the behavior to the administration utilizing the process in place for reporting.

**Reporting by Students, Parents/Guardians, and Others:** The district expects students, parents/guardians, and others who witness or become aware of an instance of bullying or retaliation involving a student to report it to the school principal or designee. An individual may make an anonymous report of bullying or retaliation; however, no disciplinary action may be taken against a student solely on the basis of an anonymous report. A student who knowingly makes a false accusation of bullying or retaliation shall be subject to disciplinary action.

**Reporting to Parents/Guardians:** Upon determining that bullying or retaliation has occurred, the principal or designee will notify the parent/guardian of
the target and of the aggressor of this finding and of the school’s procedures for responding to it. If the alleged target and alleged aggressor attend different schools, the principal receiving the report shall inform the principal of the other student’s school, and that principal or designee shall notify the student’s parents of the report and procedures. See also section H below.

**Reporting to Local Law Enforcement:** At any point after receipt of a report of bullying or retaliation, or during or after an investigation, if the school principal or designee has a reasonable basis to believe that the incident may involve criminal conduct, the school principal or designee will notify the local law enforcement agency. In addition, if an incident of bullying or retaliation occurs on school grounds and involves a former student under the age of 21 who is no longer enrolled in a local school district, charter school, non-public school, approved private day or residential school or collaborative school, the Superintendent of the [Redacted] Public Schools or designee will notify local law enforcement if s/he believes that criminal charges may be pursued. See also section H below.

**Reporting to Administrator of Another School District or School:** If an incident of bullying or retaliation involves students from more than one school district, charter school, non-public school, approved private day or residential school or collaborative school and the [Redacted] Public Schools is the first to be informed of the bullying or retaliation, then the Superintendent of the [Redacted] Public Schools or designee must, consistent with state and federal law, promptly notify the appropriate administrator of the other school district or school so that both may take appropriate action.

**Reporting Methods:** Each school shall have a reporting procedure in place for staff members to utilize. Each school shall communicate, through its handbook, the ways in which students and parents/guardians may report suspected bullying or cyberbullying, including anonymous reporting.

D. **Investigation**

The school principal or designee shall investigate promptly a report of bullying or retaliation, giving consideration to all the circumstances at hand, including the nature of the allegations and the ages of the students involved. The following are general guidelines for responding to a report of bullying or retaliation. The guidelines will be adapted as necessary to respond appropriately to the complaint.

**Pre-Investigation:** Even before fully investigating allegations of bullying or retaliation, school personnel will consider whether there is a need to take immediate steps to support the alleged target and/or protect the alleged target from further potential incidents of concern. In taking any such action, however, the rights of both the alleged target and alleged aggressor must be considered.

**Written statement of the complaint:** The investigator will seek to
determine the basis of the complaint, gathering information from the complainant, including such matters as: what specifically happened, who committed the alleged acts, who was present or may have information about the events, when the events occurred (date, time of day), and where the events occurred. It is helpful to have these facts in writing. If age appropriate, the complainant may be asked to put the complaint in writing and to sign and date it. If the complainant cannot or chooses not to write a complaint, the investigator will record the allegations, read them to the complainant to confirm accuracy, and ask the complainant to sign the document. If the complainant cannot or chooses not to sign, the investigator may sign and date the document her/himself.

**Interviews:** Once the allegations of the complainant are established, the investigator will gather other evidence, which may involve interviews of the alleged aggressor and/or other witnesses. If appropriate, the investigator should remind the alleged aggressor and witnesses that retaliation against persons whom they believe might have reported the incidents or cooperated with the investigation is strictly prohibited and will result in disciplinary action.

**Confidentiality:** The confidentiality of the complainant and the other witnesses will be maintained to the extent practicable given the school's obligation to investigate and address the matter.

**E. Determination**

School personnel must weigh all of the evidence objectively to determine whether the alleged events occurred and, if they did, whether the events constitute bullying or retaliation. The determination must be based upon all of the facts and circumstances and the perspective of a reasonable person. When applied to children, the "reasonable person" standard is generally "that of a reasonable person of like age, intelligence, and experience under like circumstances." See Ellison v. Brady, 924 F.2d872 (9th Cir. 1991).

If bullying or retaliation is substantiated, the school will take steps reasonably calculated to prevent recurrence and ensure that the target is not restricted in participating in school or in benefiting from school activities. As with the investigation, the response will be individually tailored to all of the circumstances, including the nature of the conduct and the age of the students involved. In addition to taking disciplinary action, the following are examples of steps that may be taken to prevent the recurrence of bullying or retaliation:
- holding parent conferences;
- transferring student’s classroom or school;
- limiting or denying student access to a part, or area, of a school;
- enhancing adult supervision on school premises;
- excluding from participation in school-sponsored or school-related functions, after-school programs, and/or extracurricular activities;
- providing relevant educational activities for individual students or groups of
students (guidance counselors and others in the school setting who have been trained in working with students on interpersonal issues may be helpful in providing such programs);

- student action plan and directives for future conduct, including providing the target with a process for reporting any concerns about future conduct immediately (it is critical to involve the student in creating an action plan that involves a reporting process that works for that particular student);
- arranging for communication between the parties, if appropriate, to assist them in resolving issues which have arisen between them (such an approach will be used cautiously since communication can sometimes exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the target’s concerns and since the conduct often involves an imbalance of power); and
- providing counseling (or other appropriate services) or referral to such services outside of school for the target and/or the aggressor and/or for appropriate family members of said students. The cost of outside counseling or other social services will not be the responsibility of the school district.

F. **Closing the Complaint and Possible Follow-Up**

If a complaint is substantiated, school staff will promptly provide notice to the parent/guardian of the target and the aggressor. Notice will indicate what action is being taken to prevent any further acts of bullying or retaliation. Specific information about disciplinary action taken generally will not be released to the target’s parents or guardians—unless it involves a “stay away” or other directive that the target must be aware of in order to report violations (see section H below).

If appropriate, within a reasonable time period following closure of the complaint, the administrative staff or designee will contact the target to determine whether there has been any recurrence of the prohibited conduct.

The district will retain a report of the complaint, containing the name of the complainant, the date of the complaint, investigator, school, a brief statement of the nature of the complaint, the outcome of the investigation, and the action taken.

G. **Bullying Prevention Plan**

Pursuant to M.G.L. c.71, s. 37O, the [Name] Public Schools administration will develop a bullying prevention and intervention plan that will address the various provisions within the law. The plan will be developed in accordance with the requirements of the law and will be reviewed and updated if necessary at least biennially by the administration per the law. The plan will be communicated to parents and students annually. The plan will also include a provision for the ongoing professional development of all staff members, including, but not limited to, educators, administrators, school nurses, cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, athletic coaches, advisors to an extracurricular activity, and
paraprofessionals, to prevent, identify, and respond to bullying. The principal is responsible for the implementation and oversight of the bullying prevention and intervention plan within his or her school.

H. **Communication**

The principal or a designee will communicate findings to the parents/guardians of both the target and the aggressor when an investigation determines that bullying or retaliation has occurred; communication of a complaint and investigation may occur prior to the investigation/determination if, in the principal or designee’s judgment, such communication is in the best interests of the students and the school. All communications related to bullying complaints, investigations, and findings will take into consideration individual privacy concerns as well as state and federal law related to confidentiality of student records.

Pursuant to Department of Elementary and Secondary regulations (603 CMR 49.00) related to M.G.L. c. 71, s. 37O, pursuant to the Massachusetts Student Record Regulations (603 CMR 23.00), and pursuant to the Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act regulations (34 CFR Part 99) school personnel may not disclose information from a student record to a parent except for the parent/guardian’s own child. Therefore, specific information regarding disciplinary actions that become part of the aggressor’s record may not be shared with the target or the parents/guardians of the target, unless it involves a “stay away” or other directive that the target must be aware of in order to report violations. School personnel may, however, share information with the family of the target regarding the process that was followed to investigate and determine whether bullying occurred; what general measures are being taken to protect the target from further acts of bullying or retaliation; and what is being done to ensure that the target is reassured, receives help, and is provided with appropriate ways to communicate ongoing concerns.

The principal or designee will notify the Police Department if he/she has a reasonable basis to believe that criminal charges may be pursued against the aggressor. The principal or designee may consult with the school resource officer or any other individuals deemed appropriate in order to make such a determination. Notification of law enforcement is not required in situations where bullying and retaliation can be handled appropriately within the school.

If, in the principal or designee’s judgment, there is an immediate threat to the health and/or safety of a student or other individuals, information in the student record may be disclosed to appropriate parties during the period of emergency.

I. **Reporting**

The superintendent or a designee shall report annually to the School Committee regarding the frequency of bullying behaviors during the prior school year and to update the Committee regarding steps being taken in the schools to minimize such behaviors while promoting the continuous improvement of learning environments.