Bullying In Schools: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Early-Career Elementary School Principals

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Bullying in schools: Exploring the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals

By

Jason Q. Harris

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Educational Leadership with a concentration in P-12 School Leadership
in the College of Education

Mississippi State, Mississippi

December 2018
Bullying in schools: Exploring the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals

By

Jason Q. Harris

Approved:

______________________________
Eric A. Moyen
(Major Professor)

______________________________
Christopher Clayton Armstrong
(Committee Member)

______________________________
Leigh Ann Hailey
(Committee Member)

______________________________
Stephanie B. King
(Committee Member/Graduate Coordinator)

______________________________
Richard L. Blackbourn
Dean
College of Education
Name: Jason Q. Harris

Date of Degree: December 14, 2018

Institution: Mississippi State University

Major Field: Educational Leadership with a concentration in P-12 School Leadership

Major Professor: Eric A. Moyen

Title of Study: Bullying in schools: Exploring the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals

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Candidate for Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Since the latter part of the 19th Century, researchers have been studying the bullying phenomenon and the devastating short- and long-term impact it has on children’s lives. In an attempt to reduce bullying incidents that arise in school, many have set up anti-bullying programs. The goal of these programs is twofold: (a) to reduce the number of bullying incidents in school and (b) create a safe and welcoming learning environment for all students. Although principals work tirelessly to establish conditions to sustain learning for others, they receive very little support for their own learning and development. As principals’ on-going experiences continue to shape their understanding of issues (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment, culture, and bullying) that directly impact the effective functioning of a school, it is imperative to investigate the lived experiences of early-career principals in an attempt to identify potential areas of concern and overall need. Therefore, the purpose of this inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals regarding the topic of bullying. Results of qualitative analyses identified the following prominent and recurring nine themes: (1) lack of concern/sense of denial, (2) misunderstandings, (3)
frustrations/trepidations, (4) proactivity, (5) establish a supportive learning environment, (6) dialog with students, (7) social media as a cause/concern, (8) home life as a part of the problem and, (9) possible solutions/needs. Implications, limitations, and the need for future research are also discussed.
DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to any and all students who have been affected by bullying—whether personally or as an unsolicited witness.

This research is also dedicated to the many caring teachers, staff members, officers, and administrators who work tirelessly to make sure that every student is safe at school. Your work does not go unnoticed.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents, thank you for being the best parents that anyone could ever ask for. You have encouraged and inspired me throughout my life.

To my beautiful wife Tamra, words cannot express how supportive you have been during this journey. My daughter Maddy, who lost so much time with her dad while he completed schoolwork. To my boys, who always asked where I was and what I was doing. Thank you for your patience as I labored through this process.

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I would like to acknowledge the 11 early-career elementary school principals who volunteered to participate in this study. Thank you for sharing your precious time with me.

To my friends, Alex Farned, Kirk Presley, Brent Rainey, Bill Morgan, Art Dobbs and Jason Shelton, finally my Saturdays will be free for college football.

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Dr. Stephanie King, Dr. Clay Armstrong, and Dr. Leigh Ann Hailey, thank you for serving on my committee.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .................................................................................................................. ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. iii

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................... viii

I. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

   Background of the Study ............................................................................................. 1
   What is Bullying? ......................................................................................................... 3
   Causes of Bullying ...................................................................................................... 3
   Characteristics of Bullies and Victims of Bullying ..................................................... 4
   Court Cases Regarding Bullying ............................................................................... 5
   Legislation Regarding Bullying .................................................................................. 6
   Statement of the Problem and Purpose ...................................................................... 8
   Statistics of Bullying in the United States ............................................................... 10
   Research Questions .................................................................................................. 12
   Definition of Key Terms ........................................................................................... 13
   Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................. 14
   Overview of Method–Phenomenology ..................................................................... 15
   Study Delimitations .................................................................................................... 16
   Significance of the Study ........................................................................................... 17

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ..................................................................................... 18

   Aggression and Bullying ............................................................................................ 19
   Cyberbullying ........................................................................................................... 22
   Disabilities and Bullying ........................................................................................... 26
   Parents and Bullying .................................................................................................. 29
   Prevention of Bullying .............................................................................................. 32
   Social and Emotional Development and Bullying .................................................... 35
   Suicide and Bullying .................................................................................................. 39
   Summary .................................................................................................................... 42

III. METHOD ................................................................................................................. 48

   Qualitative Research Design ..................................................................................... 48
   Phenomenology ......................................................................................................... 50
   Research Questions ................................................................................................... 51
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C. INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Script</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Questions</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

1. Participant Demographics ........................................................................................................61
2. School Demographics .............................................................................................................62
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

On the morning of October 1, 1997, 16-year-old Pearl High School (MS) student Luke Woodham murdered three people—two at school and one at his home. Seven individuals were also injured in the shooting that occurred at the assassin’s school. In an effort to explore what could have prevented this tragic event, former Pearl School District Superintendent, William H. Dodson, interviewed Mr. Woodham who is serving a life-sentence in the Mississippi State Penitentiary. The following statement comes from Dr. Dodson’s initial interview with Luke:

Now would be the chance to ask Luke the question that had persisted in my mind for nine and a half years. I had to listen carefully to his answer. I started our visit by discussing the tragic incident gently, especially the bullying. Luke said from day one at school he felt he was constantly harassed. He explained that the more he tried to free himself, the deeper he got into trouble. If he tried to fight back or defend himself he received the same punishment as those who had started the bullying. School was in no way fun or enjoyable for him, and he was miserable most of the time. When I pressed him about the bullying, he broke down. It was my intention to get an assessment and not cause him an unpleasant flashback. Luke’s reaction confirmed the conclusions I had drawn from years of research and
analysis of bullying: The years do not erase the scars. So distressing was this subject for Luke that I didn’t inquire further. I decided to wait for another visit. (Dodson, 2009, p. 65)

Since the latter part of the 19th Century, researchers have been studying the bullying phenomenon and the devastating short- and long-term impact it has on children’s lives (Burk, 1897; Canty, Stubbe, Steers, & Collings, 2016; Koo, 2007). Unfortunately, society’s initial relaxed treatment of bullying may have allowed this aggressive behavior to escalate, prevail, and become one of the biggest problems facing teens today (Dowling, 2015; Monokajo, 2017). Simply stated, bullying continues to exist because it is effective. A bully typically exhibits aggressive behavior that targets individuals who are smaller or weaker (Veenstra et al., 2005). Ma (2001) observed that bullies are very intentional in their selection of victims, mainly focusing on their physical appearance. Bullies engage themselves in activities and actions which harm their peers, such as name calling, teasing, and intimidation. Moreover, bullies like to demonstrate their dominance by fighting their victims.

Smokowski and Kopasz (2005) noted that bullies could be recognized from a young age in elementary schools that lack quality advice and supervision from responsible adults (Veenstra et al., 2005). In an attempt to reduce the bullying incidents that arise in school, many schools have set up anti-bullying programs (Baldry, 2003). The goal of these programs is twofold: (a) to reduce the number of bullying incidents in school and (b) create a safe and welcoming learning environment for all students. As educational administrators create ways to combat school bullying and policymakers
create legislation to regulate it, it is imperative that all involved stakeholders understand exactly what bullying is.

**What is Bullying?**

The definition of bullying behavior extends beyond the classical stereotyping of older boys harassing and beating up their smaller peers. Bullying involves multifaceted behavior that varies by situation, individuals involved, context, and time. Additionally, bullying in school involves unnecessary and belligerent aggression by school-aged children involving real and perceived social power imbalances (Axford et al., 2015). In order to be categorized as bullying, the aggressive act needs to repeated and not welcomed by the victim. Furthermore, bullying often involves situations where the bully is older, bigger, taller, and stronger than the victim which results in a clear imbalance of power (Baldry, 2014). Finally, bullying exists because it is effective; perpetrators of bullying experience the results they seek. Bullying often causes great emotional, psychological, and physical pain by hurting, exposing, harassing, and humiliating the victim. Victims of bullying often suffer severe and long-lasting effects. In order to reduce the likelihood of this occurring, it is imperative to focus on the cause of this negative and unwanted behavior.

**Causes of Bullying**

According to Kim, Leventhal, Koh, Hubbard, and Boyce (2006), there is a relationship between bullying and youth violence. Children who are exposed to violence in their homes and communities tend to repeat the behaviors at school with their peers. Smith (2004) noted that boys often demonstrate violent behaviors (that they learn at
home) towards girls at school. However, home and community life do not harbor all of the blame. Bullying in school can be a direct result of a lack of preparedness and action on the part of the school. As Berger (2007) pointed out, (a) schools often have inadequate anti-bullying policy and procedures, (b) teachers do not react to bullying cases immediately or at all, and (c) there is a weak ratio of teachers to students which makes it difficult to control the situation. Additionally, a lack of care by teachers or other staff in schools makes the bullied student feel unwanted, which in-turn negatively affects his or her academic performance (Smith, 2004). In order to reverse these distressing data and create a better learning environment for all students, it is important to understand the characteristics of bullies and their victims.

**Characteristics of Bullies and Victims of Bullying**

Most often, a bully exhibits aggressive behavior toward individuals who are smaller and/or are unable to defend themselves (Veenstra et al., 2005). Ma (2011) observed that bullies take time when identifying their victims and target their victims based solely on physical appearance. Typically, bullies lack guidance and supervision from adults and can be successfully identified at a young age (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005; Veenstra et al., 2005). Moreover, bullies are typically big for their age, while most victims are small and/or weak (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Victims tend to demonstrate shared personality characteristics, such as shyness, lower self-confidence, anger, anxiety, and introversion (Nazir & Nesheen, 2015), while bullies are typically aggressive, spiteful, confrontational, manipulative, mean, impulsive, and lack empathy (Baldry, 2014). According to Veenstra et al. (2005), victims tend to avoid isolated places (such as restrooms) and seek safety from people who can protect them (e.g., teachers).
Lastly, victims and bullies tend to display more antisocial behaviors than non-involved children (van Noorden, Haselager, Lansu, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2016). Due to the high prevalence of bullying today, courts continue to hear many cases regarding bullying in schools.

### Court Cases Regarding Bullying

The spirited fight against bullying is evident in the number of cases courts have ruled on regarding its occurrence. Over time, courts have made opinions on the role of schools and school leaders in preventing bullying. To determine liability, courts apply a general legal standard of “deliberate indifference” to each of the statutory claims (Wood, 2012). In the past 75 years, courts at all levels (state and federal) have ruled on cases that involve student bullying. Most notably, courts have ruled on cases involving the following:


The accompanied rulings have resulted in policymakers continuing to create and pass legislation aimed at adhering to court decisions. These laws are beginning to have an impact on reducing the current bullying epidemic, but bullying remains a common problem in many schools.

Legislation Regarding Bullying

In 1999, Georgia became the first state in the United States to introduce and pass bullying laws. By 2003, 15 American states enacted similar laws that aimed at addressing the bullying problem (Limber & Small, 2003). Today, all 50 states have enacted bullying legislation (Cornell & Limber, 2015). In 2017, the House Education Committee of Mississippi passed an anti-bullying bill that amended Section 37-11-69 of the Mississippi Code of 1972 by clarifying conduct that is considered bullying behavior, revising provisions to be included in a school district’s anti-bullying policy, and requiring school districts to post the proper procedure for reporting bullying on their Internet website (Mississippi House Bill 263, 2017). Additionally, this Bill gives victims the right to defend themselves and includes language that protects the victim from disciplinary measures if he or she uses “reasonable self-defense” in response to bullying (Skinner, 2017).
Most laws enacted in various states in America are aimed at increasing penalties in any cases which relate to bullying (e.g., harassment, menace, assault, criminal trespass, mischief racism, and gender discrimination among others). In 2010, the Education Secretary in the United States explained that anti-bullying laws and policies were not necessarily meant to prevent bullying, but rather send a message to all bullies and perpetrators that the behavior would not be tolerated under any circumstances (Cornell & Limber, 2015). In spite of the serious nature and consequences of bullying, the United States lacks a federal law that directly addresses bullying matters (Jordan & Austin, 2012).

However, the lack of federal laws to address bullying does not mean that bullying is permitted in schools. Schools have been authorized by the U.S. Department of Justice, Education, and Civil rights to address such behaviors (Jordan & Austin, 2012). The United States Education Department, the Department of Justice, and the Federal Civil Rights are responsible for enforcing civil rights. Schools that fail to address harassment cases of students break the following federal civil rights laws: Titles IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; Cornell & Limber, 2015). As states continue to create and pass legislation that addresses and regulates bullying in schools, educational administrators face the daunting task of seeking ways to effectively deal with violence and aggression in their schools.
Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Unfortunately, exposure to aggression and/or violence may cause children or adolescents to interpret hostility as an acceptable means of resolving conflict (Fagan & Browne, 1994; Mercy, Butchart, Farrington, & Cerda, 2002; Widom, 1989). One form of aggression that warrants attention is bullying (Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003). Even though many bullying incidents take place at school, victims perceive bullying as part of life and assume bullying is a necessary part of the “growing up process” at school. While some individuals naturally will openly reject bullying and stand against it, others lack bravery and often submit to the offenders (Gentry & Whitley, 2014). Victims of bullying often become quiet and isolated, which brings them challenging experiences when interacting with colleagues (Hatzenbuehler, Schwab-Reese, Ranapurwala, Hertz, & Ramirez, 2015). Additionally, individuals who are victims of bullying: (a) often experience difficulties in sleeping and eating, (b) tend to withdraw from friends and activities they once enjoyed, (c) suffer a loss in academic performance, (d) have higher rates of absenteeism and school dropout, (e) develop anger and rage as their typical emotional response to difficulties, (f) are more likely to experience suicidal thoughts, (g) experience stress, social anxiety, and a loss of confidence, and (h) have higher rates of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal substance usage (Acquah, Topalli, Wilson, Juntila, & Niemi, 2016; Eslea et al., 2004; Gofin & Avitzour, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Nazir & Nesheen, 2015; Quinn, Fitzpatrick, Bussey, Hides, & Chan, 2016; Trevisol & Uberti, 2015; Xu et al., 2017; Young Shin, Leventhal, Yun-Joo, & Boyce, 2009). Alarmingly, bullying victims may in fact become bullies themselves in adulthood (Gentry & Whitley, 2014). Unfortunately, victims of bullying
are not the only ones to experience pain and suffering; negative outcomes also exist for those who execute the bullying action.

Bullies often find it problematic to express empathy which makes it difficult to show remorse for their actions. Unfortunately, this lack of empathy results in a risk of short- and long-lasting emotional challenges similar to the children they victimized (López-Pérez, Hanoch, Holt, & Gummerum, 2017). Additionally, bullies experience trouble interacting with peers as others perceive them as violent, controlling, and cruel (Pitlick, 2015). As a result, this casts them as socially isolated, which results in a lack of development of genuine friendships. While it is possible for bullies to be members of a large bullying social circle, membership in such a circle places them at great risk for substance abuse (Suski, 2014). Lastly, bullies are more likely than their peers to (a) take part in physical altercations, (b) engage in vandalism, (c) drop out of school, (d) engage in criminal activity, (e) develop quick tempers, (f) gain and sustain employment, and (g) form long-lasting romantic relationships (Gentry & Whitley, 2014).

The effect of bullying is even detrimental to bystanders—despite the continued misconception that they are somehow immune to the effects of such events. Bystanders play a pivotal role in facilitating or deterring bullying behavior (Datta, Cornell, & Huang, 2016) and become the target audience needed to accomplish the task of humiliating others (Calbom, 2012). Unfortunately, bystanders often abstain from interfering with the situation to avoid becoming the next target. When bystanders observe and neglect to intervene, the result can manifest into anxiety, depression, and self-pity. These feelings can lead to long-lasting psychological issues, substance abuse, and school dropout (Nazir & Nesheen, 2015). Surprisingly, bullying is most often viewed as an isolated conflict
between one bully and one victim, and this conception makes it difficult for bystanders to intervene (Byers, 2013). Furthermore, simply encouraging bystander intervention has been unsuccessful at reducing bullying at schools (Ttofi & Farrington, 2010). Even though the results of bullying are severe and long-lasting, American society tends to ignore bullying behaviors, which increases its prevalence (Dowling, 2015). The end result is a bullying epidemic with alarming statistics.

Statistics of Bullying in the United States

Longitudinal research conducted by Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) demonstrated the following statistics:

- approximately one in four students in the U.S. stated they are physically bullied in schools regularly;
- over 75% of students stated verbal bullying (e.g., yelling, name calling, and the spreading of rumors) is a common occurrence;
- almost 15% of students stated they act in a severe, aggressive, or abusive manner;
- one out of five students admitted that they were responsible for bullying their peers in hidden places, such as bathrooms, where the school administration could not protect them;
- approximately 80% of students encounter bullying online (i.e., cyberbullying); and
• in 85% of the cases of bullying reported, teachers do not make an attempt to stop the bullying or take measures to make sure it does not happen in the future.

Similarly, research conducted by Cohn and Canter (2003) resulted in these findings. Thirty percent of students in schools reported being involved in bullying as a bully, victim, or both. Of the students, 11% reported they were bullied by others, 13% stated they bully others, and 6% admitted that they bully and are bullied. Eight percent of students stated that they were victimized at least once in a week. As bullying increased in schools, the dropout cases also increased, especially in the 11th and 12th grades. Although there were exceptions, bullying among male students generally involved aggression and physicality, while bullying among girls often involved isolation or exclusion from various activities.

In another study, Kevorkian and D'Antona (2008) sought to find out the truth about bullying and differentiate it from myths. The study confirmed that both genders practice bullying behavior; however, boys act as both bullies and victims more often than girls. This indicates that boys are more affected by bullying and suggests that bullying is different by gender. The current research on bullying in the U.S. highlights a major concern in schools today—a point of interest that attracts the attention of educational administrators across the country.

As a principal’s primary responsibility is to create a safe and secure learning environment for all students (PSEL, 2015), school principals must be prepared to address bullying incidents on their campuses as soon as they occur. However, administrators must be able to recognize bullying in order to swiftly assist victims and prevent bullies
from continuing their aggressive behavior. Due to professional responsibilities that require the supervision of school administrators, the primary researcher was (and still is) initially interested in how early-career elementary school administrators identify and manage bullying, how they internalize the experience, and what actions they are taking to prevent it.

Results from this study may provide public school administrators across the state with an expanded lens of understanding how bullying emerges in the school culture and what current practices exist to deal proactively and reactively with the problem. According to Hanish et al. (2013), a gap in bullying research exists at the elementary school level; therefore, this qualitative research addressed that gap by examining how administrators individually respond to incidences of bullying. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals as they attempt to combat bullying in schools. It was hoped that reflections on their experiences would provide insight for school leaders seeking to develop safe and healthy school environments.

**Research Questions**

By forming the foundation of a study, research questions assist in framing inquiries that are answered throughout the course of a study (Toloie-Eshlaghy, Chitsaz, Karimian, & Charkhchi, 2011). According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher identifies a topic of discovery and develops a series of questions to guide the interview process. Therefore, this study explores the phenomenon of bullying in schools from the perspective of early-career elementary school principals. The following research questions guided the development of the study:
RQ1: What are the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals?

RQ2: Are there shared lived experiences among early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying?

RQ3: Are there unique lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying?

RQ4: How are early-career elementary school principals managing bullying?

RQ5: What actions are early-career elementary school principals taking to prevent bullying?

RQ6: Is there anything that early-career elementary school principals believe they need (that they do not have) to help them combat bullying?

**Definition of Key Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms were defined using Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2018):

1. Aggression: hostile or violent behavior or attitudes toward another.

2. Bully: an individual who threatens or generates harm to another, especially someone weaker or smaller.

3. Bullying: using force, coercion, or threats to intimidate or abuse others aimed at having domination over them.

4. Bystander: a person who watches the proceedings without participating.

5. Cyberbullying: taking advantage of Information Technology to cause harassment or harm to other people intentionally over and over again and in an antagonistic manner.

6. Physical bullying: injury to an individual’s body or possessions.
7. Social and emotional development: the ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others through experience, expression, and management of emotions.

8. Suicide: the taking of one’s own life voluntarily and intentionally.

9. Verbal bullying: the use of words in a negative manner such as teasing or insults.

10. Victim: a person injured from bullying behavior.

**Theoretical Framework**

The development of a contemporary theory for understanding bullying is reflected in the Social Dominance Theory (SDT). The SDT creates a framework for understanding the social dynamics of bullying by focusing on how societies maintain group-based social hierarchies that are formed and fueled by the concept of dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Despite progress in the extension of human and civil rights to broader sectors of the world, the problems of oppression, discrimination, bigotry, and genocide still exist (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006). In nearly all stable societies, one social group (often a racial, national, religious or ethnic group) enjoys special privileges and holds disproportionate power while at least one other group has relatively little political power (Pratto & Stewart, 2011).

In an effort to secure power and dominance, bullies use the tactics of intimidation and humiliation. This desire for power and dominance is the main motivating factor that drives the continuation of bullying behavior (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). To experience gains in social status, bullies oppress less powerful members of the class through ongoing social dominance (Long & Pellegrini, 2003). This qualitative inquiry aims to expand the current understanding of SDT by exploring the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals regarding the topic of bullying. Specifically, the
SDT will be reflected in (and utilized to create) all parts of this qualitative inquiry as follows: (a) selection of the topic, (b) development of research questions, (c) development of interview questions, (d) selection of participants, (e) identification of design approach, (f) analysis of the plan, and (g) analysis of the data.

**Overview of Method—Phenomenology**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative inquiry may adopt a phenomenological theory in an attempt to understand the meaning of shared interactions and events of ordinary individuals in specific situations. Phenomenological research has been defined as the study of lived experiences. At its core, this form of inquiry is based on the postulation that there are an arrangement and quintessence to the experiences shared (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The influential philosopher, Edmund Husserl, was the first to construct a theory of transcendental phenomenology. During one of his lectures in Paris, Husserl stated that, "I cannot live, experience, think, value, and act in any world which is not in some sense in me and derives its meaning and truth from me" (Husserl, 1998, p. 8).

Phenomenology as a theory is designed to study people and experiences (instead of objects) by collecting primary data. Primary data have been defined as data that originate initially and originally from the researcher through direct experience and efforts with the aim of addressing a research problem (Bryman, 2004). Phenomenological theory examines this data with the intent of determining individual meaning. In this research study phenomenology provides a valuable framework with which to examine personal experiences with bullying. The current researcher collected primary data during interviews that were conducted via the telephone (all participants chose telephone
interviews instead of face-to-face). Primary data allowed the current researcher to take control of the process of collecting information while serving in a direct role in the investigative process (Bryman, 2004).

The interview questions were presented to a purposive sample of 11 early-career (i.e., within the first five years) elementary school principals from across the state of Mississippi. All interviews took place over the phone; administrators had the choice between an in-person interview or a phone interview (the choice was left to the respondents and depended on their schedule and availability). For each of the interviews, the researcher allowed as much time as necessary for the respondents to fully and comfortably answer all seven of the primary, and all eight additional interview questions. No respondent was limited by time; each participant was able to share as much or as little as he or she wanted to share. The entire interview sessions with each research respondent were recorded using a digital recording device.

**Study Delimitations**

Only early-career elementary school principals were invited to participate in this qualitative phenomenological inquiry. The decision to interview early-career principals (as opposed to veteran principals) was made to explore the current preparation and training qualifications for the position with regard to the issue of bullying. Essentially, the primary researcher was interested in exploring the current training trends addressing bullying prevention of early-career principals. Lastly, the primary researcher chose to follow Moustakas’s (1994) method for conducting a qualitative study based on phenomenological theory because of the descriptive nature of this design.
Significance of the Study

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), more than one out of every five (20.8%) students reported being bullied. This staggering statistic, however, should not hide the fact that all students are impacted by bullying. When students sense the prevalence of bullying, they have a lower sense of safety (Austin, Reynolds, & Barnes, 2016). School administrators are required to deal with acts of inappropriate student behavior that are brought to school either in person or via the internet. The results of this study indicated a significant need for early-career administrators to receive specific training on recognizing bullying behaviors, preventing bullying, and dealing with victims and perpetrators. Results may help school and district administrators determine which administrators (based on direct observations, feedback, performance, and evaluations) need direct supervision and training in bullying prevention. Furthermore, the information should help central office administration and higher education programs in identifying need and providing intensive training and support to reduce bullying. Specifically, the rationale of this study was to (a) explore the lived experiences of elementary school principals regarding the phenomenon of bullying, (b) identify how elementary school administrators manage bullying, (c) identify what actions they are taking to prevent it, (d) identify areas of need and (e) make recommendations for school leaders that will aid in minimizing bullying and its effects. The findings of this research should provide school leaders with viewpoints for handling bullying.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Bullying in schools is a societal epidemic that affects millions of students (Espelage & Holt, 2012; Polanin & Vera, 2013). In many instances, the ramifications are long-lasting and devastating. Bullying often leads to the following: (a) depression, (b) suicide and suicidal thoughts, (c) early sexual activity, (d) substance abuse, and (e) acts of violence (Kim, Yang, Barthelemy, & Lofaso, 2018; Reed, Nugent, & Cooper, 2015). However, victims are not the only group of students who suffer negative consequences due to bullying. Bullies and bystanders to incidents of bullying also experience devastating short- and long-term outcomes (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2017; Hurley, 2018). As bullying incidents in schools become more and more widespread (due in large part to social media), the issue continues to garner the interest of parents, students, teachers, policymakers, educational administrators, and academics. Therefore, extensive research has been conducted with regard to bullying and victimization, both in the U.S. and internationally (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2017).

A leading researcher in the field of bullying is Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus. It was his seminal works that helped to provide initial insight into the cause and continuation of bullying in the educational setting. According to Olweus (1999), bullying occurs when students socially ostracize others from a group, spread gossip about another
student, use unfriendly or hurtful language, threaten or commit physically violent acts, and/or attempt to cause other students to dislike or not be friends with a student. In addition to the works of Olweus (1999), published studies revealed a wide range of topics to be addressed within the larger theme of bullying (Bang & Park, 2017; Bezyazit, Simsek, & Ayhan, 2017; Bradshaw, Pas, Debnam & Johnson, 2015; Brown, Aalsma, & Ott, 2013; Burton, Florell, & Wygant, 2013; Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2016; Hartley, Bauman, Nixon, & Davis, 2015).

This expanded review of the literature will divide the various themes found in the literature on bullying and address the topics of the issue. A review of the current research base on bullying yields results on seven reoccurring topics: (1) aggression, (2) cyberbullying, (3) disabilities, (4) parents, (5) prevention, (6) social and emotional development, and (7) suicide. Results of the most current and relevant research representing these seven reoccurring topics are presented in alphabetical order—first by topic, then by last name of first author. Although organized alphabetically, each topic section addresses important elements of the research questions.

**Aggression and Bullying**

An exploration of the influence of the normative beliefs on aggression and peer attachment on traditional bullying, types of victimization, and cyberbullying was conducted by Burton, Florell, and Wygant (2013). A total of 859 U.S. students in the sixth- through eighth-grade participated in this study. Participants were required to complete a survey which assessed the normative beliefs on aggression, traditional bullying, and peer attachment. The study also assessed cyberbullying and traditional bullying. Results demonstrated that adolescents who had higher normative beliefs (with
regard to aggression) had an increased likelihood of becoming traditional bullies, cyberbullies, and victims of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Moreover, a lack of peer attachment was identified as being negatively associated with bullying as well as victimization.

Donoghue and Raia-Hawrylak (2015) studied the challenges associated with measuring bullying, aggression, and school climate in high school. New Jersey high school students \((n = 810)\) completed surveys in which they were asked to evaluate the impact of aggression and bullying on the school climate. Results indicated that boys had a higher probability than girls to become involved in aggression, victim-aggression, victims, threats, property damage, and physical aggression, while girls were more likely to be involved in social aggression. The survey results identified the prevalence of particular stages of aggression but failed to successfully represent the true climate of a school.

Espelage, Polanin, and Low (2014) conducted a study examining how teacher and staff perceptions of a school environment compare to student self-reports of aggression, bullying, victimization, and the willingness to interfere with bullying incidents. Data were derived from sixth-grade students \((n = 3,616)\) and teachers and staff \((n = 1,447)\) across 36 middle schools in the Midwest (U.S.). Researchers completed the survey measures with regard to aggression, bullying, victimization, and the willingness to interfere in bullying situations. Results demonstrated that, when staff and teachers failed to address aggression with a clear and consistent policy as the main issue in their school, students reported higher incidents of bullying, peer victimization, fighting, and a reduced willingness to intervene. However, in schools where staff and teachers reported a greater
commitment to preventing bullying, students reported fewer incidents of peer victimization and bullying.

Hellström, Beckman, and Hagquist (2013) examined the agreement and disagreement between measures of peer aggression and bullying. Compiled data (via a web-based questionnaire) from Swedish adolescents ($n = 1,760$) were used to compare measures of bullying with measures of peer aggression. Findings indicated that 13% of students who experienced peer victimization reported only bullying, 44% reported only repeated peer aggression, and 43% reported both. In order to capture the prevalence and full magnitude of peer victimization, Hellström et al. (2013) recommended that questions about bullying and peer aggression be used simultaneously, especially given the results of past research that focuses on positive mental health development.

Homel (2013) used a three-dimensional longitudinal study of Australian students to find the developmental processes underlying the link between physical aggression and school bullying during early adulthood. The focus of the investigation was to determine if drinking alcohol would entrench or disrupt the aggressive pathways from bullying in school to aggression in adulthood. Data were gathered from self-reports from 63 males and 88 females during childhood (age 10 years), adolescence (age 14 years) and early adulthood (age 20 years). Results indicated participants who bullied other students during their adolescence and childhood showed increased physical aggression during early adulthood compared to participants who had never bullied. Nonetheless, participants who bullied others during adolescence reported higher forms of aggression, and consumed greater amounts of alcohol.
Machackova and Pfetsch (2016) conducted a study investigating the responses of bystanders to cyberbullying incidents compared to bystanders of offline bullying. Adolescent German students (n = 321) participated in the research. Specifically, the researchers were interested in studying the association between normative beliefs (i.e., how beliefs affect behavior) and bystander responses regarding cyberbullying, verbal aggression, and empathy. Results demonstrated that normative beliefs and a perceived lack of empathy predicted online and offline bullying. Also, the tendencies of bystanders to respond supportively towards a victim or reinforce a bully remained consistent in offline bullying and cyberbullying.

Tippett and Wolke (2015) investigated the prevalence of (and associations between) sibling aggression, household relationships, and family characteristics. Data were compiled from 4,237 adolescent participants from the U.K. Sibling aggression was categorized into four types: stealing, teasing, other verbal abuse, and physical abuse. Results indicated that there were associations between aggression and (a) parent-child relationships (e.g., results indicated that harsh parenting heightens the risk of sibling aggression while positive parenting reduces the risk), (b) socioeconomic status (e.g., greater perpetration of bullying was observed among children with moderately or highly education parents), and (c) sibling and family relationships (e.g., 36% of participants who had experienced sibling aggression perpetrated aggression toward peers).

**Cyberbullying**

Although bullying has been a problem for decades, cyberbullying has developed in the last 20 years, and has added a new dimension for student aggression. Beyazit, Simsek, and Ayhan (2017) carried out a study involving 417 Turkish adolescents at the
high school level to determine factors used to predict cyberbullying behavior in adolescents. According to the study, 35% of the participants had been involved in cyberbullying (victim or bully) at least once in the past month. Results indicated that gender, age, grade, and family income were factors that could successfully predict a predisposition to involvement in cyberbullying. The following groups had a higher frequency for cyberbullying: (a) males, (b) students in ninth or tenth grade, (c) students whose father were younger than 40 years old, and (d) students whose family income was relatively high. Additionally, individuals with the specific intent to cyberbully were likely to access the Internet in areas that lack close parental/adult supervision (e.g., public library, café, or “smartphone” cell phone access outside of the home). Beyazit et al. (2017) acknowledged that some of the most important factors which could be used to prevent cyberbullying include close parental supervision of adolescents when accessing the internet and educating adolescents on appropriate use of information and communication technology (ICT).

Research by Chaux, Velásquez, Schultze-Krumbholz, and Scheithauer (2016) demonstrated that individuals involved in traditional bullying tend to be the same individuals involved in cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is sometimes deemed “easier to conduct” due to the anonymity of the perpetrators. Participants included 722 German students ranging from 11 to 17 years of age. The student participants were assigned to three types of interventions: a short intervention of one day, long interventions involving 15 sessions, and a control group. The results demonstrated that online bullying prevention methods could be used to prevent traditional bullying and cyberbullying.
Moreover, compared to the one-day intervention and control groups, students in the long interventions exhibited the best results.

Garaigordobil et al. (2015) used a sample \((n = 3,026)\) of Spanish participants between the ages of 12 and 18 years who participated in research that studied cyberbullying. According to the study, 69% of the participants had been involved in past incidences of cyberbullying. All 69% claimed to have experienced cyberbullying more than once in a year. Additionally, findings demonstrated that 30% were identified as cyber victims, 15% as cyberbullies, and 65% as observers (some rated themselves in two or more categories). However, only 13% of respondents categorized themselves as bullies and victims. The most prevalent behaviors were lying about someone online, sending offensive/insulting messages, making anonymous frightening phone calls, and stealing someone's password. The study indicated that the actions among cyber victims, cyberbullies, and observers had a negative impact on each group.

Lonigro et al. (2015) noted that some individuals acted as cyberbullies while also being cyber victims. These individuals were trying to avenge for being bullied. Therefore, Lonigro et al. (2015) conducted a study to test exactly how state anger (i.e., temporary anger) and trait anger (i.e., chronic anger) impact cyberbullying and victimization. Participants \((n = 716)\) between the ages of 11 and 17 years responded to surveys that measured state and trait anger as it pertains to cyberbullying. Results demonstrated that most of the participants considered cyberbullying as a major concern, experienced trait anger caused by cyberbullying, and believed victimization brought about state anger.
Patterson, Allan, and Cross (2017) explored the effect of cyberbullying on victims and bystanders. Their research consisted of Australian students \((n = 292)\) between the ages of 13 and 16 years. Participants were interviewed about their online habits and experiences (specifically pertaining to cyberbullying) and were asked to respond to hypothetical scenarios involving cyberbullies. Additionally, participants were asked to reflect on the effect that cyberbullying has on their friends and themselves. The interviews involved counseling the youths and advising them to seek help from people (including their parents) who could guide them on how to cope with such situations in the future. Results indicated the following.

1. Cyberbullying not only negatively affected the victim, but also the bystander to the action.
2. Bystanders were more likely to intervene when the perceived threat/harm to the target was high, the victim was a close friend, and/or the bystander was female.
3. Bystanders were less likely to approach teachers regarding online versus offline incidents.

Payne and Hutzell (2015) compared the prevalence of cyberbullying to interpersonal (face-to-face) bullying among male students between the ages of 12 and 18 years. Results indicated that among boys, interpersonal (face-to-face) bullying occurred more frequently than cyberbullying. Twenty-eight percent of the students claimed that they had been victims of interpersonal bullying, while nine percent had been victims of cyberbullying. The most common types of interpersonal bullying were making fun of
each other, while the most common forms of cyberbullying involved the spreading of gossip on social media and threats via text messages.

A study was conducted by Wright (2016) to examine different mediation strategies used by parents to curb cyberbullying and victimization. These mediation strategies included restriction to access the internet, co-viewing online material, and other instructions. The study focused on 568 female participants adolescents ages 13 to 15 years. It was discovered that cyberbullying victimization was effectively controlled by the parent’s mediation strategies. However, at times, such strategies caused unwanted psychological difficulties for the adolescents (e.g., loneliness). Overall, findings indicated that parental supervision is a key factor in helping to curb the problem of cyberbullying.

**Disabilities and Bullying**

Hartley, Bauman, Nixon, and Davis (2015) pointed out that researching bullying was a critical avenue to understand the social integration of students who were in special education. In this study, Hartley et al. (2015) focused on 3,305 students who reported being bullied two or three times each month. These researchers compared the pattern of relational, verbal, and physical bullying among students who were in special education to their general education peers. In general, the findings demonstrated that students who were in special education reported more frequently on emotional harm, physical harm, and psychological distress due to bullying. However, self-reported rates of relational and verbal victimization were equal, while physical victimization was more common among the students who were in special education. According to the student self-report, staff and teachers also had a likelihood of being physically, relationally, and verbally abusive towards students who were in special education.
In a separate study, Kokkinos and Antoniadou (2013) sought to examine self-reported victimization and bullying experiences among students identified as having a specific learning disability (SLD). Participants in this study were Greek primary school students. Of this sample \( n = 346 \), 50 met the SLD criteria. The researchers ensured that all the respondents completed self-reported measures of victimization and bullying and provided their demographic data as well. The results of the research demonstrated that students with SLD had a higher likelihood of being victims and/or bullies through the use of direct verbal aggression. The findings of this research somewhat challenged existing research that focused on students with disabilities being only victims of bullying.

For over three years, Rose and Gage (2016) explored bullying involvement of students with and without disabilities. The researchers evaluated the perpetration and victimization rates of 6,531 students who were in Grades 3 through 12. Just over 16% of the participants had disabilities. Results of the research indicated students with disabilities experienced high rates of victimization, yet also engaged in greater levels of perpetration compared to their peers without disabilities. Additionally, the study revealed a discrepancy between the perpetration and victimization rates between the youth who were disabled and those who were not disabled (i.e., youth with disabilities had higher rates of victimization and bullying). The findings of Rose and Gage (2016) supported the recommendations that students with disabilities should be provided with distinct instruction in communication and social skills to mitigate the negative experiences caused by bullying.

Rose, Simpson, and Ellis (2016) suggested the act of bullying was grounded in interactions between complex social-ecological systems and specific groups of
individuals. Since the occurrence of bullying is not confined to one specific school or classroom, this study sought to explore the intersection between school belonging and sibling aggression on fighting, victimization, and bullying in various schools. Data were compiled from surveys completed by 14,580 students in Grades 6 through 12 with and without disabilities. Results demonstrated that students who had disabilities reported a higher level of school victimization, bullying, and fighting than their nondisabled peers. The researchers concluded there was a need for schools to be intentional in establishing a safe and inclusive environment for all school-aged youth.

Rose, Simpson, and Moss (2015) stated that contemporary literature shows that students with disabilities might often be overrepresented within the dynamics of bullying as both victims and perpetrators. Nonetheless, the prevalence rates associated with representing the youths or students with disabilities has been limited to measurement, definition issues, and status identification. The purpose of this study was to assess the commonness of specific sub-groups of students who had disabilities. The researchers adopted a cross-sectional methodology, where a sample of 14,508 students with and without disabilities was included as the respondents from grades six through 12. The results of the study suggested that students with disabilities experienced higher rates of bullying, victimization, fighting, aggression, and online victimization compared to their nondisabled counterparts.

Rose, Simpson, and Preast (2016) stated that, within the dynamics of bullying, students who have disabilities are disproportionately involved. The authors identified a lack of research that investigates the interaction between victimization (and reactive or proactive aggression) and the bullying psychosocial predictors among school-going youth.
who have various disabilities. In this study, Rose et al. (2016) chose to use structural equation modeling to examine the predictive nature of hostility, depression, and self-esteem on bullying, victimization, and fighting. The study used a diverse sample 1,183 students who had disabilities. According to the results of the study, victimization predicted fighting and bullying. Moreover, lower levels of depression and increased levels of hostility predicted fighting, bullying, deeper depression, and lower esteem levels. These researchers concluded there was a need for schools to integrate targeted interventions that would address the factors that escalate the rates of bullying and violence.

According to Rose et al. (2015), students who have disabilities have been neglected and are disproportionately represented when it comes to incidents of bullying. Additionally, there have been few studies which have examined the interaction between special education services, disability identification, and bullying. These authors conducted a study that evaluated bullying involvement among 1,055 students with and without disabilities. According to the results, students who had disabilities experienced increased rates of victimization and engaged in more fighting incidents than those without disabilities. Students with behavioral and emotional disorders and those with intellectual disabilities received higher rates of victimization in their school environments.

**Parents and Bullying**

The research by Brown, Aalsma, and Ott (2013) examined the experience of U.S. middle-school parents as they tried to protect their bullied children. Qualitative inquiry was used to interpret the phenomenon by providing an in-depth analysis of data collected...
during interviews with parents. A sample of 11 parents who had experienced their child being bullied at school were interviewed via phone calls. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using MAX QD software. Results indicated that parents experience three stages of action: (a) discovering the bullying incident, (b) reporting to school, and (c) living with the aftermath of their child being bullied. Ten of the eleven parents experienced ongoing resistance from school officials once they reported the bullying incident. This study highlighted the difficulties experienced by parents of bullied children and perceived lack of assistance from school leaders.

The objective of the study conducted by Cho, Hong, Sterzing, and Woo (2013) was to investigate whether delinquency, low self-esteem, and peer pressure were negatively affected by the relationship between insecure parental attachment and harassment at school. The information for the study was derived from the Korean youth panel study. Longitudinal data were collected from one group of students who were fourth graders in 2004, and eighth graders in 2008. Structural equation modeling was implemented to investigate whether insecure parental attachment, unusual peer relations, self-control, and felony were positively connected to bullying. This study by Cho et al. (2013) suggested an indirect relationship between poor parental relationship and high rates of bullying.

Eiden (2010) evaluated the relationship between alcoholism, parents, peer bulling, and victimization in middle school students \((n = 162)\). Structural equation modeling was used to test this hypothesis. Initially, the child-mother association was evaluated at 18 months of age; subsequent reports of peer bullying and victimization were then evaluated in the fourth grade. The results indicated a direct relationship between the father’s
alcoholism and indirect relationship through the child-mother association. Additionally, findings demonstrated that there was a direct relationship between parental alcohol symptoms to the boys but not to the girls. Lastly, results demonstrated that children exposed to parents engaged in alcoholism are at a great risk for interpersonal and behavioral difficulties (Eiden, 2010).

Edwards and Batlemento (2016) investigated bullying and victimization occurrences of high school students living in out-of-home placements with guardians compared to those living at home with at least one parent. The authors surveyed 3,793 participants aged 15-18 years. Results indicated that high school students who live in out-of-home placements with guardians are more likely to become victims of bullying compared to their peers who do live at home with at least one parent. Additionally, results indicated that individuals living in out-of-home placements are no more likely to become perpetrators of bullying than their peers.

The study by Harcourt, Green, and Bowden (2015) examined long-term, serious psychological effects of bullying. Results demonstrated that children who have been bullied experience more serious psychosocial issues when compared to those who have not experienced bullying. Harcourt et al. (2015) examined the experiences of 26 parents whose children had been bullied at primary school levels in New Zealand. Responses from parent participants reported experiencing a great range of emotions in reaction to the bullying of their child. An online anonymous questionnaire was developed to gather the comprehensive responses of parents whose children had been bullied. The qualitative responses were analyzed using deductive content analysis. High parental support, involvement, and effective family communication were found to protect children from
bullying, while parental abuse and/or negligence were the most common contributors to bullying. The common emotion between all parents surveyed was a concern for the future of their bullied child.

Rajendran, Kruszewski, and Halperin (2016) investigated the link between positive parenting and lower rates of bullying. Children \((n = 162)\) from the New York metropolitan area were studied over six assessment points between preschool and 9 years of age. Results indicated that those children who received positive parental support by the age of five years showed a significantly larger decline in bullying than those who did not receive parental support. However, there was no longitudinal link between bullying and (a) quality of parent-child interactions, (b) supportive parenting, and (c) negative affect.

Zablotsky, Bradshaw, Anderson, and Law (2012) conducted a cross-sectional study with the aim of investigating parental experiences with their children on the matter of bullying. The research also sought to examine the parents’ perceptions of the school and involvement in prevention strategies. Ultimately, data were collected from 1,221 parents via anonymous surveys. Results of the study indicated that parents had a high probability of rating the climate of their children’s school environment negatively if bullying had been reported in the last month. Additionally, parents who had a positive view of the school were more likely to be directly involved in the affairs of their children.

**Prevention of Bullying**

Bradshaw, Pas, Debnam, and Johnson (2015) investigated the effect that implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in high schools had on bullying and school climate. They adopted a multi-tiered system to address issues
related to aggressive school climate and bullying. Their study focused on whether or not 31 high schools could adopt and successfully implement PBIS. The multilevel analysis conducted on the longitudinal data revealed that schools which demonstrated higher motivation toward adopting and implementing PBIS had the greatest declining rates in bullying incidents. Therefore, the authors suggested that schools with a high rate of bullying should be especially motivated to adopt PBIS.

Cecil and Molnar-Main (2015) investigated the adoption and implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) by 2,022 teachers in 88 elementary schools in Pennsylvania. Even though all of the teachers were in attendance during the initial kick-off event and posted (and explained) the rules of the program to their students, it was later observed that booster sessions and parental involvement lacked in almost all the schools. The teachers who demonstrated the greatest comfort with the OBPP program (e.g., those with past experience with OBPP) were more likely to complete all of the components of the program, including individual-level activities. Findings of Cecil and Molnar-Main (2015) revealed that implementer characteristics matter when implementing OBPP with fidelity. In addition, some of the OBPP components were easier to implement and complete than others.

Jenson, Brisson, Bender, and Williford (2013) examined the effect of the Youth Matters (YM) program on bullying and victimization. Data were collected from 876 Dutch elementary and middle school students. When compared to students in the control group, participants in the YM group transitioned from membership from the three bully categories (i.e., bully, victim, bully-victim) at significantly higher rates than those without a YM program. Experimental findings were strongest during the first year of the
intervention (fourth grade) and the first year of middle school (sixth grade). Future research should not only focus on these two grade groups but also pay particular attention to raising the effects on fifth grade participants.

Letendre, Ostrander, and Mickens (2016) investigated the experiences of teachers, administrators, and support staff who implemented PBIS in hopes of reducing bullying in an urban school. The participants were initially motivated by the need to eliminate bullying that appeared to hinder school performance along with the well-being of the students. Letendre et al. conducted a qualitative study with five focus groups that targeted understanding the teachers’ and support staffs’ experiences along with the role of administrators as they implemented the school-wide bullying prevention program. Grounded Theory approaches were used to code and analyze data. Results demonstrated that participants’ experiences were generally positive—likely an indicator of the program’s success (Letendre et al., 2016).

As bullying has been shown to negatively affect attendance rates and academic performance among students, Migliaccio and Raskauskas (2013) set out to examine a small-scale bullying intervention program (KiVa) that was implemented using a video-discussion model. Data were collected from U.S. students in grades four through six ($n = 81$). Gains in knowledge of bullying were measured using pretest and posttest assessments. Results indicated students who participated in the program increased their knowledge of who to approach for assistance with bullying, attitudes about victims, and overall knowledge regarding bullying. Results of Migliaccio and Raskauskas’ (2013) study suggested that a video-discussion classroom intervention can help in building knowledge and awareness of bullying.
Timmons-Mitchell, Levesque, Harris, Flannery, and Falcone (2016) were concerned with the effect that bullying had on students with regard to public health in the U.S. The authors conducted a pilot test of the StandUp online initiative aimed at preventing bullying. The three-session online initiative included a sample initially consisting of 113 high school students (ultimately, 88 students completed all of the sessions). Overall results indicated that (a) students’ healthy relationship skills increased, (b) students had reduced odds of perpetrating and experiencing emotional and physical bullying, and (c) students were less likely to passively stand by while others were bullied. Additionally, the StandUp online program can be utilized to deter bullying and increase active bystander participation with relative ease, because the online sessions do not require extensive staff training.

Trip et al. (2015) investigated a class-based antibullying prevention program on student behaviors, emotions, and cognitions. Viennese Social Competence (ViSC), a behavior component, and Rational Emotion Behavioral Education (REBE), a cognitive-behavior component, were utilized during the study. Eleven schools in Austria (34 total classes) participated in the study. Data were collected during one academic year at three intervals (beginning, middle, and end). Results differed depending on the order of implementation of the programs. While the programs were effective in reducing dysfunctional cognitions, they failed to stop unwanted behavior.

**Social and Emotional Development and Bullying**

Espelage et al. (2016) conducted a three-year evaluation study targeted at determining the effectiveness of the Second Step-Student Success Through Prevention (SS-SSTP). This program was based on creating a social-emotional learning (SEL)
program to increase prosocial behavior capable of protecting students in the occurrence of bullying incidents, especially those directed towards those with disabilities. The study featured 123 students drawn from 12 schools in the Midwest region of the U.S. Results revealed that participants in the program experienced statistical gains and clinical increases in the willingness to resolve bullying incidents compared to their peers in the control groups. The study affirmed that SEL initiatives hold promise for reducing bullying and improving school performance.

Garner (2017) investigated the occurrence of mental representations (i.e., relationships, confidence, managing bullying, and empathy toward victims) in 150 pre-service and 25 in-service teachers. Focus of the study included examining insight towards victims along with emotional expression associated with peer victimization. The study found that positive associations (traced from their prosocial peer beliefs) led to confidence in dealing with bullying behaviors. Additionally, results indicated that positive emotional expressiveness brought normative avoidance and occasional dismissive victimization-related beliefs. These reports by teachers who showed negative emotional expressiveness were linked to prosocial peer beliefs and victimization-related convictions. Lastly, results demonstrated that in-service teachers have a higher positive expressiveness than their pre-service colleagues (Garner, 2017).

Golmaryami et al. (2016) perceived bullying as a continued challenge in schools that has often led to adverse outcomes for the bully and victim alike. Golmaryami et al.’s investigation involved 284 U.S. school children regarded as ethnically diverse. Participants ranged from nine to 14 years old. Golmaryami et al. examined the level of victimization involving bullying and several social and emotional features. The
characteristics chosen served to integrate distinct developmental pathways undertaken to conduct challenges among children who bully others. Results demonstrated that interaction was observed between bullying and victimization when forecasting callous-unemotional traits in those identified with lower victimization. The study by Golmaryami et al. failed to prove the connection of harassment with perceived challenges to regulate anger expression and moderate victimization levels.

Hajdukovaa, Hornby, and Cushman (2016) documented the findings of a qualitative study that explored the lived-experiences of 29 boys (ages 9 through 13 years) with severe social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. All participants were schooled in the same residential school. Hajdukovaa et al. utilized in-depth focus groups and semi-structured interviews for data collection. Transcendental phenomenology using Husserl’s (1998) descriptive philosophy was adopted to understand the implication of the participants’ schooling experiences from provided descriptions. Bullying topped the list of features examined. Results indicated that all participants faced the challenge of suffering victimization and bullying owing to insufficient positive relations with peers and adults. Secondary findings indicated that teachers had inadequate understanding of bullying, thus hindering their effectiveness to eliminating it (Hajdukovaa et al., 2016).

The development of social and emotional learning skills of bullies, victims, and bully-victims was studied by Hussein (2013). Data were collected from 623 students between the ages of 10 years and 12 years in Grades 5 and 6 in four Egyptian elementary schools. Of the three bully groups, bullies numbered 138, victims 138, and bully-victims 248. Analysis of data required applying multinomial logistic regression. Descriptive data demonstrated that boys were more likely to fall in the bully category than girls.
Additionally, bully victims had lower probabilities of compliance with the set social rules than the bullies themselves did. Lastly, victims and bullies have less likeability than children not involved in bullying. The findings of this study by Hussein (2013) suggested that social and emotional skills have collective potential to provide sufficiency in addressing bullying challenges.

Jenkins, Demaray, and Tennant (2017) studied the connection involving bullying experiences and certain social, emotional, and cognitive factors. Social skills observed involved empathy, cooperation, responsibility, and assertion. Emotional factors affected difficulties associated with personal adjustment, schooling problems, and internalizing challenges. Cognitive elements involved self-monitoring challenge, inhibitory control, and emotional regulation. Data were collected from 246 students in Grades 6 through 8. Findings demonstrated emotional difficulties significantly caused positive association with victimization in boys and girls. Furthermore, social skills had significant and positive relations with defensive behaviors in both girls and boys. However, the findings emphasized how investigating social, emotional, and executive functioning could vary systematically across the bullying roles. Further investigation is necessary to develop targeted social-emotional interventions that would halt bullying while initiating defenses that would support victims at risk (Jenkins et al., 2017).

Smith, Polenik, Nakasita, and Jones (2012) examined the social, emotional, and behavioral functioning for two subtypes of bullying: direct and indirect. Data were collected on the sociometric measures of bullying behavior and social inclusion of 192 pupils (ages 7 through 11 years). All student participants (and their teachers) completed a series of assessments related to self-perception, social competence, and behavior.
Preliminary results indicated that all bully groups had similar levels of social rejection. Both direct and indirect teams experienced increased emotional and social challenges with the indirect group revealing weaker self-perception. The study showed that knowledge of behavioral, psychological, and social indicators correlates to bullying, thus demanding support before implementing interventions. Results demonstrated that all three bully groups experienced similar levels of significant social rejection. Additionally, students directly involved in bullying demonstrated the greatest number of social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, while students who were indirectly involved in bullying demonstrated weakness in self-perception (Smith et al., 2012).

**Suicide and Bullying**

Bang and Park (2017) investigated suicide risks and psychiatric disorders among adolescents who had been victims of bullying. Data from two stages of psychopathology screeners were collected from 33,038 Korean middle-school students. Following the screenings, Bang and Park conducted structured interviews with 26,092 participants. The interviews were conducted through a structured diagnostic instrument which was also utilized in collecting information regarding the experiences of the respondents in matters of bullying as well as the history of attempts on suicide. The results of this study revealed that adolescents with a history of bullying had a high likelihood of being diagnosed with psychosis and depression compared to those not exposed to bullying. The authors concluded that bullying victimization was a risk factor for suicide attempts, ideation (thinking about committing suicide), psychosis, and depression.

Bhatta, Shakya, and Jefferis (2014) studied the association between bullying, ideation (thinking about killing oneself), and making a plan to kill oneself. Data were
collected from 1,082 middle-school adolescents in rural Ohio. Results indicated that approximately 43% reported being bullied in school, 22% reported engaging in suicidal ideation, and 13% reported creating an actual plan to commit suicide. The results showed a strong indication of how bullying can lead to suicide ideation and plans to commit suicide.

Görzig (2016) investigated the association of cyberbullying roles by viewing specific suicide-related web content and psychological problems. Data from 19,406 Internet-using 11- to 16-year-olds from Europe were analyzed. Self-reports were obtained to identify if students (a) viewed online content related to self-harm, (b) viewed online content related to suicide, and/or (c) engaged in cyberbullying (as the role of bully or victim). Additionally, data were obtained using the conduct, emotional, and peer problem subscales of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Results revealed that victims of cyberbullying incidents were more likely to view web content related to suicide and self-harm than cyberbullies (Görzig, 2016).

Suicidal behavior (SB) and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) in victims of bullying was studied by Jantzer, Haffner, Parzer, Resch, and Kaess (2015). The authors also sought to identify the effect that parental monitoring had on the actions of adolescents. Data were collected from 647 adolescents ($M = 12\,\text{years}$) surveyed on their own behaviors (SB and NSSI), experiences with bullying, and the monitoring by their parents. Results demonstrated that approximately 14% of participants experienced frequent bullying in the past few months, which increased the risk of SB and NSSI. Additionally, 35% of participants experienced bullying occasionally during the previous three months. Lastly, no protective effect of bullying occurred as a result of parental monitoring.
LeVasseur, Kelvin, and Grosskopf (2013) sought to examine the intersections between gender, sexual minority, and Hispanic ethnic identities and how they interact with bullying experiences in the prediction of suicide attempts among youths residing in New York City. The researchers utilized secondary data analysis as the methodology based on the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey of New York City. The study used logical regression to examine the association between ethnicity, gender, sexual identity and bullying in an attempt to suicide. The authors focused on incidents of bullying and suicide attempts among all participants. The results from the study indicated that minority youths who engage in sexual activity had a much higher rate of attempting suicide and reporting bullying than minority youths who did not engage in sexual activity.

Roh et al. (2015) conducted a study with two main goals: (1) observe the experiences of bullying among adolescents from a victim's perspective and (2) scrutinize the suicidal behaviors (attempts of suicide, planning for suicide, and ideation). Data were collected from 4,410 participants who were seeking medical attention for specific medical-related issues in 31 local healthcare centers in South Korea. Throughout the study, peer bullying was examined by the use of latent class analysis (LCA), which is used to classify participants’ experiences. The results of the study indicated that experiences with bullying showed two types of bullying (i.e., physical and nonphysical). Results revealed that adolescents who were the victims of physical and/or nonphysical bullying are approximately three times more likely to attempt suicide than those who have never been victims of any type of bullying (Roh et al., 2015).
Suicide and depressive symptoms in Latina girls were studied by Romero, Wiggs, Valencia, and Bauman (2013). The authors examined occurrences of depression, suicide ideation, suicide planning, and suicide attempts among a sample of 650 adolescent Latina girls. Compared to national averages, rates among participants for suicide ideation (23%), suicide planning (23%), suicide attempts (13%), and depression (49%) were much higher. Results also indicated that girls who had been victims of past bullying incidents had a greater likelihood of committing suicide compared to those who have never been victims. Finally, bullies themselves had a greater likelihood to create a suicide plan or engage in ideation than compared to those who have never bullied in the past.

Summary

The research clearly demonstrates that school bullying has a lasting impact on healthy development that negatively affects the psychological well-being of the victims, bullies, and bystanders. As schools continue to combat the bullying epidemic, it is important that administrators focus on student aggression as a whole. Administrators need to be keenly aware of the potential for a negative and violent school climate that can be the cause (and result) of student aggression. In order to address and reduce school aggression, administrators need to fully understand the current school climate. Physical and social aggression can have an extremely negative effect on the school climate (Donoghue & Raia-Hawrylak, 2015). Fortunately, in schools where staff and teachers make a commitment to prevent bullying (and that commitment is clear to the students), administrators can expect less aggression, reports of peer victimization, and bullying (Espelage et al., 2014). However, without a commitment to prevent bullying from teachers and staff, administrators can expect to experience the devastating cyclical effect
of bullying and aggression (Hellstrom et al., 2013). This effect will likely lead to negative consequences throughout adulthood for bullies, victims, and bystanders (Homel, 2013).

In addition to school climate, school administrators often find themselves engaged in a battle that often takes place outside the school building. Cyberbullying has become one of the most concerning topics for adolescents today. Approximately 69% of students experience cyberbullying on a regular basis (Garaigordobil et al., 2015; Lonigro et al., 2015). Additionally, cyberbullying often leads to anger, depression, and a withdrawal from social activities (Patterson et al., 2017). Unfortunately, cyberbullying typically takes place in areas that lack adult (e.g., teacher, staff, parent, etc.) supervision (Beyazit et al., 2017), thus making it difficult to control. There is some good news: Current research demonstrates that online bullying prevention methods can be utilized to prevent traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Chaux et al., 2016). However, some anti-cyberbullying strategies (e.g., increased adult supervision of Internet usage, restriction to Internet access, etc.) can result in unintended and unwanted psychological difficulties for adolescents (e.g., loneliness; Wright, 2016).

Even though students with disabilities often experience loneliness and social exclusion (Tobias & Mukhopadhyay, 2017), they are not immune from bullying. In fact, just the opposite is true. Vast amounts of research demonstrate that students with disabilities are more likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers (Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2013; Rose & Gage, 2016; Rose, Simpson, & Ellis, 2016; Rose, Simpson, & Moss, 2015; Rose, Simpson & Preast, 2016; Rose et al., 2015). Not only do students in special education make more reports on bullying, emotional harm, physical harm, and
psychological distress than students in general education but alarmingly staff and teachers are more likely to engage in physical, relationally, and verbally abusive toward students with disabilities compared to students without disabilities (Hartley et al., 2015). However, students with disabilities are not always the victims of incidents of bullying. Students with disabilities engage in bullying, aggression, and physical violence more often than their nondisabled peers (Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2013; Rose, Simpson, & Moss, 2015; Rose, Simpson & Preast, 2016; Rose et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important for parents of students with disabilities to closely monitor their child’s social, emotional, and physical development in and out of school.

Across the country, parents of children with and without disabilities attempt to prevent their children from experiencing the devastating effects of bullying. Unfortunately, parents are often met with resistance from school officials once they report an incident of bullying (Brown et al., 2013). This makes living with the aftermath of their child being bullied even more difficult. Due to the difficulties that go along with “getting involved,” parents might feel the best course of action is to remain uninvolved in hopes that the problem naturally works itself out. However, poor parent involvement results in higher rates of bullying (Cho et al., 2013), while supportive parenting (e.g., supportive, involved parents who effectively communicate) was found to protect children from bullying (Harcourt et al., 2015; Rajendran et al., 2016). Additionally, parental involvement, actions, and behaviors also directly affect whether or not a child will engage in bullying behaviors. Children exposed to parental abuse of alcohol, abuse, and negligence are at a greater risk for engaging in bullying (Eiden, 2010; Harcourt et al., 2015). While poor parenting is positively correlated with bullying, so does living with
guardians instead of birth parents. Students who live in out-of-home placements with guardians (as opposed to parents) are more likely to become victims of bullying and/or bullies (Edwards & Batlemento, 2016).

School officials and academics have implemented many anti-bullying programs that have yielded positive results. Anti-bullying programs, such as the OBPP, YM, KiVa, PBIS, and StandUp, have been extremely effective in reducing the amount of bullying incidents in schools. In addition to declining rates in bullying, results of these programs have demonstrated that student participants increase their (a) knowledge and awareness of bullying, (b) the likelihood of getting involved to stop a bullying incident from continuing, and (c) healthy relationship skills (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Cecil & Molnar-Main, 2015; Jenson et al., 2013; Letendre et al., 2016; Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2013; Timmons-Mitchell et al., 2016). The main component that most anti-bullying programs have in common is a focus on the SEL skill development of adolescents.

By focusing on the five core competencies of SEL development (i.e., Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision Making, Relationship Skills, and Social Awareness), schools are able to reduce bullying and implement a coordinated framework for administrators, teachers, families, and communities to foster students’ social, emotional, and academic learning Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2018). However, when attention is not provided to the social and emotional well-being of students, the effects can lead to depression, psychosis, viewing harmful material online, engaging in cyberbullying, ideation (thinking about suicide), planning to commit suicide, self-harm, and committing suicide (Bang & Park,
A review of the current research on bullying yields alarming results: even though bullying in schools has reached epidemic proportions in many areas of the U.S. (and the results have extremely adverse short- and long-term consequences), many schools do not have active anti-bullying programs currently in place (Carter, 2012). It is imperative that principals become (and remain) aware and informed of the evidence-based anti-bullying programs available to them. However, staying up-to-date on the results of current bullying research is not an easy task, as the job of being a principal (especially that of an early-career building administrator) is extremely complex and demanding. Although principals work tirelessly to establish conditions that sustain learning for others, they receive very little support for their own learning and development (Bartoletti, 2012). As principals’ on-going experiences continue to shape their understanding of issues (e.g., curriculum, instruction, assessment, culture, and bullying) that directly impact the effective functioning of a school, it is imperative to investigate the lived experiences (regarding bullying) of early-career principals in an attempt to identify potential areas of concern and overall need.

According to Moustakas (1994), in developing scientific evidence for phenomenological investigations, the primary researcher carries out a series of procedures and methods that follow a systematic, disciplined, and organized study. The steps of such a study include (a) identifying a topic of inquiry, (b) conducting a systematic review of the literature on the topic, (c) constructing a set of criteria to locate appropriate participants, and (d) developing a set of questions to guide the interview.
process. The review of the literature on the topic of bullying (presented in Chapter II) identified seven reoccurring topics (aggression, cyberbullying, disabilities, parents, prevention, social and emotional development, and suicide) that aided in the construction of the research questions and interview questions utilized for this study.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Qualitative Research Design

As previously stated (see Chapters I and II), this study identified qualitative research as a means to address an important topic (bullying) that negatively impacts schools today. Qualitative research is an inquiry method applied in various academic disciplines (such as the natural sciences and social sciences) but also utilized in nonacademic disciplines, such as business and marketing (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The qualitative research design focuses on opinions and words rather than quantitative information or data that emanate from a quantitative study (Bryman, 2004). The critical objective of quantitative research is achieving an understanding by having the investigation center on the facts that extend into perceptions and beliefs. The most common method utilized in the generation of data for qualitative research is interviewing (i.e., structured or semi-structured). However, other ways can be employed by the researcher to collect data, such as observations, focus groups, group discussions, or text messages (Bryman, 2004). Regardless of the investigation method, the research questions guide the interviewer by serving as the major experiences the researcher seeks to explore (Saunders et al., 2009).

One of the most significant benefits of qualitative research is that the researcher and participant(s) each play a critical role during the investigation (Bryman, 2004).
Further, the in-depth involvement of the researcher during a qualitative study helps to ensure that data are collected in a genuine manner without bias from the researcher. By attending to these issues, the process instills trustworthiness and credibility because the subjects and issues covered are evaluated in detail and depth (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). Lastly, opportunities for the researcher to ask follow-up questions (as a method of seeking more clarity) also exist. Qualitative research is an important method of conducting research because it explores and highlights the experience of human beings, which can be more powerful and compelling than data collected using quantitative research (Saunders et al., 2009).

Purposive sampling is synonymous with qualitative studies as it is widely used to identify and select quality participants (i.e., information) to take full advantage of lacking resources (Patton, 2002). Purposeful technique involves the identification and selection of people who have deep knowledge, experience, or understanding of the topic under study (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). Additionally, the choice of this technique is critical in increasing the willingness and availability of individuals to be part of the research by offering opportunities to share personal opinions and experiences in the most eloquent, reflective, and expressive way. Purposive sampling is a nonprobability method where the elements included in the research sample are chosen by the researcher’s judgment (Bryman, 2004).

One of the common perceptions among researchers using this technique is to obtain a representative sample using sound judgment (Moustakas, 1994). At times, purposive sampling proves to be important and effective in situations where there are only limited individuals who can serve as research respondents based on the nature of the
research questions as well as the adopted research design. However, it is critical for the researcher to exercise caution when utilizing this sampling technique because of the possible shortcomings. Possible shortcomings of this type of participant selection are as follows: (a) vulnerability to errors in the researcher’s judgment, (b) high level of bias, (c) low level of reliability, and (d) the inability to have the outcome of the research generalized (Palinkas et al., 2015). Another challenge associated with this sampling technique is the fact that the range variant in the sample from which a purposive sample is selected is unknown before or after the completion of the research (Palinkas et al., 2015). However, all five types of qualitative research (i.e., narrative, case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography) possess challenges to implementation.

**Phenomenology**

As previously stated, phenomenological inquiry was selected for this qualitative study due to the nature of its purpose (to explore the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying). According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research is inspired by the curiosity and excitement of a researcher on a specific topic area. This study stems from the current researcher’s experiences with bullying at a large urban high school in the southeastern United States. By using the phenomenological methods and techniques as described by Moustakas (1994), this study focused on gaining a better understanding of the bullying experiences of people in the same administrative position. Research has demonstrated that in addition to the high- and middle-school levels, bullying is now a pervasive problem at the elementary school level (McCormac, 2014). However, there has been far less research focused solely on this age
group. Therefore, this phenomenological inquiry aimed to examine the lived experiences of early-career (i.e., within their first 5 years of the job) elementary school principals regarding the important topic of bullying.

**Research Questions**

As previously stated in Chapter I, the phenomenon of bullying in schools was explored from the perspective of early-career elementary school principals. The following research questions guided the development of the study:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals?

RQ2: Are there shared lived experiences among early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying?

RQ3: Are there unique lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying?

RQ4: How are early-career elementary school principals managing bullying?

RQ5: What actions are early-career elementary school principals taking to prevent bullying?

RQ6: Is there anything that early-career elementary school principals believe they need (that they do not have) to help them combat bullying?

**Interview Questions**

The following interview questions were presented to the purposive sample of early-career elementary school principals:
1. In your role as principal, what are your experiences with student-to-student bullying?

2. In your role as principal, can you articulate your experiences with physical bullying?

3. In your role as principal, can you articulate experiences with cyberbullying?

4. In your role as principal, are you taking any active measures to combat/prevent bullying?

5. Is there anything you feel you need (that you don’t currently have) to help prevent bullying in your school?

6. As a student growing up, did you ever experience bullying in school? If so, would you be willing to share with me some of those experiences?

7. Is there anything that you would like to add?

**Additional Interview Questions**

a. Prior to assuming your current position as principal, how many years were you a teacher?

b. What grade/content area did you teach?

c. What grade/content area are you certified?

d. How many years have you been a principal?

e. What is your highest degree?

f. Did you obtain your administrator’s certificate via the traditional route with a master’s degree in educational leadership or by completing an alternate route program? If alternate route, which program?

g. Have you received any formal training in bullying prevention?

h. Have you received any informal training in bullying prevention?
Procedures Followed for Data Collection

Properly designed phenomenological inquiries involve procedural adherence to research ethics. While conducting this study, ethical considerations were followed to ensure that all aspects of the research did not infringe upon the rights of any participant. The researcher proceeded with the study once the specific protocol and details were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University (see Appendix A). Importantly, this affirmed the learning institution's commitment to following ethical guidelines when conducting studies (Saunders et al., 2009). During all interviews, the researcher followed the same procedures (i.e., reintroduce self, thank participants for participating, summarize study, ask interview questions one at a time, clarify any information necessary, and finish by again thanking each participant). The second ethical consideration was obtaining the consent of research respondents. Once a respondent was identified through purposive sampling, each participant signed a consent form (Saunders et al., 2009) (see Appendix B). However, before requesting participation, the researcher provided a detailed explanation of why the research was conducted. It was an opportunity to answer prospective respondents’ possible questions regarding the study and their involvement and enabled them to make informed decisions on whether to become part of the sample. Further, once respondents agreed to be included in the study, the researcher had them sign the consent form (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and also informed them of the following:

1. They had the right to withdraw from the study.
2. The research offered no incentives to the respondents.
3. Participation was voluntary.
As part of conducting ethical research, confidentiality and privacy of the researcher’s identity were ensured (Saunders et al., 2009). The respondents’ identity would remain anonymous. The recordings did not contain their names as the researcher did not ask them to identify themselves by name. Additionally, when transcribing, the researcher concealed the identity of the respondents. Any personal information related to the respondents was kept private and was only be accessible to the researcher (Bryman & Bell, 2004). The collected data via the recordings as well as the transcriptions were safely kept under a lock and key. These materials were labeled confidential to ensure that no unauthorized persons would have access to this information (Saunders et al., 2009).

**Participants and Setting**

The interview questions were presented to a purposive sample (n = 11) of early-career elementary school principals from the state of Mississippi. The primary researcher had a professional relationship with two of the participants; the other nine were unknown to the primary researcher. The ultimate goal in identifying and selecting participants (e.g., school principals) was to amass a diverse sample based on the following: (a) socio-economic status of the students served, (b) Mississippi Department of Education performance levels, (c) geographic region/area, and (d) percent of minority students served (see Table 2). All interviews took place over the telephone; each participant was given the option of an in-person interview or a telephone interview.

**Procedure and Collection Data**

As previously stated, this phenomenological inquiry followed strict interviewing procedures and data analysis techniques set forth by Moustakas (1994). Data for this
study were collected using interviews conducted via telephone. (The choice was left to the respondents and depended on their schedule and availability.) For each of the interviews, the researcher allowed as much time as necessary for the respondents to fully and comfortably answer all of the interview questions. No respondent was limited by time, and each participant was able to share as much or as little as he or she wanted. The entire interview session with each research respondent was recorded using a digital recording device. During these qualitative interviews, the researcher utilized two Olympus VN-6000 digital recorders. These recorders have the capability of recording approximately 600 hours. The decision to use two digital recorders (rather than one) was a preventive measure in the event one malfunctioned. The researcher made sure to inform the research respondents prior to the discussions that the researcher was recording the interviews. In doing so, this hopefully demonstrated the researcher’s commitment to conducting an ethical research study.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

After concluding the interviews, the researcher transcribed all interview dialogues by using Microsoft Word on a personal laptop. Each interview was listened to multiple times before transcription was complete. To ensure accuracy of the data transcribed, the researcher utilized the playback option of the recorder until the researcher was satisfied it was correct. NVivo software was used to aid in analysis of the collected data. Additionally, the researcher secured the help of a second scholar who listened to the recordings and compared the researcher’s transcriptions to ensure accuracy. This process went on until 100% inter-transcriber agreement on the transcriptions accuracy had been achieved. After completion of transcription of data, the researcher embarked on
exploring data with an aim toward developing broad trends to develop a preliminary understanding of the data. Then, the researcher identified significant quotes and statements that provided an understanding of how the research respondents experienced the phenomena of bullying. The significance statements were presented using quotes and grouped in themes. According to Moustakas (1994), this process is known as horizontalization.

**Validation**

Validation provides for an accurate collection and analysis of all data. After completing each of the interviews, the researcher played back the responses to each of the questions posed with an aim toward providing a chance for respondents to hear their responses and make clarifications or additions. Therefore, an opportunity to listen to their respective comments during the interview session for purposes of clarity was granted. In addition, two weeks after conducting the interviews, each research respondent received a transcribed copy of the interview for two reasons. First, they were asked to confirm the accuracy of the transcription. Second, the researcher sent the transcribed copy to the respondents to afford them the opportunity to add further comments or information. This process is referred to as *member checking* (Moustakas, 1994).

The primary researcher enlisted a second scholar (approved by IRB) in discussions with the objective toward improving the accuracy of data collected as well as the analysis process. The primary researcher met with the second scholar two times: (a) before any of the interviews with the participants and (b) after all of the interviews had taken place. These meetings allowed discussion of the potential limitations and
procedures that are pivotal in collecting accurate data—a procedure known as the *Epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, this peer debriefing process allowed the researcher to discuss any biases the researcher may have had about bullying and further served as an attempt to have the researcher refrain from making judgments that might negatively impact the data collected and eventually the results. During the first meeting, the researcher addressed the technique of interviewing used, the data collection procedures, as well as the overall transcription process. Consequently, the second meeting was arranged subsequent to data collection to discuss the selection of significance statements, the emergence of themes, and the accuracy of the transcriptions. The end goal of these meetings ensured that 100% intercoder reliability was achieved.
CHAPTER IV
PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This empirical research study explored the lived experiences of early-career elementary school administrators pertaining to bullying. Additionally, this study investigated the plans and actions early-career administrators are taking to prevent bullying. Eleven early-career elementary school principals from across the state of Mississippi were invited to, and did participate in the study. The participants shared their lived experiences of bullying in relation to their career as an elementary school principal. In doing so, this empirical study answered the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of early-career principals regarding student bullying?

RQ2: Are there shared lived experiences among early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying?

RQ3: Are there unique lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying?

RQ4: How are early-career elementary school principals managing bullying?

RQ5: What actions are early-career elementary school principals taking to prevent bullying?

RQ6: Is there anything that early-career elementary school principals believe they need (that they do not currently have) to help them combat bullying?
The research questions were used to guide the direction of the study including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The purpose of the qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals as they encounter bullying in their schools. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was utilized in the development of the study.

Structured interviews of each research participant were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. NVivo software was used to aid in analysis of the collected data. This chapter consists of a discussion of the data collected that are thematically presented to convey the essence of the participants’ lived experiences in dealing with bullying in their respective schools.

**Data Collection**

Eleven educational leaders who met the criteria for the research participants were invited to participate in the study. All 11 participants were contacted via e-mail to schedule an interview. All participants’ interviews were conducted via telephone. Participants were offered the option of either an in-person interview or telephone interview. All individuals agreed to participate, selected the option of a phone interview, and were given consent forms to sign and submit (prior to commencement of the interviews).

Interviews, lasting up to 20 minutes, were conducted over a two-month period. All 11 participants responded to open-ended questions (see Appendix C). The participants were all early-career elementary school principals in the state of Mississippi. Following completion of all of the interviews, each participant was emailed the written transcription of his or her response to allow the participant to review the transcription.
Each participant was offered the opportunity to add, change, or delete any information. No participant added to, changed, or deleted any of the written transcriptions.

**Demographics of the Sample**

Eleven participants (four males and seven females) were interviewed. Experience as a principal ranged from one year to four years with an average of two years of experience. Three participants had experience teaching at the secondary level, and eight had experience teaching at the elementary level. Altogether, the participants’ years of experience teaching was 116 years with an average of 10.5 years. Experience in the classroom ranged from two to 18 years. One participant received certification through a nontraditional path while 10 completed master’s and/or specialist’s programs. Seven participants had master’s degrees as their highest level of education, while four held specialist’s degrees (see Table 1).
Table 1

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years’ experience as principal</th>
<th>Years teaching</th>
<th>Highest degree</th>
<th>Path to certification</th>
<th>Formal bullying training</th>
<th>Bullied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>Alternate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All principals had some experience as an assistant principal. Eight had received formal training on bullying prevention while three had not received formal training. All participants had some informal training in the area of bullying prevention. Grade levels served by the participating administrators ranged from Pre-K through 8 (see Table).
Table 2

School Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% Free or Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>Grades Served</th>
<th>MDE Performance Level</th>
<th>Geographic Area</th>
<th>% Minority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>PK-2</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Suburb: Large</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Rural: Distant</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Rural: Fringe</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Suburb: Small</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Town: Remote</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>PK-8</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Rural: Distant</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>K-2</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Town: Remote</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>973</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>PK-2</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Suburb: Small</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>699</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Suburb: Large</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Rural: Fringe</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>PK-1</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Suburb: Large</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Population, Performance Level, and Percent Minority data were taken from Mississippi Department of Education 17-18 information. Free/reduced and Geographic Area data were taken from NCES.

Interview Questions

Below are the interview questions posed by the researcher:

1. In your role as principal, what are your experiences with student-to-student bullying?

2. In your role as principal, can you articulate your experiences with physical bullying.
3. In your role as principal, can you articulate experiences with cyberbullying?

4. In your role as principal, are you taking any active measures to combat/prevent bullying?

5. Is there anything you feel you need (that you don’t currently have) to help prevent bullying in your school?

6. As a student growing up, did you ever experience bullying in school? If so, would you be willing to share with me some of those experiences?

7. Is there anything that you would like to add?

**Additional Questions**

a. Prior to assuming your current position as principal, how many years were you a teacher?

b. What grade/content area did you teach?

c. What grade/content area are you certified?

d. How many years have you been a principal?

e. What is your highest degree?

f. Did you obtain your administrator’s certificate via the traditional route with a master’s degree in educational leadership or by completing an alternate route program? If alternate route, which program?

g. Have you received any formal training in bullying prevention?

h. Have you received any informal training in bullying prevention?
Findings

Prominent and recurring themes surfaced from the accounts of early-career principals’ lived experiences regarding bullying. Ultimately, a total of 81 significant statements from the 11 interviews were grouped into nine themes. The following is a presentation of the nine themes, including their accompanying significant statements.

**Theme 1: Lack of Concern/Sense of Denial**

Many of the principals felt that bullying is labeled as the cause of numerous discipline issues when the true case was not bullying. They seemed to believe that parents, teachers, and students over-identified incidences of bullying. Additionally, results indicated administrators did not believe bullying was a serious issue in the elementary school. They noted that most incidences occurred at the secondary level, and when they took place at the elementary level, it is just “kids being kids” (as if it is a natural and expected progression through developmental stages). This was a rather unexpected finding as this was not one of the reoccurring topics identified in the review of literature.

P1: “I don’t see it [bullying] as being as big a problem as they say it is.”
P5: “I think sometimes it [bullying] is overblown.”
P1: “I think it’s [bullying] not as big a problem it seems to be.”
P2: “The word [bullying] gets thrown around a lot.”
P4: “It’s not a pervasive part of our culture right now.”
P4: “Any type of physical bullying here is going to be more or less just a child kind of picking on another child.”
P4: “That [cyber bullying] we don’t have.”
P9: “So parents jump on us, like, my child’s getting bullied, when in reality it’s just a typical kid name calling situation that the parent has blown out of proportion.”

P5: “It’s basically just typical bullying.”

P11: “We’ve really not had anything come up that we would call physical bullying. We’ve had kids kick or punch, you know, where they kick or punch three different kids on different occasions…”

**Theme 2: Misunderstandings**

Due to a lack of formal training among educators (and the general public), principals felt that bullying was misunderstood. They agreed that it was confusing to the layperson who has not been informed of the proper definition. However, administrators did note there were several challenges to defining and identifying bullying (e.g., is it aggressive or just rough play?). Another area of need was helping the layperson understand that bullying is most often a recurring behavior and was not necessarily considered bullying if it takes place only once. Lastly, administrators felt there are misconceptions about defining bullying behavior.

P7: “I’ve had to really explain what the definition of bullying is because sometimes they [parents] get confused.”

P1: “The biggest thing is being able to help clarify what bullying is and isn’t for parents.”

P1: “They say bullying, but they don’t understand that bullying is a repetitive type deal.”

P1: “I would need…to educate them [parents] on what true bullying is.”
P1: “People are not educated as to what bullying really is.”

P7: “Parents tend to think everything is bullying when it’s actually not.”

P1: “I don’t think people really understand what bullying is.”

P2: “6th graders, they don’t understand what bullying actually is.”

P4: “Kids think it’s (bullying) something that it’s not…”

**Theme 3: Frustrations/Trepidations**

The participants felt frustrated when dealing with incidences and constantly felt their time was spent educating others on what qualified as bullying and what did not. Even though bullying was recognized as a major consumption of their time, principals felt that it was almost impossible to stop the behavior. Complicating the problem was the various forms that bullying can take. Bullying is an imbalance of power (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) that can form as threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone verbally or physically, abusing someone through social media, and even exclusion. Even when bullying was properly identified, principals felt it was difficult to deal with, and almost impossible to eliminate. While many administrators witnessed severe cases of bullying, most experienced little support from district-level administrators in how to deal with students who engaged in bullying. It was apparent principals were uncertain (at times) whether or not the behavior could be considered illegal activity. Defining what rights have been violated and under which laws (e.g., discrimination, harassment, etc.) created another challenge that caused frustration and trepidation.

P1: “That’s the first thing the parents say when they call, my child’s being bullied and you’re not doing anything about it.”
P4: “Some of them are in need of, you know, more intensive therapy than we are able to provide given the resources we have in public schools.”

P2: “But it’s hard to get, you know, all the evidence you need, to say yes, this child is bullying, let’s apply the policies to him.”

P3: “We can’t seem to get it [bullying] stopped.”

P9: “I do wish we could educate the parents more.”

P3: “I don’t know that there’s an actual resource that would be of benefit.”

P4: “Anytime, you know, that there’s a conflict or anytime somebody does something mean or annoying, they call that bullying when it’s just somebody being mean or annoying.”

P9: “I don’t know how you could do it (monitor cyberbullying) outside of school because you can’t mandatorily do it.”

P9: “I see it [bullying] almost every day, two or three times a day.”

P3: “I don’t think it [bullying] ever goes away, and I think it’s [bullying] in every situation.”

P1: “I have seen some horrible bullying.”

P1: “I’ve had quite a few experiences with physical bullying, and really, that’s something you have to keep your eyes open for.”

P7: “I think we need to bring more awareness to bullying.”

**Theme 4: Proactivity**

Some principals took an active role to *stop* bullying before it occurred. These administrators felt teachers needed more training on prevention and awareness.

Additionally, administrators felt students and parents needed training to correctly identify
and prevent bullying outside of school. Administrators admitted that training teachers on how to quickly and effectively identify concerning behaviors proved difficult. Without definitive evidence, educators needed to be careful not to label all misbehaviors as bullying. Participant estimates varied on how often bullying occurred, which created more confusion regarding “identifying actions” that needed to be taken.

P1: “I tell my teachers you’ve got to be on the lookout, they can’t be standing around talking.”

P1: “They’ve [teachers] got to watch the children.”

P1: “Part of our plan is for teachers to be present…in the hallway.”

P7: “Teachers are being proactive in the classroom.”

P6: “We send that information out specifically to our teachers to be more observant of those students to try and prevent anything [bullying] from that occurring here.”

P7: “The teachers building a community within the classroom helps tremendously.”

P9: “I do train them [teachers] at the first of the year about how to stop bullying and how to respond to it.”

P2: “All our teachers have been trained and certified where they can identify bullying, you know, every year, each semester try to having a bullying course with our junior high or our counselor on how to identify bullying.”

P4: “I feel like we have seen the most positive results when we have been very proactive in teaching them [students] about taking the positive actions that they
need to be engaging in and really emphasizing and encouraging and rewarding them.”

**Theme 5: Establish a Supportive Learning Environment**

Because of true social (or antisocial) nature of bullying, principals felt that having a supportive and engaging learning environment would decrease the number of bullying referrals they receive. With an emphasis on PBIS, some school personnel felt that they were doing enough to prevent bullying. However, participant responses differed regarding response to bullying behaviors (i.e., some administrators favored positive intervention, while others preferred punishment as a consequence).

P4: “I think that it’s one of our most important responsibilities as educators is to teach our children to be kind.”

P8: “We have a huge character education program on our campus.”

P8: “Our students go to character ed. activity once every seven days with our counselor.”

P3: “Every morning we have a school-wide behavior plan talk…”

P3: “If you’ve got a school community, your staff, your parents and your community leaders that can really support and treat one another appropriately and kindly, that would really help.”

P3: “We state goals…and tell them they (students) should be kind and respectful…”

P4: “We work really hard to establish a culture here that is safe, and that is positive for our students.”

P4: “We’re practicing what it, you know, the action behind what it means to be
kind, and then just recognizing students when we see them in those acts of kindness.”

P4: “We just spend a lot of time emphasizing kindness.”

P10: “Each week our counselor does a character ed. and anti-bullying [lesson] on how to be a true friend…”

**Theme 6: Dialog with Students**

Along with developing a culture where everyone felt safe (physically and emotionally), administrators were concerned with instilling in students the appropriate social skills necessary to behave in a responsible manner. Administrators felt that simply advising students on how to treat each other was the most important strategy for stopping and preventing bullying behaviors. Principals made a point of encouraging students who witnessed bullying to report the occurrences and even to confront the bully.

P1: “I let them [students] know it’s [bullying] against the law.”

P7: “My counselor talks with each class of students.”

P8: “We talk a good bit about what it means to be a bully and what it means to be disrespectful and polite.”

P4: “I talk with the kids and try to help them resolve conflict.”

P4: “All the teachers have conversations [with students] in homeroom classes.”

P11: “Our counselor does one month of her sessions about bullying.”

**Theme 7: Social Media as a Cause/Concern**

Even though participating elementary principals felt cyberbullying primarily included older students (i.e., not consistently found at the elementary level), they noted
that, as students became more active and technologically savvy and engaged in social media, the number of cyberbullying incidents increased. Administrators felt students need to be taught proper online engagement. Similar to face-to-face bullying, the issue of identifying the differences between online aggression and cyberbullying is challenging.

P6: “We’ve had plenty of cyberbullying, on Facebook, Snapchat, cell phones, school email. You know, any way they can find they can get to each other.”

P6: “I’ve seen that [bullying] increase since social media has become available.”

P3: “Several instances where students, you know, post inappropriate things on Instagram or Facebook about other students.”

P2: “I had a child, of course [bully] through social media…make physical threats.”

P9: “Younger kids are getting cell phones and they do not know how the rules of the phone work, they think they can shoot off text messages, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchats…”

P2: “Snapchats are the hardest because it’s gone so quickly.”

**Theme 8: Home Life as Part of the Problem**

Participating administrators cited home life as the cause of many of the bullying behaviors they dealt with. Principals felt that students were likely to emulate the bullying behaviors they are exposed to at home. Additionally, administrators felt off-site bullying often occurred because of a lack of proper adult supervision. Lastly, principals felt the presence of drugs, alcohol, gangs, and violence in the home (and community) negatively impacted students’ ability to successfully navigate the trials and tribulations of young adulthood.
P4: “They [students] are taught to be cruel…and of course a lot of that comes from home.”

P9: “But I do see it [bullying] increasing more because these kids are not being taught proper protocol about how to talk to other people by their parents.”

P4: “There’s some of our kids that have been through some rough situations, and they have trauma…”

P2: “Part of it [bullying] pours over from home.”

P10: “Our bullying issues we’re seeing is because the kids come out of situations where they’re not able to cope well.”

P2: “But we find that sometimes parents are actually fighting with other parents, too.”

P3: “It’s [the cause] usually the adults.”

P3: “In a lot of the bullying you deal with a parent and then you understand why you’ve got a bullying situation at school, because the parent is like that, and you think they’re, you know, they’re ready to fight somebody.”

P10: “We have a huge poverty rate…what our children are seeing at home, there’s a lot of violence and gang, and guns and drug-related issues in some of our neighborhoods, and that’s what they’re seeing and what they’re used to and what they’re being brought up around…and they don’t know how to cope and deal with everyday kind of situations.”

P4: “The cyber bullying that we have had to deal with has happened outside of school.”
Theme 9: Possible Solutions/Needs

Of the principals who offered solutions for reducing the number of bullying incidences, most identified the need to educate parents as the primary objective. A few administrators identified professional counseling and mental health services as a way to effectively address bullying.

P4: “I think more mental health resources and access to more mental health resources [are needed] for our students and their families.”

P7: “I think more parent education on the issue [bullying].”

P7: “I think with better parental involvement.”

P1: “I would need some things that help with better parental involvement.”

P9: “I think we need to teach parents a little better.”

P7: “Just continue the parent education on bullying.”

P8: “We need better education for our parents to understand what is bullying and what is not bullying…”

P10: “To identify our kids with coping issues…and provide them like an in-house kind of counseling I think would be huge.”

Summary

Eleven early-career elementary school principals participated in the research study. The researcher conducted and analyzed interview transcripts, and the narrative descriptions of the early-career principals’ encounters with bullying. Nine themes emerged from the research. The nine themes included the following: (1) lack of concern/sense of denial, (2) misunderstandings, (3) frustrations/trepidations, (4) proactivity, (5) establish a supportive learning environment, (6) dialog with students, (7)
social media as a concern, (8) home-life as part of the problem, and (9) possible solutions/needs.

Principals had numerous responsibilities and urgent decisions to be made each school day. Attending to bullying incidents was one of the most time-consuming and frustrating aspects of the job. The identified themes demonstrated that principals have a variety of views and issues when it comes to bullying. Administrators felt that consistency (in terms of definitions across schools and states) would help educators use the same language. Defining bullying for the larger school community, however, was a daunting task. Additionally, training others to deal with incidences of bullying required considerable resources, time, thought, and debate. In this effort, there were multiple approaches to take; choosing one was crucial and would be influenced by many factors. The growing bullying phenomena needed to be at the forefront of every school administrator’s priorities. Even though educating everyone involved in the schooling process (e.g., administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, community members, etc.) is a monumental task, effective and explicit bullying prevention training must occur to prevent the on-going disruption of the social, emotional, and academic development of all students.

It is important to note that even though Mississippi law requires each school district to draft (and publish) a statement regarding the intolerance of student bullying, school districts are not required to implement an anti-bullying program. Additionally, school districts are not required to identify and list specific consequences of bullying behavior. Even though it is likely that some form of bullying will always take place (no matter the program, education, and training) consequences for bullying need to be clear
and consistent. Furthermore, no principal mentioned he or she is using a specific anti-bullying program in his or her school. The findings of this research clearly demonstrate that building principals feel ill-equipped to deal with incidents of bullying. Therefore, specific training in how to deal with bullying behavior is imperative for building principals as they attempt to reduce the occurrence of bullying in their schools.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenological study was designed to investigate the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals regarding the epidemic of bullying. Phenomenological research seeks to discover how individuals construct meaning of the human experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004) and has served (along with the SDT theory) as a guiding influence in the development of this dissertation. Tenets of phenomenology were woven throughout the research design to ensure appropriate representation of the lived experiences of those being investigated. Demonstrating the essence of the respondents’ perspectives improves accuracy in representing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). By doing so, the researcher developed a broad foundation of relative knowledge in order to adequately vet developing themes through inductive discovery (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The literature review was designed to help define the study’s parameters and assist in navigating patterns and themes that emerged through analysis of data. The researcher was interested in discovering how early-career elementary school principals viewed bullying and their lived experiences with bullying incidences in their schools. It is interesting to note that, of the six participants who said they were bullied growing up, five spoke in depth of their experience, and had more to say on the topic in general.
Chapter V integrates the literature and findings, discusses practitioner-based implications, identifies limitations, and makes a case for future research. Previously (in Chapter II), the researcher presented a foundation of literature for positioning the study within a framework of existing publications involving bullying among children and youth. Those empirical studies (while spanning the concepts of disabilities and bullying, suicide and bullying, prevention of bullying, social and emotional development and bullying, parents and bullying, and cyberbullying) provide a context for the researcher’s findings. The literature was utilized to help explore themes common in bullying. These themes also emerged in this study. The researcher’s intent was for study findings to augment the body of knowledge surrounding the increasing phenomena of bullying in schools. The verbal responses of 11 early-career elementary school principals were captured via telephone interviews, categorized into significant statements, and distilled into nine emergent themes that expanded the topic under consideration.

**Discussion**

This study explored the lived experiences of early-career elementary school administrators pertaining to bullying. Additionally, this study investigated (through the use of seven interview questions and eight additional questions) the plans and actions early-career administrators are taking to prevent bullying. In doing so, this research study answered six research questions.
Research Question 1

What are the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals?

Data from the interviews indicated that principals experience much frustration when dealing with bullying incidences and often feel they need to educate others on what bullying is and is not. Administrators believe bullying is grossly misunderstood because of lack of formal training. Most laypersons, according to these principals, do not understand the definition of bullying. Even though administrators identify the difficulties in defining bullying, helping the layperson understand that bullying is most often a recurring behavior (and is not necessarily considered bullying if it takes place once) is of utmost importance. Many of the principals felt that bullying was not the actual cause of many of the referrals they received from students, their parents, and teachers that originally cite bullying as the source of the incident. Furthermore, administrators believed that parents, teachers, and students often over-identify incidences of bullying. They deemed that bullying was not a big concern in the elementary school setting and believed that most incidences occurred at the secondary level. They believed that when elementary students fight, call names, and tease, it was just “kids being kids”—thus a natural and expected occurrence. When bullying was recognized as the main factor, principals felt it was almost impossible to stop the behavior. Because bullying occurs in many forms (e.g., threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone verbally or physically, abusing someone through social media, exclusion, etc.), complications arose when administrators attempted to determine if it had actually taken place or not.
Research Question 2

Are there shared lived experiences among early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying?

While many of the principals witnessed severe cases of bullying, most experienced little support in dealing with students who engage in bullying. Principals were uncertain at times about whether or not the behavior could be considered illegal activity. Defining what rights have been violated and which laws the behavior is in violation of can be exasperating to identify and/or differentiate between discrimination or harassment. Principals expressed a desire to do more to prevent (and eliminate) bullying behaviors. The principals realized that teachers need more training on bullying prevention and awareness, and students and parents need to be more effectively trained to identify and prevent bullying. Principals understand that just expecting teachers to observe and quickly identify disturbing behaviors is ineffective. Educators must be trained to not label all inappropriate behaviors as bullying, but must also know when to address student behavior that is bullying.

Principals recognized how home life can negatively impact bullying behavior. If bullying is modeled or encouraged at home or in the community, students will emulate those behaviors at school. In addition, a shared experience among participants was the anxiety and confusion that comes with attempting to identify the necessary training and support needed to reduce student bullying.

Research Question 3

Are there unique lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals regarding bullying?
Even though most principals seemed to think of cyberbullying as an “older student concern,” a few have had experiences with students (as they become more active technologically) engaging in cyberbullying behaviors. Those administrators identified the need for proper instruction regarding appropriate online engagement. Additionally, the elementary school administrators who experienced cyberbullying identified difficulties with differentiating between online aggression and actual cyberbullying.

Research Question 4

How are early-career elementary school principals managing bullying?

Principals felt that teachers needed more training on ways to identify and handle bullying. Their responses indicated that they felt bullying was over-identified, but they did not feel that staff members could differentiate between bullying and simple childish behavior. Clearly, principals desire more training. The principals realized that building a supportive environment with opportunities for students to connect to school was a critical component to managing bullying on their campuses. Additionally, they identified that talking to students and training them were important steps in preventing bullying. Principals trained their staff, students, and parents informally on what bullying is. They seem to deal with bullying after it occurred, and they do very little to prevent bullying from happening. Clearly, there is a lack of structured consequences for students who engage in bullying behavior.

Research Question 5

What actions are early-career elementary school principals taking to prevent bullying?
Principals felt that staff, parents, community members, and students need formal training in bullying prevention. Only one principal has implemented an anti-bullying program in his school. Principals considered building a supportive learning environment for all to be a priority, and they felt that good modeling for students was imperative in setting a standard for wholesome behavior. Several of the principals used counselors to deal with bullying instead of addressing the issue themselves.

Research Question 6

Is there anything that early-career elementary school principals believe they need (that they do not have) to help them combat bullying?

The recurring need that administrators identified was for parent training to help define and prevent bullying. Unfortunately, only one participant had an anti-bullying plan already in place. As educators across the nation work to get parents involved in their children’s education, the 11 participants seemed to want less involvement from parents in discipline issues when bullying was an issue. At times, they seemed to feel that parental involvement placed an additional burden on solving a disciplinary issue. Their solution was to have formal training for parents while preferring less parental involvement. Several participants cited the need for additional resource officers to help maintain safety and security, and additional counselors to work with students (victims and bullies). They also agreed that more training for bullying prevention was needed. Lastly, administrators would like stronger positive behavior supports and intervention programs and character education.
Conclusions

The review of literature revealed that student aggression is an issue in primary and secondary schools across the world. According to the global report of the UNESCO (2017), school violence exposes children and adolescents to “schoolyard fighting, gang violence, assault with weapons, and sexual and gender-based violence” (p. 8). School violence in the forms of bullying and cyberbullying victimize over 243 million young people annually (UNESCO, 2017). Reported incidences of bullying and cyberbullying increased dramatically during the last decade. Bullying may lead to harassment when its focus is race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or national origin (Allen, 2017). According to Kim et al. (2006), there is a relationship between bullying and youth violence. Social norms and gender inequality are also some of the causes of bullying in schools. While males are considered to bully more than females, Smith (2004) indicated that boys also show violent behaviors toward girls. There is also the potential that selected environments nurture harassment (Smith, 2004). This concept is supported by the research findings presented in “Theme eight: Home Life is Part of the Problem” where principals felt that students were likely to emulate the bullying behaviors were exposed to at home.

School violence is harmful to the physical and mental health of thousands of children. Lawmakers have passed legislation to enforce anti-bullying policies to address the situation. All states have bullying legislation that requires thorough investigation of any incidence. Even though educators are responsible for decreasing the number of bullying incidents in schools to ensure that every student has an appropriate learning environment (Baldry, 2003), findings of this research study indicate that administrators
are not actively implementing evidence based anti-bullying programs. Students who become victims are more likely to suffer negative consequences that affect their educational performance as well as their home life. Bullying is one cause of suicide. According to Baldry (2003), there are many effects of bullying, including depression, stress, decreased academic performance, lack of concentration, and suicidal thoughts and actions.

Bullying extends beyond physical harassment to quiet and covert occurrences responsible for causing emotional damage (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). An imbalance of power can place one individual in a position of strength over others as per the SDT, an imbalance of power. Illustrations extend from an adult using vicious words to adolescents influencing their teammates (Gentry & Whitley, 2014). The primary aspects of bullying come from real emotional and psychological effect; varying impacts seek to hurt, expose, harass, or humiliate the victims (Heiman, Olenik-Shemesh, & Eden, 2015). Bullying involves a multifaceted behavior pattern which varies with the situation, participants, and context as well as the time of day.

Identifying all areas where bullying occurs is an unending task for school leaders (Calbom, 2012). Determining when individuals may experience bullying appears to change with age. Specifically, harassment via electronic media rises with age (Worthen, 2007). This supports the findings of research question three, when principals seem to think of cyberbullying as an “older student concern.” However, it is beginning to occur in elementary schools also. Bullying occurs anywhere in and near schools or public places where adult supervision appears insufficient or nonexistent. According to Calbom (2012), expanding supervision in areas of bullying include the cafeteria, playground,
locker rooms, and public transportation. Berger (2007) researched bullying practices and concluded that teachers are part of the problem. Berger confirmed the findings of Smith (2004) that there are poor anti-bullying practices shared with teachers and a weak ratio of teachers-to-students, thus making it difficult to control the situation. Again, this concept was presented in research findings of this study that identified a lack of anti-bullying programs implementation by administrators. Lack of adult situational awareness makes the bullied student feel unwanted which affects his academic performance (Smith, 2004).

Wang et al. (2009) acknowledged that one in four kids were bullied regularly in schools. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) confirmed this trend in their study of the relationship between cyberbullying and suicide. Approximately 30% of the students bullied may also become bullies (Wang et al., 2009). Verbal assault is the most common harassing tool in the United States and is used by 77% of student aggressors (Wang et al., 2009). The indicators of verbal bullying include arguing, yelling, criticism, and rumors (Jan & Husain, 2015). Studies show that, out of this majority, only 14% of targets react in a severe, aggressive, or abusive manner (Wang et al., 2009). One out of five students admitted that they are responsible for bullying their peers in hidden places, such as bathrooms, where the school administration does not monitor.

The biggest challenge cited in the United States is that the teachers do not make an effort to stop the bullying or take measures to make sure that it does not happen in the future in 85% of cases that were reported. Wang et al. (2009) cited the most prevalent type of bullying in the 21st century is cyberbullying, and studies have shown that about 80% of the students encounter bullying online. Further, Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok, and Benz (2012) concluded that cases of bullying have escalated. Wang et al. (2009) argued
that, while bullying cases are prevalent in schools and have shown a rising trend annually, many of the strategies adopted by schools and policymakers have been deemed insufficient.

This study revealed that the lived experiences of early-elementary school principals indicated that the principals: (a) complain parents do not understand what bullying is (even though they themselves did not articulate a consistent definition), (b) do not know how to investigate incidents of bullying, (c) do not have set consequences for bullying behavior, and (d) do not have the skills or knowledge to plan for prevention of bullying behaviors. Their comments revealed that there is a need for formal training of others, but few recognized that they themselves needed more training, even though it is apparent they struggle with addressing the topic as a whole. Even though research indicates that the number of bullying incidences are growing (Nazir & Nesheen, 2015) the principals interviewed seemed to think that these numbers were inflated. Further research should be conducted to reinforce that training is needed and effective.

Limitations of the Study

1. Ambiguities are inherent in human language.
2. The findings could not be tested to discover whether they are statistically significant.
3. The interviewees may have been tempted to give socially acceptable answers.
4. The interviews were recorded, thus limiting the number of interviews to those who agreed to be recorded.
5. Interviews were limited to early-career elementary school principals and did not include veterans or secondary principals.
6. The school districts represented in the sample included mostly rural districts.

7. The study was qualitative in nature, thus limiting the ability to replicate the findings.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This research study is by no means a comprehensive inquiry into the topic of bullying. Such a study, while useful, would be too great in scope and sequence for one researcher to complete in one research study. However, this study (in its entirety) helps to inform the current conversation regarding the bullying epidemic. Therefore, future researchers should identify and address ways to deal with true incidences of bullying. Future research should include principals (a) with varying years of experience, (b) from other geographic areas, and (c) of middle and/or high schools. Additionally, studies should focus on defining effective ways to train and ensure that trainees have applicable skills when completed. Furthermore, additional studies need to be implemented that attempt to capture the effective management of the learning environment as a means to eliminate bullying. Lastly, future research should include professional conversations (all levels) in hopes to prevent incidents of violence (including bullying) from occurring in school and the community.

**Recommendations for Practitioners and Policymakers**

The bullying phenomenon is serious and must be at the forefront of all school administration’s priorities. The identified themes show that elementary school principals have a variety of views and issues when it comes to bullying. Consistency in definitions across schools and states would help educators use the same language. Defining what it
is and training others to deal with incidences takes considerable attention, time and resources. Training everyone connected with the school and community is a colossal task, but it must occur to prevent bullying from disrupting the instructional day and education of students. Additionally, training needs to focus on the following: (a) establishing a safe and supportive school environment; (b) providing training for staff, students, parents, and community; (c) ensuring that laws regarding bullying are followed; and (d) implementing effective anti-bullying programs. According to the literature review, two programs that are helpful in the reduction of bullying occurrences are PBIS (Bradshaw, Pas, Debnam, & Johnson, 2015) and SEL (CASEL 2018).

The use of PBIS has demonstrated positive results academically and behaviorally. One of the primary components of PBIS emphasizes a schoolwide system of support that includes proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors and social skills. These components create positive school environments that result in a reduction of bullying behaviors. Instead of using a fragmentary approach of individual behavioral management plans, a continuum of positive behavior support for all students within a school is implemented in areas including the classroom and non-classroom settings (e.g., hallways, buses, and restrooms). Positive behavior support is an application of a behaviorally-based systems approach to enhance the capacity of schools. PBIS involves a continuum of academically-focused instructional and intervention supports and services that are strategically implemented across a multi-tiered system and at different levels of intensity (Knoff, 2018). Students receive direct instruction in social skills and positive behavior. If students begin having problems, assistive supports can help students, especially those students with significant disabilities, to learn and function
behaviorally. Remediation involves strategies that teach students specific, usually prerequisite, skills to help them master needed skills to interact positively within their environment and with others.

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2018). The five competencies of the SEL framework suggest that students can be productive members of society. Those five competencies include self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2018). As per the literature review, SEL can be incorporated to reduce incidences of school bullying. Principals should become well-versed in the administration of SEL; the use of evidence-based SEL programs (e.g., Positive Action, Caring School Community, MindUP, Responsive Classroom, RULER, Second Step, Leader in Me, and Getting Along Together) is imperative.

Above all other anti-bullying programs, the OBPP (with over 35 years of research and successful implementation) is the best known and most researched bullying prevention program today (Violence Prevention Works, 2018). By focusing on long-term change that creates a safe and positive school climate, the OBPP is a comprehensive approach that includes individual, classroom, schoolwide, and community components (Clemson University, 2018). Additionally, by offering activities designed for use in high school, middle school, and elementary school, the OBPP increases awareness on the topic, reduces the opportunities and rewards for bullying behavior, and improves peer
relations (Blueprints, 2018). Most importantly, school administrators can expect positive results pertaining to the reduction of schoolwide bullying incidents if teachers and staff implement the OBPP with fidelity. None of the participants mentioned the OBPP (the most well-known, and most well-researched anti-bullying program).

In order to successfully implement an anti-bullying program, administrators, staff, students, and parents must be trained on what constitutes bullying. They need to know the warning signs and what changes to look for in a child (i.e., bullies, victims, and bully-victims). Additionally, students and teachers should know what the types of bullying are, such as verbal, physical, cyber, and social. A popular online resource to help combat all aspects of bullying is www.stopbullying.gov. This resource provides training modules for educators, students, bus drivers, and community members including parents. It houses information on what students can do if they are bullied and what they can do to prevent bullying. The website also accesses state laws and policies on bullying and lists findings of research.

Finally, school leaders must have knowledge concerning the anti-bullying programs that have proven results. These programs must be implemented in schools, which takes training, time, and money. Once implemented, school leaders at both the building, district, and the state levels must be clear with regard to the consequences for bullying. At some level, the most important part of an educational program is to inform parents and students about the consequences of bullying. At the same time, it will help protect these students who are being bullied and break the cycle of bullying in schools.
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APPENDIX A

APPROVAL OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
NOTICE OF DETERMINATION FROM THE HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

DATE: April 12, 2018
TO: Angela Farmer, EdD, Educational Leadership, Christopher Armstrong-Leigh
       Hailey; Stephanie King
PROTOCOL TITLE: Bullying in schools: Exploring the lived experiences of elementary school principals
PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-18-105
Approval Date: April 12, 2018 Expiration Date: April 11, 2023

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

The review of your research study referenced above has been completed. The HRPP has made an Exemption Determination as defined by 45 CFR 46.101(b). Based on this determination, and in accordance with Federal Regulations, your research does not require further oversight by the HRPP.

Employing best practices for Exempt studies are strongly encouraged such as adherence to the ethical principles articulated in the Belmont Report, found at www.oep.hhs.gov/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/ as well as the MSU HRPP Operations Manual, found at www.orc.msstate.edu/human-subjects. Additionally, to protect the confidentiality of research participants, we encourage you to destroy private information which can be linked to the identities of individuals as soon as it is reasonable to do so.

Based on this determination, this study has been inactivated in our system. This means that recruitment, enrollment, data collection, and/or data analysis can continue, yet personnel and procedural amendments to this study are no longer required. If at any point, however, the risk to participants increases, you must contact the HRPP immediately. If you are unsure if your proposed change would increase the risk, please call the HRPP office and they can guide you.

If this research is for a thesis or dissertation, this notification is your official documentation that the HRPP has made this determination.

If you have any questions relating to the protection of human research participants, please contact the HRPP Office at hr@research.msstate.edu. We wish you success in carrying out your research project.

Review Type: EXEMPT
IRB Number: IOR/2000/0497

111
APPENDIX B

LETTER OF INVITATION AND CONSENT FORM
Information Letter

Dear Prospective Participant:

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree in the Department of Educational Leadership at Mississippi State University under the supervision of Dr. Angela Farmer. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2016), more than one out of every five (20.8%) students report being bullied. All students are impacted by bullying. When students sense the prevalence of bullying, they have a lower sense of safety (Austin, Reynolds, & Barnes, 2016). School administrators are required to deal with acts of inappropriate student behavior that are brought to school either tangibly or via the internet. Therefore, the rationale of this study is to (a) explore the lived experiences of elementary school principals regarding the phenomenon of bullying, (b) identify how elementary school administrators manage bullying, (c) identify what actions they are taking to prevent it, and (d) identify areas of need. The findings of this research should provide school leaders with viewpoints for handling bullying. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify how elementary school administrators manage bullying, how they internalize the experience, and what actions they are taking to prevent it.

This study will focus on early-career elementary school principals (within their first 5 years). Therefore, I would like to include you as one of several principals to be involved in my study. Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately 15 minutes in a mutually agreed upon location. You may also elect to participate via phone interview. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be tape-recorded to facilitate collection of information and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be retained for 3 months in a locked cabinet in my office. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at (662-352-3140) or via e-mail at jharris@columbiaschools.org
I hope that the results of my study provide public school administrators across the state with an expanded lens of understanding how bullying emerges into the school culture and what current practices exist to deal proactively with the problem. Additionally, this qualitative research addresses the present gap in the research where bullying emerges in the elementary years and examines how administrators individually respond to such circumstances.

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Sincerely,

Jason Harris
Consent Form to be Interviewed

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Jason Harris, doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership at Mississippi State University. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study and have received satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be tape-recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the dissertation and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

With full knowledge of all the foregoing, I agree, of my own freewill, to participate in this study.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

I agree to have my interview tape-recorded.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that evolves from this research.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

Participant’s Name (please print) ____________________________________________

Participant’s Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

Researcher’s Title ___________________________ Department __________________

Faculty Advisor Signature _________________________ Date ________________

Faculty Advisor Title ___________________________ Department __________________
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Verbal Script

Hello,

Thank you for choosing to participate in this research study. At this time, I am going to discuss the details of the study. I want you to feel comfortable throughout the interview, so feel free to ask me any questions and stop me if you need clarification at any point.

I am conducting a study entitled Bullying in schools: Exploring the lived experiences of early-career elementary school principals. You have been selected to participate in this study because you have 5 or less years of experience as an elementary principal. Participating in this study will consist of your answering open-ended questions in an interview lasting approximately 15 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded. Furthermore, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher.

Do you have any questions regarding your participation in this study? If no, then “I completely understand.” If yes, then great! Let us begin with the interview.”
Interview Questions

1. In your role as principal, what are your experiences with student-to-student bullying?

2. In your role as principal, can you articulate your experiences with physical bullying?

3. In your role as principal, can you articulate experiences with cyberbullying?

4. In your role as principal, are you taking any active measures to combat/prevent bullying?

5. Is there anything you feel you need (that you don’t currently have) to help prevent bullying in your school?

6. As a student growing up, did you ever experience bullying in school? If so, would you be willing to share with me some of those experiences?

7. Is there anything that you would like to add?

Additional Questions

a. Prior to assuming your current position as principal, how many years were you a teacher?

b. What grade/content area did you teach?

c. What grade/content area are you certified?

d. How many years have you been a principal?

e. What is your highest degree?

f. Did you obtain your administrator’s certificate via the traditional route with a master’s degree in educational leadership or by completing an alternate route program? If alternate route, which program?

g. Have you received any formal training in bullying prevention?

h. Have you received any informal training in bullying prevention?