

ABSTRACT

BOWEN, LISA WATSON. Bullying of Middle School Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Qualitative Exploration of Prevalence and Perceptions of Students, Parents, and Teachers. (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass and Dr. Mike Ward).

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior that has become increasingly pervasive in school settings. The consequences of bullying manifest as poor physical health, anxiety, depression, poor school performance, school avoidance, and increased risk for students. While no student is immune to bullying, research suggests that students with autism are particularly susceptible to bullying victimization and may be at least three times more likely to be bullied than their typically developing peers. The findings in my study reveal a major challenge and call for heightened concern for the well-being and safety of students with autism who participate in the general education setting. Such concern is particularly warranted in light of the difficulty with social skills, interactions, and communication that are often manifestations of autism.

This study examined the prevalence of bullying of middle school students with autism participating in the general education setting from the perspectives of the middle school student with autism, their parents, and their teachers. The extent to which the participants shared similar beliefs about what constituted bullying was also explored. Adolescent students with autism shared their experiences with reporting bullying, the actions that were taken based on their bullying reports, and strategies they employed to address bullying behavior. Parents and teachers also shared their recommendations for reducing bullying incidents within the school.

The study revealed that the student and teacher participants shared a common understanding of the definition of bullying and agreed that bullying is prevalent in the school setting. Students recounted bullying experiences that substantiated the prevalence of bullying. Parents did not demonstrate an expansive understanding of what constitutes bullying and

expressed an overall satisfaction with school safety and their children's learning environment. The study revealed that students are more likely to report bullying to a trusted adult staff member at school rather than to a parent. These students expressed strong confidence that staff members would address such situations. In addition, I found that the students developed coping strategies to address bullying behavior, though the strategies are frequently ineffective. The study determined that teachers and parents share similar ideas about how to reduce the number of bullying incidents in the school setting.

The study included an analysis of survey responses by 12 parents of student participants with autism and 26 teachers of student participants with autism. It also included interviews with the 12 student participants with autism. The collective results from the interviews and surveys of the study participants revealed that students with autism have experienced some form of bullying while attending school. In addition, the results demonstrated that student participants had a positive relationship with at least one staff member to whom they felt comfortable making reports of bullying. The respondents also provided recommendations to improve the communication regarding bullying prevention, strategies for addressing bullying, and reporting bullying behaviors to reduce the incidence of bullying of students with autism.

The study concluded with a set of recommendations for policy and practice. Critical components of the recommendations included district selection and implementation of a bullying prevention program that includes a component of social emotional learning; integration of the bullying prevention program into the curriculum; accountability for implementing the program; and incorporation of parent communication and education as part of the bullying prevention program. Recommendations also include suggestions for future research to address the limitations of this study.

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Bullying of Middle School Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Qualitative Exploration
of Prevalence and Perceptions of Students, Parents, and Teachers

by
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DEDICATION

To my late husband, David Eli Bowen: I will forever be grateful for your love and support. Despite the time this took away from our family, all of the take-out dinners you ate when you really preferred home cooking, the late nights and early mornings, and the times I was not always completely present, even when boating, because my nose was in my work, you encouraged me and reminded me that it would be worth it in the end. I always knew you were proud of me and that you would be there waiting for me when I finally crossed the finish line. When I lost you, I lost my way for a while, and I resented the time I spent away from you, but ultimately, your persistent loving voice in my mind made me realize that the best way I could honor all that you gave to support me through this journey, was to finish. So, Big Dave, this is to you, along with all my love.

To my daughters, Courtney and Erin: I can't even imagine where I would be without the two of you. You are the reason it was so important for me to further my education and achieve my dreams for myself, so that you too would know what was available to you in life. You didn't let me forget that when I wanted to throw in the towel and walk away from this work. I will always be grateful for your unwavering love, support, and gentle, but firm encouragement. You gave me the freedom to quit without being disappointed in me, but you also made me question whether I could live with being disappointed in myself. We Bowen women don't give up on one another. I love you with all my heart Courtney and Erin.

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Because of you, I have the vision to reach for my dreams, and the determination to push through the challenges that are in my way. Thank you for your unconditional love.

Finally, to the families, teachers, and most importantly students with autism who took part in this study: You are the real heroes. Thank you for being willing to be a part of this study and to bring to light the struggles with bullying that our children with autism face. I pray that your voices will be heard and that each of you will experience one good outcome from your participation. The entire purpose was to make a positive difference for each of you. Thank you for your bravery in speaking up and sharing. Without you, this would not have been possible.

BIOGRAPHY

After earning her Bachelor of Science Degree in Biology from East Carolina University, Lisa Bowen began her career in education as a high school science teacher. After several years in the classroom, she realized that no matter how much you know and how much you want students to know, that learning is interrupted when students' social–emotional needs are not met. This prompted Lisa to pursue her Master of Science Degree in Counselor Education, along with completing coursework for an add-on licensure in School Administration at East Carolina University. While working as a school counselor, she developed a passion for working with children with disabilities, which quickly became the work of her heart. Over the past 35 years Lisa has been fortunate to serve the students of Martin County Schools as a teacher, school counselor, Exceptional Children Program Assistant, and Exceptional Children Program director. She currently serves as the Human Resource Director and the Exceptional Children Program Director. She continues to be passionate about meeting all of the needs of all students through servant leadership.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

First and foremost, I give gratitude and praise to our almighty God for the strength and perseverance to accomplish this task. His guidance has led me to where I am and I will continue to pray for his guidance to lead me to where I will be. I have no doubt that his grace is sufficient. Thank you to all of my family and friends that have prayed for me and encouraged me as I struggled through this process that was a “heavy emotional lift.”

God’s intent is not for man to just subsist, but to have good things in abundance. I was blessed to be taught and mentored by a number of professors that challenged and supported our cohort to grow and to exceed our own expectations. A special thank you to Dr. LaTricia Townsend, Dr. Anna Egalite, and Dr. Henry Johunson for their outstanding leadership. Also a thank you to Dr, Lance Fusarelli and Dr, Bonnie Fusarelli for your dedication to growing the educational leadership capacity of the northeast. Without you, this opportunity would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Chapter Introduction

This qualitative case study investigated the prevalence and reporting of bullying of mainstreamed middle school students with autism from the perspectives of the students with autism, teachers, and parents. The introduction outlines the problem, identifies the research questions, defines technical terminology, reviews the purpose of the study, and provides justification for the research.

Why Study Bullying of Students With Autism?

In the fall of 2015, as a member of the North Carolina Council of Administrators of Special Education (NC CASE), a professional educational organization affiliated with the Council for Exceptional Children and the NC CASE, I attended the annual conference sponsored by NC CASE. The goal of the annual conference is to provide up-to-date information and support to members on matters related to policies, practices, and services in the state that impact the quality of special education and related services for students. The conference further offers a legal update or “year-in-review” of the 100 most important judicial cases in special education law across the United States and addresses how these rulings may change interpretations of policies and procedures and impact the provision of free appropriate public education (FAPE).

Melinda Jacobs, the founding attorney of The Law Office Melinda Jacobs, PLLC and legal presenter at the NC CASE conference, exclusively represents clients in education law. Her practice focuses on general education and special education issues arising under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and related federal and state laws and regulations. The

practice includes litigation at all administrative and judicial levels, including appearances before the Tennessee Secretary of State's Division of Administrative Hearings, U.S. District Courts for the Western, Middle, and Eastern Districts of Tennessee, and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. In addition, since 1991 she has conducted hundreds of professional development training and statewide/regional/local presentations on special education law across the United States. She has served as chairperson of the National Institute on Legal Issues of Educating Students with Disabilities since 1993 and was a founding member of the National Special Education School Attorneys Council (serving continuously since 1994). Mrs. Jacobs' presentation at the NC CASE conference is viewed favorably by most attendees of this event, as has been evidenced through member feedback on conference surveys. This has resulted in her return to the conference for the past 12 years.

Typically, in her presentation of the legal year-in-review, Mrs. Jacobs also discusses the current hot topics in special education law that are most prevalent in cases brought to attorneys for potential litigation. In the fall of 2015, Mrs. Jacobs stated that the hot topic in special education law was the bullying of children with autism, particularly those in the general education setting. She asserted in her presentation that this was the fastest growing area of litigation, with cases having tripled between 2013 and 2015 (M. Jacobs, personal communication, October 6, 2015). Table 1 depicts the upward trajectory of special education cases involving the bullying of school-age students with autism as compared to the cases involving bullying of school-age students with other identified disabilities.

Table 1

Empirical Analysis of Litigated Cases Involving Bullying of Special Education Students in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia

Cases	2007–2009	2009–2011	2011–2013	2013–2015
# of cases involving bullying of students with autism	14	30	28	72
# of cases involving bullying of students with other disabilities	3	8	10	8
Total # of cases involving bullying of children with disabilities	17	38	38	80

Note. Reprinted from “The Year in Review: 2015,” by M. Jacobs, 2009, Conference session presented to the North Carolina Council of Administrators of Special Education.

As this topic was heatedly debated among exceptional children administrators, and colleagues working in school districts in close proximity to my district concurred with the trend presented by Mrs. Jacobs and discussed in detail the increasing number of reports by parents of bullying of autistic children, I became concerned. Further, I felt somewhat anxious as I reflected on bullying data from my own school district and the incongruence with the data Mrs. Jacobs presented regarding the increasing number of reports by parents of bullying of their child with autism. I questioned why the phenomenon of increasing reports of bullying of children with autism, particularly reports by parents, was not occurring within my own district when it had steadily risen over the past 2 years across the United States. Added to this was information of report increases that were being discussed and reviewed by colleagues in school districts of

similar size, special education demographics, and close proximity to my own. While I would like to have believed that the bullying prevention and intervention programs utilized in my district were effective and that students with autism in the district experienced a bully-free environment, my observations within the district schools and experiences at meetings involving students with autism did not support that conclusion. This ignited my interest in the growing phenomenon of the bullying of children with autism, particularly in my school district, and became the impetus behind this research study.

One can easily find instances of bullying simply by turning on the television, reading a newspaper, or talking with students in school settings. Bullying takes a number of different forms including verbal, physical, and social shunning and it is an act that is repeated over time, aggressive in nature, and intended to do harm to another person (Olweus, 1993). Sterzing et al. (2012) found that 46.3% of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) had been victimized by bullies in contrast to the national prevalence rate of 10.6% for typically developing same-age peers, supporting the idea that students with ASD are at a greater risk for victimization.

Children with ASD are especially susceptible to bullying because of their comparative difficulties with socialization, communication, and their tendency to display odd behaviors, as perceived by others, which make them easy targets (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Roekel et al., 2010). The impacts of bullying experienced by children with ASD include negative physical and psychological effects that further exacerbate the characteristics of anxiety, elevated emotional sensitivity, and stereotypic behaviors already associated with their autism (Cappadocia et al., 2012).

Across the United States and other countries, including England, young people with ASD are widely reported by parents and teachers to be bullied by their peers during their school years

(Hebron et al., 2015). Given this information, it is a concern that bullying of students with autism in Hall County Schools is rarely reported by either the victims or their parents. Reports of bullying of children with ASD are frequently made by Hall County School teachers. When bullying of young people with ASD has been recognized as “a serious and pernicious problem” (Reid & Batten, 2006, p. 29), with longstanding, negative physical and mental consequences (Cappadocia et al., 2012), it is imperative that the lack of reporting by this group of students and their parents be further investigated to determine the nature of action needed to address this problem.

Statement of the Problem

Bullying is a repetitive form of aggression that is characterized by a power imbalance between the bully, who intends to do harm or intimidate, and the victim (Blood et al., 2013). In recent years, bullying within the school setting has generated increasingly widespread attention as a major concern for adolescent students in the United States (Donegan, 2012). The ramifications of victimization have included negative health and quality of life issues. The extreme impact of bullying on health and quality of life is reflected in its classification as a public health problem by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Realization that bullying is a serious matter and not just typical teenage teasing has caused school officials to place a focus on developing the school’s role in preventing bullying and teaching students to recognize and report bullying (Boulton & Underwood, 1992). The U.S. Department of Education (USDE, 2013) further clarified the responsibility of the school to act on behalf of all students, in August of 2013, when it stated that “bullying is no longer dismissed as an ordinary part of growing up” (p. 1).

The USDE (2013) also reminded school districts through a “Dear Colleague” letter of the district’s obligations to protect students with disabilities against bullying and advised that the failure of a district to protect students with disabilities from bullying could constitute a denial of their constitutional educational rights to a FAPE. Adolescents with ASDs are often unique in their set of social skills; they may lack the understanding of social cues, have difficulty forming and maintaining peer relationships, and exhibit overall communication deficits that make them targets of bullying behavior. According to Roekel et al. (2010), students with ASD are at a higher risk for experiencing bullying or victimization than youth with other forms of disabilities, due to the lack of social competence and subsequently fewer friendships. In particular, it was determined that those adolescents with ASD in the general education setting were at an even greater risk of being bullied than students with ASD in special education settings. A nationwide study by Sterzing et al. (2012) revealed that of 192 survey participants with ASD, 46% experienced bullying victimization. This was over four times higher than the rate reported by regular education students.

Though there are only a few extant studies of the particular phenomenon of the bullying of students with ASD, the evidence that exists supports the conclusion that youths with ASD are at a greater risk of victimization by bullies than their typically developing peers (Schroeder et al., 2014). In addition, students with ASD who are victimized are also more likely to suffer significant mental health issues because of further social isolation and inadequate skills to effectively communicate their feelings (Cappadocia et al., 2012).

Hall County Schools currently has a process in place for reporting bullying activity. Parents, students, and Hall County School employees receive training about bullying and how to make a report. There is evidence to support that this training and the process for reporting

bullying has been effective for many students and parents in this school district. During 2012–2015, the number of reports of bullying by parents and students increased; the majority of those reports involved the bullying of middle school students. Despite the increasing number of reports by students and parents over the 3-year period of time, less than 1% of the total number of reports involved students with autism. Table 2 depicts the total number of bullying reports made in Hall County Schools and the total number of bullying reports made involving students with autism from 2012 through 2015.

Table 2

Hall County Schools Bullying Report Data 2012–2015

Cases	2012	2013	2014	2015
# of reported cases of bullying	14	21	29	33
# of cases involving bullying of students with autism	0	0	1	1

This is a concern because during this same time period, district data indicate that teachers identified and reported incidents of bullying of autistic students to school administrators at a rate that was 21% higher than teacher reports made of bullying of typically developing students. This discrepancy caused me to question the accuracy of the bullying report data in comparison to the school administrative records of cases investigated involving the bullying of a student with autism.

Children identified as students with disabilities in the school setting meet the criteria for one or more of the following disability categories identified recognized by the IDEA (2004):

autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities, orthopedic impairment, multiple disabilities, other health impaired, specific learning disability, speech and language impairment, and visual impairment. While bullying is a global concern for all students (Molcho et al., 2009), students with disabilities are twice as likely to be victimized as students without disabilities. Students with autism are even more susceptible to bullying. The incidence of bullying of students with autism is 20% to 30% higher than for students with other disabilities (Pfeffer, 2016). This raises the concern of why students with autism are at a greater risk of victimization than both typically developing students and students with other disabilities.

The study of bullying of ASD adolescents is a growing body of research, but it is still in its infancy in many areas (Schroeder et al., 2014). The impacts of bullying and how they may affect mental health, life experiences, and the quality of life of autistic adolescents continue to be explored. A recent study conducted in the United States found that more than 59% of people with autism have average to above-average intelligence (Katusic et al., 2021). This correlates with the growing number of students with autism receiving their education among typically developing peers. Participation in the general education setting increases the likelihood that these students will encounter bullies. While the general education setting provides the greatest exposure to the regular curriculum for educational advancement, students with autism often have challenges with social interaction, speech and nonverbal communication, restricted interests, and unusual mannerisms which increases their risk of bullying victimization (Campbell et al., 2017).

Teachers and parents are crucial supports for students in many aspects of their educational experience. This role becomes even more critical for a child who is being bullied, particularly a student with autism. Students with autism often lack peer support groups due to

their difficulty in making and maintaining friendships (Zablotsky et al., 2012). For this reason, it is important for there to be strong teacher and parental involvement in protecting students with autism from victimization. There is limited research that addresses how and if autistic students accurately recognize bullying and report it to their parents, teachers, or other authorities when it occurs (Zablotsky et al., 2012). In addition, there is a need to examine if parents and teachers share an understanding of victimization that is similar to that of the student. Hebron et al. (2015) surmised that narrative accounts from children with ASD, their parents, and their teachers would provide a picture that would include thoughts and feelings about bullying experiences that are not captured by quantitative studies. Such a research protocol would permit a deeper and more personal understanding of the complex issues associated with bullying of children with autism.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the prevalence and reporting of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying of middle school students with autism in the general education setting in a school district in Eastern North Carolina. The perspectives of the students, teachers, and parents relative to this phenomenon was explored. In particular, the study examined whether students with autism believe they are being bullied, how they identify that they are being bullied and how they report that information to authorities. The study also examined the identification and reporting of bullying of autistic students from the perspectives of the students' teachers and parents.

By virtue of professional experiences in directing programs for students with disabilities, I have been afforded the opportunity to work with multiple students with autism, along with their families and teachers. During meetings to develop students' Individualized Education Plans, I listened as students with autism or their parents described victimization of the students through bullying behaviors that occurred at school. Often, the parents or even the student would excuse

the bullying behavior by acknowledging the lack of appropriate social skills often associated with autism and in response the team would develop a goal to assist the student to improve specific social skills in order to develop positive peer relationships. On each occasion that this occurred, the parent and the student were asked if they believed that what they described was an example of bullying behavior and often the answer was an emphatic “no,” despite the fact that the teachers participating in the meetings concurred that they believed the student had been a victim of bullying. Such meetings are perplexing; the inability or unwillingness to describe the behaviors as bullying appeared to be a form of denial by the parents and students. Interest in studying this phenomenon was furthered by the discovery that less than 1% of the bullying reports collected through the district’s bullying reporting system involved students with autism. This information appeared to contradict the findings of Hebron et al. (2015) that students with autism are widely reported by their parents to be bullied by their peers during the school day.

Understanding and identifying the factors that prevent students with autism or their parents from identifying victimization is crucial to addressing bullying behavior and to identifying the need for and implementing programs of self-advocacy and prevention for students with autism who attend Hall County Schools. Given that the largest number of bullying reports, over a 3-year period of time, in Hall County is generated by middle school students or their parents, this study focused on middle school students with autism who are enrolled in Hall County Schools, Grades 6–8. A qualitative case study, utilizing surveys and interviews, was used to gather information from the identified students, their parents, and their teachers in order to gain insight about the prevalence of bullying, beliefs about the definition of bullying, how bullying is reported if it is identified, and strategies that students with autism utilize in order to deal with bullying behavior. The study also sought to discern student perceptions of how

teachers and parents respond to reports of bullying and what recommendations teachers and parents have for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying.

According to Schroeder et al. (2014), the study of bullying of children and adolescents with autism is a relatively new but growing area of research; much remains to be learned. Most of the limited studies available regarding the bullying of children with adolescent ASDs are quantitative in nature (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). This study addressed a need identified by Hebron et al. (2015) by including narrative accounts from children with ASD, their parents, and their teachers and providing insights into the personal understanding of the experiences of bullying by children with autism.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research investigation:

1. What is the prevalence of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying among middle school students with autism in the general education setting of Hall County Schools from the perspective of the students with autism, the students' parents, and the teachers?
2. To what extent do adolescents with autism, parents, and teachers have similar beliefs about what constitutes bullying?
3. What methods do adolescents with autism use to report instances of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying to parents, teachers, and other authorities?
4. What strategies do adolescents with autism use to address face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying?
5. How do adolescents with autism describe the responses of teachers to their reports of face-to-face or cyberbullying?

6. What are the recommendations of teachers and parents for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying of students with autism spectrum disorder?

Definition of Terms

Autism—a diverse neurological–developmental disability that affects communication, socialization, motor coordination, sensory processing, and some areas of executive functioning (Roekel et al., 2010).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)—a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave (Cappadocia et al., 2012). This term is often used interchangeably with the term autism.

Autistic—a term used describe a person who has been diagnosed with autism or ASDs.

Bully—a person who intentionally and repeatedly inflicts negative behavior against another person.

Bullying—the intentional and repeated infliction of negative behavior against another person resulting in harm to that person. “Negative actions can be carried out by physical contact, by words, or in other ways, such as gestures or intentional exclusion from a group” (Olweus & Limber, 2010, p. 124).

Cyberbullying—“willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009, p. 5).

Face-to-face bullying—behavior that is “direct and includes actions such as hitting, threatening and calling names” (Maunder et al., 2010, p. 265).

Free appropriate public education (FAPE)—an educational right of children with disabilities provided by the IDEA stating that any child identified with a disability and in need of special education or related services shall be provided through an Individualized Education Plan

(IEP), a free and appropriate education in the public school system, providing the opportunity to make educational progress in preparation for the future.

General Education—the program of education that typically developing children receive, and is based on state standards and evaluated by the annual state educational standards test. It is also referred to as regular education.

IEP meeting—a meeting of a team of individuals with knowledge of educational, social, and emotional needs of a child with a disability, to develop, amend, or review a student’s individualized education plan with the intent of providing FAPE.

Inclusion—the provision of services to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment with nondisabled peers. This is also referred to as mainstreaming (Ravet, 2011).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)—a document that outlines the unique needs of a student with a disability, along with how the student’s needs will be addressed to provide FAPE.

Mainstreamed—a descriptor referring to students with disabilities who receive their educational services within the general education setting and classrooms with nondisabled peers (Ravet, 2011).

North Carolina Council of Administrators of Special Education (NC CASE)—a professional educational organization of state and school district administrators of special education programs. NC CASE is also affiliated with the Council for Exceptional Children and the North Carolina Association of School Administrators (North Carolina Association of Special Education Administrators, 2019).

Special education—a program of education that includes specially designed instruction based on a student with disabilities individual needs and is delivered by a special education teacher, in a separate setting from typically developing peers (Ravet, 2011).

Victim—“a student who is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (Olweus, 2010, p. 11). This often occurs “without apparent provocation on the part of the person being targeted” (Olweus & Limber, 2010, p. 125).

Overview of Research Design

A qualitative case study was used to examine the prevalence and reporting of bullying of middle school students with ASD in the general education setting of Hall County Schools in order to capture the complexities of the ecological conditions and interactions surrounding bullying of students with autism. Most studies on bullying utilize quantitative approaches for data collection and analysis (Bosacki et al., 2006). Such methodologies provide the benefit of larger sample sizes, which make data more generalizable and reliable, but participants are limited in their responses by the instrument selected for use by the researcher (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). By employing a qualitative approach, I can explore beyond the overall statistical picture of the perceptions of participants by capturing the dynamic and multidimensional nature of bullying experiences through the responses and perspectives that students offer during a semistructured interview. In addition, I incorporated an open-ended survey for students that was used to assist in focusing the interview on specific instances of bullying and to help develop cohesive themes about students’ bullying experiences during qualitative analysis of the interview data. One parent of each student participant and the teachers, including both general education and special education, of each student participant was asked to complete a two-page survey, containing both open-ended and a few selected-response questions about their perceptions of the student’s bullying experiences, strategies for dealing with bullying, and history of reporting bullying. In addition, they were asked to provide recommendations for diminishing incidents of

bullying. The data from the selected-response items were reported via descriptive statistics. The use of survey data from all participants along with the student interview notes assisted in triangulation of the data to help ensure greater confidence in data analysis.

Significance of the Study

In order to examine factors that affect the reporting of bullying, this study took a critical look at the differential perceptions of students, parents, and teachers in relation to the bullying of middle school students with autism who are mainstreamed into the general education environment. This study provided an understanding of the stakeholders' personal experiences associated with bullying as well as identify flaws in the current system of antibullying education and reporting.

Given the detrimental effects of bullying and the potential exacerbated impact on students with autism, this information is critical in updating or developing future antibullying policies and procedures. Such policies and procedures may include training specific to autism in the areas of bullying identification, prevention, and reporting. This study may also be used by other researchers, practitioners, parents, and policy makers to inform policy and practice related to bullying of autistic adolescents.

The major significance of this study is that it examines the issue of differing perceptions of bullying of middle school students with autism held by students with autism, parents, and teachers. The intent is to identify flaws, if they exist, in the current system of antibullying education used in Hall County Schools regarding identification of bullying, how it is reported, and what coping strategies are utilized, by examining the perceptions of the aforementioned stakeholders. This study may add to the literature on bullying of autistic students and to related

policy, which remains somewhat limited in light of the rapid growth of this phenomenon (Schroeder et al., 2014).

This is one of just a few studies that included personal accounts related by the students with autism of their experiences as victims of bullying. The majority of the current research regarding bullying of students with autism is quantitative in nature (Hebron, 2012). The reporting of personal experiences by victims provided a richer, more descriptive understanding of the impact of bullying experiences for students with autism and may provide an avenue for future researchers to explore.

Chapter Summary

Bullying is recognized as a widespread problem occurring within the school environment. The results of bullying are detrimental to the health and quality of life of the victim. The lack of social cognizance and communication issues experienced by adolescents with ASDs makes them more likely to be victimized by bullies. This study investigated the prevalence and reporting of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying of mainstreamed middle school students with autism from the perspectives of the students with autism, teachers, and parents. Information gathered from this study can be used to update the existing antibullying policies and procedures or develop new ones if necessary. In addition, this study adds to the literature related to the bullying of students with autism and provide additional information from the perspectives of students with autism, parents of these students, and their teachers.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Introduction

Bullying is a significant challenge in schools that infringes on the rights of students to learn in a safe school environment free from fear and intimidation (Donegan, 2012). Within the mainstream school population, students with disabilities are targeted more often than their nondisabled peers and are the most likely individuals to encounter repetitive incidents of bullying (Holzbaur, 2008). Children with ASD typically lack well developed social skills combined with other factors that may affect their vulnerability to bullying in the mainstream student population (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). Prior to examining the prevalence of and perceptions about the bullying of students with autism, this chapter reviews the increasing recognition of bullying as a pervasive problem in schools and the rapidly increasing worldwide attention to autism, since autistic characteristics were first described by Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger (Kanner, 1943). The chapter further provides historical context related to the educational rights of students with disabilities. Following this, there is a discussion of the theoretical framework that guided this study and support the study procedures as data are gathered and interpreted. The extant literature on bullying of children and adolescents with ASD is then investigated. This chapter reviews existing research on the bullying of students with autism in the general education setting of schools, including the prevalence and reporting of bullying incidents, protective factors, and the need for schools to develop policies and programs to address this issue.

Background and Policy Context

This section explores historical understandings related to the construct of bullying both in the general social context and within the particular setting of public education. The section also

addresses the evolution of policy related to bullying in schools and related to the rights and services afforded to children with disabilities.

Bullying is widely accepted as an unprovoked form of recurring social aggression that occurs within a relationship in which one individual has more power than the other (Olweus, 1993; Pepler et al., 1999) with the intent to cause harm to the victim (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying is not a new phenomenon. The word *bully* can be traced back as early as the 1530s (Donegan, 2012) and references to bullying behavior can exist in some of the earliest literature including the stories of Cain and Abel, and the Parable of the Good Samaritan found in the Bible (*King James Bible*, 1611/1982).

After reviewing general reports, media reports, documented school incidents, anecdotes, and following direct observations of behaviors, Rigby (2004) suggested that bullying behavior has existed within the schoolyard since there has been a schoolyard, long before it became a focus of empirical researchers. The desire to survive is instinctual and is common among living things. Since the beginning of time, there has been competition among the species for resources and those that outperformed others survived. According to Agnew (2006), the survival instinct and the competitive atmosphere that it creates have remained as humans evolved and these forces have spilled over into the social, educational, and economic realms, creating a nation where bullying is unintentionally perpetuated at a very young age, as children are pressured to perform optimally.

In early 2000, the concern about bullying in schools rose to a national level as greater attention was given to the associated health and quality of life issues this phenomenon created for school-age youth (Agnew, 2006). In a 2002 report, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development disclosed that approximately 30% of American school children in Grades

6–10 reported that they had been bullied. This number has remained fairly constant since that time despite increasing national attention and focused efforts of bullying prevention (Donegan, 2012). As of March 2015, all 50 states in the United States had adopted antibullying laws (Hall, 2017). North Carolina Session Law 2009-212 (School Violence Prevention Act, 2009) required all school administrative units to adopt an antibullying policy and required training on the policy for all staff and volunteers in the school administrative unit. Enactment of state antibullying laws has raised awareness and emphasized the responsibility of education agents to safeguard children, including protection from bullying; however, enforcement of these laws at the school has proved challenging across the states due to the widely differing policies in place (Donegan, 2012).

According to studies, children and adolescents are bullied based on a number of variables, including physical appearance, body image, sexual orientation, style, social awkwardness, and academic achievement in school (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Espelage & Asidao, 2001). There are many modes of conduct through which students are bullied. Research shows that boys are more likely to be physical in their approach to bullying, while girls tend to use tactics that include social alienation, friendship manipulation, and malicious gossip (Rivers & Smith, 1994; Siann et al., 1993). Bullying behavior can be separated into direct and indirect behaviors (Brock et al., 2006). Direct bullying is defined as confrontational physical behavior, such as assault or fighting, or verbal behaviors such as name-calling and teasing, which are more cognitive in nature (Olweus, 1978). Olweus (1978) defined indirect bullying as a psychological approach to bullying that at times involves a third party, and is intended to socially damage peer relationships or create emotional distress, such as spreading rumors and social alienation. Cyberbullying is conducted through electronic social media and mobile phone texting and can be

included under the auspices of both direct, such as sending a threatening message, and indirect bullying, such as spreading rumors or gossip (Brock et al., 2006). Table 3 outlines the different forms of direct and indirect bullying.

Table 3

Types of Bullying

Direct/indirect	Type of bullying	Short description	Examples
Direct	Physical bullying	Open attacks that involve physical contact	shoving, pushing, punching, kicking, biting, spitting
Direct	Cognitive bullying	Verbal attacks	teasing, name calling, taunting, ridiculing, threatening
Indirect	Emotional bullying	Psychological attacks to cause emotional harm or distress	shunning, social isolation, spreading rumors or gossip
Direct	Cyberbullying	Use of social media or electronic devices to verbally attack	teasing, name calling, taunting, ridiculing, threatening
Indirect	Cyberbullying	Use of social media or electronic devices to cause emotional harm or distress	shunning, social isolation, spreading rumors or gossip

Note. Adapted from “The Impact of Direct and Indirect Bullying on the Mental and Physical Health of Italian Youngsters,” by A. Baldry, 2004, *Aggressive Behavior*, 30(5), 343–355 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20043>). Copyright 2004 by Aggressive Behavior.

Victims of bullying behavior suffer potentially permanent mental health effects that can lead to suicidal tendencies (Agnew, 2006). The negative effects of bullying are long lasting and, if left untreated, result in poor mental and physical health and future adjustment issues for bullied children as they progress into adulthood (Nansel et al., 2001). Other issues that are associated with being the victim of bullying include low self-esteem, poor academic progress, higher school absenteeism, and self-imposed social isolation (Monks et al., 2009). There may also be links to a greater tendency for victims of bullying to engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as abuse of alcohol and drugs, and smoking, although the findings in these areas are inconclusive (Nansel et al., 2001). The potential consequences associated with bullying make it apparent that being the victim of bullying is not just harmful in the short term. In 1970, many states still had laws that specifically prohibited students within particular disability categories from receiving a public education and only one in every five children with disabilities were allowed to attend public school (USDE, 2015). The Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause was established because of landmark court cases and it provided that students with disabilities were entitled to the same opportunity to receive a free and appropriate public education as students without disabilities and that, wherever possible, that education should occur in a regular public school classroom (Young et al., 2012). The evolution of the Fourteenth Amendment led to the creation of a legal and funding infrastructure for students with disabilities, through what eventually became IDEA 2004, Public Law (Pub. L.) 114-95, and remains in existence today. This infrastructure was designed to ensure that students with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

As students with disabilities became a part of the school population and interacted more with nondisabled students, there were positive and negative impacts. Students with disabilities

have benefited educationally from being exposed to the general curriculum with nondisabled peers; however, they have also been subjected to bullying from nondisabled peers which is directly related to their disability (Whitney et al., 1994). Studies show that students with disabilities, regardless of the type of disability, are more likely to be bullied and face peer rejection than nondisabled peers (Little, 2002). In response to the significant bullying issues that students with disabilities have encountered while attempting to access their free and appropriate education, the USDE (2010) issued a “Dear Colleague” letter which included disability in a list of protected classes from which schools must respond to bullying and harassment on the “basis of.”

In March 2012, the documentary *Bully* was released. This film followed five families devastated by bullying. As a result of bullying, two families faced the loss of a child by suicide, and three families experienced the impact of disrupted education and school refusal due to bullying. Despite the national hyper-awareness of the long-term negative impacts and consequences of bullying since the early 2000s, *Bully* revealed that adult family members, as well as adults in the school and community, had an alarmingly poor response to bullying. Rose et al. (2012) pointed out the oversight by the film makers of this documentary in not using it as a platform to explore the complexities of mental health issues and bullying, stating that “we shirk our professional responsibilities if we do not shed light on the compelling evidence that youth with disabilities are at great risk for involvement in bullying” (p. 1). Despite the evidence from multiple studies of the long-term negative physical, mental, and emotional impacts of bullying on students, adults charged with protecting children, such as teachers, parents, and health care providers, still do not have a complete understanding of how to prevent bullying, respond to bullying, or how to intervene when bullying occurs.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is a diverse neurological–developmental disability that affects communication, socialization, motor coordination, sensory processing, and some areas of executive functioning. Sometimes the term *autism spectrum disorder* or *ASD* is used interchangeably with the word *autism*. Autism has only come to the attention of the general population in the past 70 years. Autism first appeared in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–III*; American Psychiatric Association, 1980) in 1980, and it was not until 1994 that Asperger syndrome, another form of autism, was included in the *DSM–IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). There has been rapid growth in research surrounding the disorder in the last 20 years (Newschaffer et al., 2007). Understanding of autism has evolved significantly over the last decade. Early assumptions that poor parenting skills or mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, were to blame for the characteristics of autism have now been discredited and current research indicates that there are genetic and biological bases to the origin of the disorder (Feinstein, 2010). Despite what has been learned about autism, there is not a known cure (Feinstein, 2010).

Definition and Diagnosis

ASD is a group of pervasive developmental disorders, and is made up of autism, Asperger syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (American Psychiatric Association, 2016). The criteria in both the *DSM–V* (American Psychiatric Association, 2016) and the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision* (World Health Organization, 1992) are used to inform diagnostic procedures of autism; however, there is variation in diagnosis due to the subjectivity of behavioral assessment tools and methods that are used in the process (Lord & Jones, 2012). The main impairments associated with ASD

are identified as a triad of impairments and include “markedly abnormal or impaired development of social interaction and communication, over- or undersensitivity to sensory stimuli and a markedly restricted repertoire of activity and interests with an onset prior to the age of three” (American Psychiatric Association, 2016, p. 28). Cognitive impairments are found in approximately 75% of the cases of ASD, but the condition includes individuals with the full range of intelligence (Lord & Jones, 2012).

Prevalence of Autism

In recent years, the number of children identified as having autism has increased. Matson and Kozlowski (2011) contend that the rise in the identification of ASD can best be explained by more inclusive diagnostic criteria and better awareness of the condition. Because children spend a considerable amount of their time in school, the increased identification of students with ASD has profound and significant implications for schools as they are required to adapt to effectively meet the needs of these students. Of significant concern is the fact that most educators, in both general and special education, are not adequately trained to address the unique needs of students with autism, who are enrolled in their classrooms far more frequently than in the past (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

Educational Inclusion of Children With Disabilities

As late as the early 1970s, public schools had rules that excluded children with disabilities from being enrolled in school. Individuals with disabilities received care either in the home or in state institutions, diminishing their prospects for educational attainment and future self-reliance (Feinstein, 2010). The enactment in 1975 of Pub. L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), guaranteed a FAPE for all children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, and with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible. This

law had a dramatic impact on children with disabilities and was the beginning of greater public acceptance of individuals with disabilities (Young et al., 2012). For the first time, schools were no longer able to deny education to students with disabilities (United States Office of Special Education Programs, 2007). Since that time the nation has continued to focus on improving the opportunities for disabled students and that focus has been reflected in the continued revisions and expansions of the laws. In 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act became the IDEA and has since been revised twice, in 1997 and 2004 (United States Office of Special Education Programs, 2007).

Providing services to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment with nondisabled peers is often referred to as inclusion or mainstreaming (Ravet, 2011). In 2013, the number of children and adolescents with autism in the United States who were educated in traditional schools with more than 80% of their day being spent in the regular education setting was estimated at 70% (Schroeder et al., 2014). Compared to 9% in the early 1990s, there has been a considerable increase in the number of students with autism that are being mainstreamed (Schroeder et al., 2014). Many believe that the inclusion of students with autism improves the social and academic achievement of these students by providing them an opportunity to interact with and observe their typically developing peers and that this in turn improves typically developing children's awareness and tolerance of differences (Osborne & Reed, 2011). For a child with ASD who adheres to rigid behaviors, lacks social awareness, has difficulty with communication, and needs highly structured routines, school can be a bewildering place. It is clear that given the impairments that are characteristic of ASD, inclusion has the potential to present challenges to most students with ASD and consequently increase their vulnerability to being the victims of bullying (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Difficulties in language and

communication may further alienate students with autism from their peers. For example, many students with ASD think in very literal terms that prevent them from understanding the full nuances of language in the school environment and classroom (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Bullying of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Typically, victims of bullying are perceived as different or deviating from peer group norms. The fact that children and adolescents with ASD routinely deviate from their typically developing peers makes them likely targets for bullies (Cappadocia & Weiss, 2011; Roekel et al., 2010). Students with ASD exhibit risk factors associated with victimization in the general population and they also lack attributes to protect themselves from victimization (Hebron et al., 2015). Despite the increased level of inclusion of students with special needs in the traditional school setting and classrooms with nondisabled peers, the vulnerability of students with ASD to bullying is of concern. School officials, parents, and teachers need to consider whether the regular school environment is actually the least restrictive environment if students with ASD are inadequately equipped or prepared for dealing with bullies and, thus, are at enhanced risk for harm. While state and local policymakers have taken action to prevent bullying and protect children through laws and policies that address reporting, investigations, record keeping, consequences, communication, training, and prevention, there has been little focus on the unique struggle that children with autism encounter or on requiring the implementation of prevention programs specifically targeted to this population (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). As research into these issues broadens, more will be learned through research and reviews of prevention programs that have been found to be effective in meeting the needs of this group of students. Policymakers at the legislative and school district levels, along with practitioners, need to review existing

policies and practices to address bullying of students with ASD in the mainstream school environment.

Theoretical Framework

The many facets of bullying, including its varied nature, occurrence in different environments, and the multiple risk factors and the magnitude of their impact on the victim, create a complex phenomenon to analyze and understand. In his examination of five broad theoretical perspectives, Rigby (2004) noted that, while all had some value, “none can claim to provide a complete explanation for understanding how bullying behavior in schools impacts victims, nor form the basis for a comprehensive approach to the problem” (p. 287). In their comprehensive examination of the role of theory with respect to bullying, Monks et al. (2009) asserted that there is a growing need to develop a more integrative and inclusive model that encompasses both individual and contextual factors and acknowledges the complexity of bullying in relation to the victim.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) groundbreaking ecology of human development is a flexible and comprehensive theory through which victimization due to bullying can be conceptualized from a socioecological perspective (Swearer & Doll, 2001). It has been used in several recent studies of victimization by bullying behavior. Bronfenbrenner’s theory posits that “the properties of the person and of the environmental settings and the processes taking place within and between them must be viewed as interdependent” (p. 41). Using this framework, this study characterized bullying as an ecological phenomenon that impacts the complex interplay between individuals’ traits and their ecological contexts, including peers, teachers, schools, families, and communities. The individual at the center, in this case the victim, possesses personality, beliefs, and interests that have been shaped through biological, social and environmental factors. These

factors guide or influence the behaviors of the individual and activities in which he/she may engage, such as reporting or responding to bullying behavior. Bronfenbrenner's model places the individual at the center of multiple and expanding ecological settings that have an increasingly distal influence on human behavior.

- **Microsystem:** the individual's immediate context that most directly influences and is influenced by him/her. For students this would include relationships with peers, teachers, and family. It would also include immediate communities such as the classroom environment and the school culture.
- **Mesosystem:** this is the next level and it is comprised of all of the microsystems and their overlap or interaction (parents attending a parent event at school). These first two levels influence how students interact and perceive their relationships.
- **Exosystem:** this represents larger settings, such as the school district or community in which the student may not be directly involved, but this setting indirectly impacts processes in the microsystem and mesosystem? For example, policies regarding bullying generated by the Hall County Board of Education directly influence the Hall County Schools Code of Conduct, which in turn impacts bullying at the individual level.
- **Macrosystem:** this is the largest system and it includes the set of beliefs, trends, and expectations, held in society. While this system is not as directly related to the individual as the other systems, it is influential in determining relationships, expectations, and responses to bullying behavior.

Through the lens of an ecological perspective, bullying is conceptualized as “an interaction that occurs between an individual bully and a victim that unfolds within a social

ecological context” (Atlas & Pepler, 1998, p. 86). In a school, the peer ecology is the microsystem where students develop through their interaction and socialization with one another and the adults within that setting and within their family. This theoretical framework highlights the importance of recognizing the significant roles of contextual variables such as peers, adults, school norms, and the home environment, as factors that influence how victims respond to bullying behavior. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecology of human development is an integrative, systems-based approach that allows for individual variation and multiple risk factors in different ecological settings. For this reason, it is a suitable framework for understanding responses to victimization by bullying behavior.

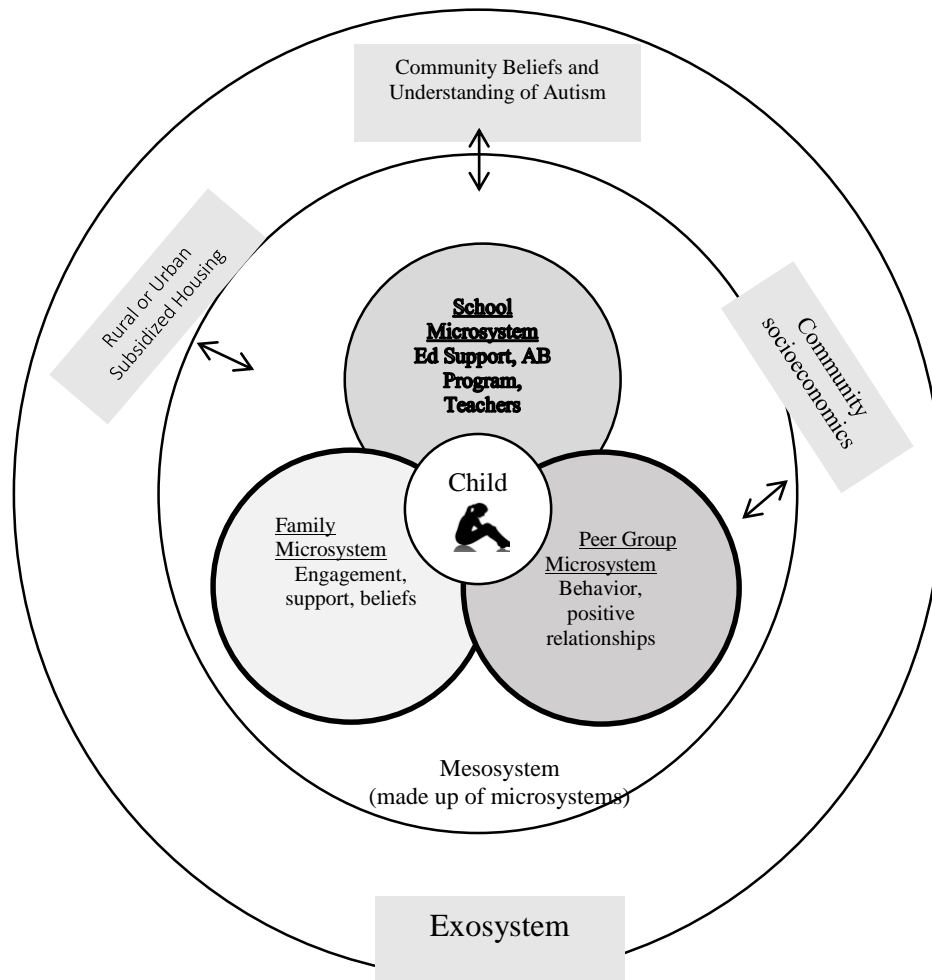
Bullying has been identified as a form of social aggression that evolves within the social context (Olweus, 1993; Pepler et al., 1999). From this ecological perspective bullying is not solely connected to the traits and characteristics of the student that bullies or the victim; instead, the behavior of bullying is maintained and allowed to occur due to societal influences that include the action of peers, teachers, school and family factors that make up the social environments of the bully and the victim (Craig et al., 2000). Within the school environment, or microsystem, children develop through interacting and socializing with one another. Peer groups allow children to integrate into this ecology. Some peer groups adhere to expected values that are imposed by the adults within the setting, such as a student code of conduct, or by social rules and messages perpetuated in the setting, such as not interrupting when the teacher is speaking or asking for permission before leaving a classroom. Others oppose those messages and engage in defiance and nonconformity (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Peer groups established within the microsystem are often stratified by social status, which is connected to likability, popularity, and conformity to peer group norms. (Adler & Adler, 1998; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Members of

popular groups, who tend to be revered, influence the peer group as a whole, while lower status peers are isolated, rejected or shunned (Adler & Adler, 1998). Because students with autism often exhibit difficulties in the areas of social interaction and communication, they often tend to be marginalized by their peer group, which then makes them likely targets for victimization by bullies (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014).

In cases of peer victimization of students with autism, the student with ASD and their own set of traits and characteristics, are in the foreground of the microsystem, which serves as the immediate setting in which the behavior unfolds. They are embedded within a background of peers, teachers, other adults, and their relationships to them, which are contextual variables. These variables should be recognized as possible determinants, correlates, and perpetrators of the recognition and responses of the victim to bullying behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). Figure 1 illustrates this exosystem. In addition to examining the beliefs and perceptions of face-to-face and cyberbullying from the perspective of middle school students with autism, this study also examined the perceptions and perspectives of the teachers and parents of students with autism. Teachers and parents of students with autism are key participants in the overlapping microsystems of students and their influence may impact how students with autism perceive or respond to bullying behavior.

Figure 1

Factors and Ecosystems Impacting Bullying Victims



Note. Adapted from *Bullying of Children and Young People With Autism Spectrum Disorders: An Investigation Into Prevalence, Victim Role, Risk and Protective Factors*, by J. Hebron, 2012, [Doctoral thesis, University of Manchester], p. 33 (https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/54525008/FULL_TEXT.PDF). Copyright 2012 by Judith Hebron.

Pertinent Research and Professional Perspectives

In accordance with the current educational mandates of IDEA that students be educated in their least restrictive environment, the number of students with ASD in the mainstream general education setting is increasing (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). There is reason to believe that youth with autism, who already struggle with communication, social interactions, and the development of interpersonal relationships, will encounter bullying at an even greater rate than their typically developing peers (Zeedyk et al., 2014). Nearly 70 years ago, Hans Asperger wrote about the torment and rejection that children with autism experienced from their classmates (Asperger, 1944). According to Humphrey and Symes (2010), though this is a frequently mentioned topic in discussion sections of ASD research, it is not typically explored further in terms of the recognition, prevalence, or protective factors.

It is important to note at the outset of this study that there is surprisingly little research in this area, though there is growing interest (Schroeder et al., 2014). It is appropriate, therefore, to explore in detail the studies and literature that are available to assess their depth and identify areas needing further investigation. This section reviews existing research on the bullying of students with autism in the general education setting of schools, including the prevalence of this phenomenon, reporting of bullying incidents, protective factors, and the need for schools to develop policies and programs to address this issue.

Research Specific to Bullying

Bullying has been a societal issue for an extensive period of time. Records of bullying behavior in books and newspapers date back to the 18th century and described physical aggression and shunning of victims in reaction to their physical and mental differences (Koo, 2007). As bullying has been studied over time, the focus of what constituted bullying has

evolved from being viewed as children, mainly boys, misbehaving by physically harassing weaker individuals who were also boys, to being viewed as behavior by both sexes in the form of physical, verbal, and psychological threats that may have a long-term harmful impact on the victim (P. K. Smith & Brain, 2000). According to the USDE (2013), in 2017 one out of every five students, or 20.2%, reported being bullied. Various studies have shown that direct bullying steadily climbs in the elementary years, plateaus in middle school, and declines in high school, while verbal bullying remains constant despite age (Banks, 2007).

During recent decades, research on bullying has increased exponentially due to media attention to national and international tragedies associated with bullying. Such research has also accelerated in response to the agendas of the state and federal legislative agencies that are intended to respond to the public's demand for a resolution (Espelage & Swearer, 2011). These efforts have resulted in a better understanding of the complexities of bullying; however, despite the research and the enactment of laws and policies, schools continue to struggle to address bullying (P. K. Smith & Brain, 2000). According to Charach et al. (1995), school intervention and prevention programs often failed in the past because the teachers, students, and parents were not well informed or well trained to implement strategies. Given this information, bullying prevention/intervention programs should include a public awareness campaign, a parental component, and program education and intervention at the school, class, and individual level (Olweus, 1993).

Research Related to Bullying of Students With Disabilities

Children with disabilities have been shown to be at greater risk of bullying than their nondisabled peers and often endure being victimized for their disability. With every disability category within the exceptional children framework, the characteristics associated with that

disability are likely viewed as signs of weakness by bullies and therefore increase the likelihood of victimization (Rose et al., 2012). B. Carter and Spencer (2006) found that students with disabilities were more likely to be bullied regardless of whether their disability was visible or not visible. Hartley et al. (2015) found that not only are there higher rates of victimization among students with disabilities, but that the harm caused by the bullying, whether physical, emotional, or psychological is at a higher level than in nondisabled victims. Additionally, Rose and Espelage (2012) found that specific disabilities have a higher risk factor for victimization and greater risk of long-term effects. Similarly, a student's setting for educational services may also impact their risk of being bullied. The findings of a study by Rose et al. (2015) revealed that students with learning disabilities or autism were more likely to be bullied in the general education setting, while students with intellectual disabilities or behavioral emotional disabilities were more likely to be bullied in the more restrictive setting, such as self-contained classroom.

Research Related to Bullying of Students With Autism

Victimization of children with autism is prevalent and it occurs in multiple forms. The first large-scale study of victimization experiences of individuals with ASD occurred in the United States and was conducted by Little in 2002 (Reid & Batten, 2006). This study included 411 mothers of children, ages 4–17, with autism and it yielded an overall prevalence rate for victimization of 94%. In addition, 75% of the children had been hit or emotionally bullied within the past year (Little, 2002). Little (2002) also noted that peer shunning was common among the participants' children and most had received at most one invitation to birthday parties in the last year and were generally picked last for team sports. These results demonstrate the bidirectional relationship of marginalization and victimization of children with ASD (Schroeder et al., 2014). There were limitations to this study. Little noted that generalization of the findings should be

done with caution because the sample only included mothers as informants and in all likelihood, based on their access to internet services to learn of the survey, they were middle to upper class. In addition, there was no verification of the diagnosis of ASD in the children whose mothers completed the survey.

Children with autism exhibit behaviors that typically deviate from their nondisabled peers. Often victims of bullying are perceived as different from peer group norms (Roekel et al., 2010). Reid and Batten (2006) completed a report that was published by the National Autistic Society in the United Kingdom. This study included over 1,400 responses from parents and caregivers, along with interviews of 28 children with ASD regarding their experiences of bullying in the school setting. Although the prevalence of bullying was reported at just 59% for students with autism, significantly lower than the rate determined by Little (2002), 835 of the parents reported the negative impacts of victimization on their children's self-esteem and 63% reported negative impacts on their children's mental health, including some instances of self-injurious behaviors (Reid & Batten, 2006). The report also indicated that the common impairments associated with autism, such as unusual behaviors, and sensory issues, were likely contributors to the targeting of the children for victimization and that, in many cases, the students with autism had difficulty determining that they were being bullied (Reid & Batten, 2006). This study also had limitations. Despite the fact that the survey included a large number of participants, it was only available to members of the National Autistic Society, which may not be representative of all parents of children with autism. Regardless of the exclusive sample, the report still provided powerful insights into the experience of bullying from the perspectives of both the parents and the children themselves, which was new up until this point in time (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

S. Carter (2009) also examined victimization through surveys of the parents of 34 children with ASD, ages 5–21. This U.S. study identified a peer victimization rate of 65%, which was consistent with the findings of Reid and Batten (2006). Results also revealed that 47% of the respondents indicated their children were hit by peers or siblings within the past year and 44% reported that their children were consistently picked on by peers (S. Carter, 2009). Once again, parents reported that the effects of bullying on their children with ASD were cause for concern and created further difficulties for their children, including mental health problems, emotional distress and school anxiety, ideation of suicide, and fear of further exclusion. This study cited the issues associated with autism as reasons children were targeted for bullying (S. Carter, 2009).

In the Netherlands, a study by Roekel et al. (2010) investigated reports of bullying that had occurred within the past month among 230 teenagers attending special ASD schools. The ratings were completed by children with ASD, student peers, and teachers. In this instance, the rates of being bullied were similar to the rates of bullying found among typically developing peers. Students' peers reported a rate of 7%, students with ASD reported a rate of 17%, and teachers reported a rate of 30%. This is significantly lower than the findings for students with ASD in the general education setting (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The findings by Roekel et al. may lend support to the idea that bullying may be more prevalent in mainstream settings, where the differences between students with autism are most obvious. The number of informants within this study was a strength of the study; however, the information would have been more applicable if it could have been compared to the prevalence ratings with of children with ASD in mainstream settings.

A more recent study was conducted by Cappadocia et al. (2012). Information was gathered regarding 192 children and adolescents with ASD through an online parent report of

mental health status and victimization within the past month. Over 80% of the youth were in fully inclusive classroom settings. While 77% of the parents reported that their children had been bullied at least once in the past month, 46% reported that their children had been bullied at least once a week (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Social bullying, such as shunning and malicious gossip, was the most common form of bullying experienced, followed by verbal bullying and lastly, physical bullying. As in former studies, the unique characteristics of students with autism were identified as factors that impacted targeting by bullies. Consistent with prior research, the negative impact of bullying created anxiety, mental health issues, and lowered self-esteem for the victims. These findings are generally consistent with those of Little (2002) and S. Carter (2009).

The information generated from the previously outlined studies has provided valuable insight into the prevalence of bullying, identification of risk factors, and the negative implications associated with victimization; however, none of the studies included comparison groups of typically developing students. Humphrey and Symes (2010) conducted a quantitative study using high school students with learning disabilities and typically developing children as comparison groups. Each group was composed of 40 students who provided information regarding their experiences with bullying through a self-report. Significant differences were found between the rate of victimization reported by students with ASD relative to both typically developing peers and peers with learning disabilities, while differences between the two control groups were not significant (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The authors concluded that children with ASD are at a higher risk of victimization than even students with another type of special need. Higher levels of bullying were associated with a lower level of social support from peers when compared with the control groups and the authors suggest that this may also be a

bidirectional relationship, with bullying impacting social relationships; this makes the child even more isolated and vulnerable (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Thus, having relationships with a peer in the class is a way to reduce bullying and may act as a protective factor. An unexpected finding, given the diligent advocacy of many parents of children with autism, was that parent support was not associated with lower levels of bullying (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

Humphrey and Symes (2010), utilizing the same ASD participant group as in the previous paragraph, explored students' responses to bullying and social support through a qualitative study. Bullying and social support were viewed by victims as important factors of inclusion. Difficulties with social relationships, along with social isolation, were common concerns among study participants. According to Humphrey and Symes, this predisposes children with ASD in the general education setting to circumstances that are associated with a much higher rate of bullying. They also reported that the likelihood that children with autism would report bullying or seek help from others, including adults, depended on relationship history (whether the person who might be called upon for support been dependable in the past) and barriers created by characteristics associated with autism, such as a lack of trust in others and a desire for solitude.

More recently, two quantitative studies have provided additional research that supports the conclusion that bullying is a significant problem for youth with ASD. Rowley et al. (2012) found that in the United Kingdom, rates of victimization were highest among students with ASD when compared to typically developing peers and those with other special education needs. Sofronoff et al. (2011) examined, via parent reports, social vulnerability and its relationship with bullying in a sample of 133 Australian children. While prevalence of victimization predictors was not explicitly explored, the authors did find that social incompetence was the strongest

predictor of bullying and that children with ASD who appeared to have more developed social skills were less likely to be bullied (Sofronoff et al., 2011). This indicates that interventions to improve the social competence of students with ASD may be a next step in bullying prevention. As is the case for several other studies mentioned, the sample sizes for these studies were relatively small and utilized single informants, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings.

Hebron and Humphrey (2014) investigated the prevalence, risk and protective factors for being bullied among children and youth with ASD. Through a mixed methods design, data were collected from 722 teachers and 119 parents of students with ASD. The results indicated that students with ASD were bullied more than other students with disabilities, and more than typically developing peers. In addition, social incompetence, behavior problems, and being in a regular education setting were identified as risk factors, while increased positive relationships, attending a school specifically for children with ASD, and higher levels of parental involvement were protective factors (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). Based on these findings, Hebron and Humphrey advocated that schools examine the role that teachers, parents, and peers might play in facilitating the development of supportive relationships with students who have autism. In addition, they suggested that schools address the problem of bullying and social exclusion through implementation of school based antibullying programs, peer support, and mentor programs, as well as specialty training in the area of autism for all professionals working with this unique group of students.

The studies reviewed strongly support the contention that children and adolescents with ASD experience increased rates of perceived physical, verbal, and social forms of bullying compared to their typically developing peers (Cappadocia et al., 2012; S. Carter, 2009; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Little, 2002; Roekel et al., 2010; Sofronoff et al.,

2011). Based on parent and self-report, children and adolescents with ASD also experience higher rate of victimization than peers with other special needs and disabilities (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Rowley et al., 2012). The current review indicates that students with ASD tend to exhibit risk factors that make them more vulnerable to victimization and lack protective factors that would make them less vulnerable to victimization. The evidence indicates that likely risk factors include social incompetence and difficulties related to characteristics of autism, social exclusion, peer marginalization and negative behaviors (Cappadocia et al., 2012; S. Carter, 2009; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Little, 2002; Rowley et al., 2012; Sofronoff et al., 2011). Roekel et al. (2010) found that judgment errors in social perception by students with autism, with respect to perceiving the presence of bullying, were related to rates of bullying victimization.

The impact of bullying cannot be underestimated, given the harmful effects on self-esteem, mental health, school engagement, and general well-being and happiness (Cappadocia et al., 2012; S. Carter, 2009; Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Little, 2002; Reid & Batten, 2006). In addition, the studies reported here helped to clarify the role that social differences play regarding increased rates of bullying for those with autism; this should serve as a basis for the development and modification of intervention strategies to provide safe school environments for students with autism.

Chapter Summary

Despite a national focus on the prevalence of bullying in schools and efforts made through laws and policies to address the concerns raised by the bullying phenomenon, it continues to be a prevalent factor in schools impacting students daily (Banks, 2007). Over the decades, the body of research on bullying has continued to grow and to shed light on effective

practices for addressing bullying concerns in the school setting (Espelage & Swearer, 2011). Despite this body of knowledge, schools have continued to struggle to implement a successful bullying prevention/intervention program (P. K. Smith & Brain, 2000). School districts must implement a comprehensive intervention plan that involves all students, parents, and school staff to ensure that all students can learn in a safe and fear-free environment (Olweus, 1993).

The knowledge base related to the bullying of students with disabilities is somewhat limited, but the interest in this area is began increasing within recent decades (Flynt & Morton, 2004). According to Whitney et al. (1994), students with disabilities are at a greater risk of being bullied than their nondisabled peers. This compromises the well-being of students with disabilities, as they may become victims based on their disability and the impacts of victimization are at higher level than for nondisabled students (Hartley et al., 2015). It can be argued that bullying makes students with disabilities “doubly disadvantaged” (Chatzitheochari et al., 2016, p. 696) due to the impact it has on their sense of self and well-being.

The lack of research on the bullying of children and adolescents with ASD is surprising, given that they are repeatedly identified as a vulnerable group, and that the key indicators of risk for bullying are frequently associated with the difficulties identified with characteristics of autism (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). Recent rises in the prevalence of autism among students, along with changes in the policies governing special education that require that students be provided educational services in their least restrictive environment, have led to an increase in the number of students with ASD in the mainstream educational setting (Schroeder et al., 2014). The risk factors associated with victimization are reminiscent of the difficulties with social interaction and communication associated with autism, which makes this group exceptionally vulnerable not only because of the challenges inherent in ASD, but also because the educational

settings in which students with autism are placed may not be fully adapted to their unique needs (Hebron et al., 2015).

In this study of the prevalence and reporting of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying of mainstreamed middle school students with autism from the perspectives of the students with autism, teachers, and parents, it was important to examine not only the characteristics and traits of the child with autism, but to also consider factors that are external to the child, but may represent contextual variables which influence bullying behavior. Through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, bullying was viewed as the interplay between individuals' characteristics and traits and the variables they encounter, such as peers, teachers, family members, and community factors within their ecological environment (Swearer & Doll, 2001).

The limited extant research indicates that students with autism demonstrate a higher risk rate for victimization than children with other special needs areas and children that are typically developing. In addition, the negative impact of victimization places students with autism at increased risk of experiencing anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues that affect the quality and enjoyment of life. This is supported by Hebron and Humphrey's (2014) observations that many adults with ASD reflect back on their time in school as "a difficult time that caused great sadness and anxiety and sometimes even depression" (p. 628). If for no other reason than this, it is important to continue to investigate the bullying of children and adolescents with autism to gain insights into how to develop and implement appropriate policies and practices to safeguard students from acts of bullying (Hebron et al., 2015).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Introduction

Research efforts are most successful when planning and organization are integral parts of the process. Crotty (2003) suggested the methodologies and methods used to conduct research are contingent on the purpose of the research and the specific questions that guided the line of inquiry. The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence and reporting of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying of middle school students with ASD in the general education setting of Hall County Schools. Perspectives and beliefs were gathered from the students with autism, students' parents, and each of the students' current teachers. In addition, I aimed to contribute to the research base on bullying of children with autism and fill in existing gaps. Merriam (1998) suggested that qualitative research offers insight into the lived experiences of individuals, as well as the multiple contexts influencing both individuals and phenomena. In considering the purpose of this research, I concluded that the use of the qualitative case study was the most appropriate design through which to investigate the bullying of middle school students with autism, within a real-life context.

This chapter provides a description of the methodology used in the study. It describes the steps for conducting the research and it identifies the questions that were addressed by the study. In addition, this chapter outlines the eligibility criteria for participants, identifies the regions and locations involved in the study, describes study rigor, identifies data analysis and provides a brief narrative about the protection of human participants.

Rationale for a Qualitative Study

The purpose of this section is to document the developmental evolution and alignment of the research design chosen and the research framework. The alignment between research components is critical to research success.

The goal of this study was to examine the prevalence and reporting of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying of middle school students with ASD in the general education setting of Hall County Schools. Perspectives were gathered from the students with autism, students' parents, and each of the students' teachers. I sought to learn more about the beliefs of the participants regarding the phenomenon of bullying. More specifically, the study examined whether students with autism believe they are being bullied, how they identify that they are being bullied, and how they report that information to authorities. Given the small sample and the particular vulnerabilities of the student participants, I did not interact with them, but instead, had a research representative conduct the interviews with the students.

The study also examined the identification and reporting of bullying of autistic students from the perspectives of the students' parents and the students' teachers. Findings from the study were analyzed to determine if evidence exists to support the need for the school system to develop a prevention program for youth with autism to assist them in gaining self-advocacy skills needed to recognize and report bullying behavior.

Despite a growing interest in the topic of bullying of youth with autism, this phenomenon continues to be underresearched, with gaps in information that warrants further review (Schroeder et al., 2014). It is my intent to advance knowledge regarding this phenomenon, as it relates to Hall County Schools, in order to inform programs and policies to meet the needs of the growing population of students with ASD and to assist parents, teachers, and peers in

understanding the vulnerability to victimization of this population of students. How factors beyond the autistic child, such as school peers, teachers and family may have an influence on the vulnerability to bullying, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, were also examined.

To capture the complexities of the ecological conditions and interactions surrounding bullying of students with autism, a qualitative research design was selected for this study. Qualitative research is defined as "a type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 10–11). This method provided a way of gathering details about feelings, thought processes, beliefs, and emotions, which numbers alone might conceal or generalize in a manner that would fail to capture the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Most studies on bullying include quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis (Bosacki et al., 2006). Such methodologies provide the benefit of larger sample sizes, which make data more generalizable and reliable, but participants are limited in their responses by the instrument selected for use by the researcher (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). In addition, due to the dynamic and multidimensional nature of bullying, capturing the lived experiences of victims through quantitative methods is difficult (van Manen, 1990). Qualitative research allows the investigator to view a phenomenon through the participants' responses and perspectives (Merriam, 1998). Using a qualitative case study approach to research design for this study provided rich data on this topic and add to the limited research base.

- The decision of when to utilize a case study versus some other qualitative research design depends on: what the researcher wants to know, how the research problem is defined and, the questions it raises (Kenny & Grotelueschen, 1980). In determining

the appropriateness of using a qualitative case study for this research, the following advantages were considered. Case study methods are applicable to real-life, contemporary, human situations (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

- Case study results relate directly to the common reader's everyday experience and facilitate an understanding of complex real-life situations (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

Qualitative case studies allow the researcher to capture and describe the complexity of real-life events (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). This case study was conducted to create a foundation of knowledge through interviews, open-ended surveys, and document review to identify the prevalence and reporting of bullying occurrences of mainstreamed middle school students with autism from the perspectives and beliefs of the students with autism, teachers, and parents and as suggested by Merriam (2009), the case study provided an intensive description and analysis of the perceptions of the participants. Utilizing the case study methodology allowed me to present the thick descriptions of individual perceptions and beliefs regarding bullying by incorporating multiple factors that influence the phenomenon over time (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). The development of emerging themes from the thick descriptions resulted in a holistic presentation of the real-life situations and settings to inform future action or implementation of an antibullying program for students with autism (Stake, 1995).

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research investigation:

1. What is the prevalence of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying among middle school students with autism in the general education setting of Hall County Schools from the perspective of the students with autism, the students' parents, and the teachers?

2. To what extent do adolescents with autism, parents, and teachers have similar beliefs about what constitutes bullying?
3. What methods do adolescents with autism use to report instances of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying to parents, teachers, and other authorities?
4. What strategies do adolescents with autism use to address face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying?
5. How do adolescents with autism describe the responses of teachers to their reports of face-to-face or cyberbullying?
6. What are the recommendations of teachers and parents for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying of students with autism spectrum disorder?

The Site

The selected district was a small, rural school system in the southeastern United States. Pseudonyms were used for the school district, as well as the schools involved in the study. Over the past 20 years, the population of the county has declined over 30% as several industries have closed plants in the county, also negatively impacting the economy. The county now relies on its farming community and the school system as the primary employers within the county.

The school system has one high school, two middle schools, and five elementary schools that serve 3,221 students. All of the schools are Title I schools. Because the school district is a low-wealth system and greater than 64% of the families within the district live at or below the poverty level, 100% of the students receive breakfast and lunch at no cost. At the time of the study, 67% of the student population was African American, 26% White, 4% Hispanic, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% other racial or ethnic groups. Seventeen percent of the total student population participates in the Exceptional Children Program. Upon receiving

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from North Carolina State University (NCSU), a formal request was made to the Hall County School Board requesting approval to conduct a study at the middle schools in the district in Hall County. After receiving written permission from the school board, I also requested permission to conduct research from each middle school principal before proceeding.

Eastern North Carolina is predominantly made up of rural counties with relatively small populations. Many generational families live in this area and though family members may move away, they often move to other counties in Eastern North Carolina that are in close proximity to home. Due to the economics of the different counties, it is not uncommon for individuals to have to travel to a surrounding county for work. In addition, most of the counties have a large agricultural community which have a steady influx and efflux of seasonal workers and their families. These workers and their families tend to move between neighboring counties based on where they are able to find work. As with many rural areas, there are not as many shopping, recreational, entertainment, and social activities for the population to enjoy so people frequently visit nearby counties to engage in these activities. In addition, participation in athletics is a mainstay for the youth in these districts. County lines are crossed for athletic events, but in addition there are many travel ball teams that are composed of players from multiple counties. These factors contribute to a familiarity among the residents of these counties which does not exist in other geographic regions. Because of the familiarity that I have through my personal life and my work with many individuals and families that live not only in the county that I live, but also in the surrounding counties and due to the vulnerability of the student participants included in my study, I chose to have a research representative engage with the student and parent participants for the dispersal of all communication, meetings, and interviews associated with the

study. This provided an additional level of confidentiality and decreased the likelihood of any concerns of coercion or intimidation to be a participant. The research representative is an expert in the area of autism, having spent the last 21 years of her career advancing her studies in autism and working with children with autism and their families.

Participants

Middle school students with autism were the selected participants for this study based on data in the district bullying report system. A review of data collected over the 3 years prior to the study through the district reporting and collection system and the individual bullying reports from each individual school revealed that 71% of the reports made regarding bullying occurred in Grades 6–8. In addition, consideration was given to the age of participants, specifically regarding their developmental cognition ability to understand the benefits and risks of participating in the study and to understand informed assent. When choosing to include students with autism in my study, I was well aware of the vulnerability of this population and, therefore, both the research representative and I were vigilant during each step of this project to protect and safeguard each student participant’s identity, while also giving them an opportunity to have their voices heard.

Eligibility criteria for the student participants included the requirements that they attend Hall County Schools, sixth through eighth grades, with a formal diagnosis of autism. Participants also were required to be fully participating in the general education setting. Flyers were distributed around the community to solicit participation of middle school students in this district based on the previously discussed criteria and included contact information for interested parties. All student participants voluntarily engaged in this study with the assistance and approval of their parent or guardian. Per Gall et al. (2007) and Patton (2002), purposeful sampling allows

researchers to select participants that are more likely to provide deep and rich information regarding the purpose of the study. The criteria selected for sampling were purposeful, but the actual participation by students with autism was voluntary. In addition to the student participant, one parent of each student participant and the teachers for each student were also asked to participate in the study. At the time of the study, there were 18 middle school students who met the criteria to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

I used a researcher-adapted electronic survey for parents and teachers. These instruments are located in Appendices A and B. After reviewing surveys created by four other researchers, I developed a survey instrument based on the six research questions posed in this study and by adapting some of the components of the reviewed surveys and combining them with my own questions. The intent was to gather data on participants' beliefs regarding the bullying of the student with autism with which each of these adult participants were associated.

Survey items were formatted with a Likert-type scale. Candidates rated the degree to which they agreed with the 50 belief statements about their student's experiences with bullying using an ordinal scale in which the following response options were available: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Additionally, participants were provided the opportunity to respond to three constructed-response questions to share more detailed information about their student's experience with bullying.

I developed and implemented an interview protocol to use with student participants; this instrument is located in Appendix C. Twelve of the 18 eligible students in Hall County were interviewed. The interview protocol included standardized instructions, an opening question, four probing questions and a concluding question.

To strengthen the validity of these instrument, the survey and interview protocols were reviewed by a panel of experts who provided advice on the structure and content of each. This panel included a former local and state superintendent who provided oversight of special education programs, an expert in qualitative protocols, a career administrator who provided oversight of behavioral, and special education programs, and a scholar and expert in autism who has served children with autism and their families for over 21 years.

Procedures

The study was conducted in Hall County Schools in the hopes of identifying the prevalence of bullying of the middle school students with autism, determining the factors that impact reporting of such behavior, identifying how reports of bullying are made and to whom they are made, learning of perceived outcomes of the reports of bullying, identifying strategies that students used when bullied, and to determining the suggestions that parents and teachers might offer to diminish bullying. It was my desire to use the findings from this research to determine if a prevention program was needed to assist youth with autism in gaining self-advocacy skills needed to recognize and report bullying behavior.

Creswell (2012) suggested that qualitative researchers collect data themselves by examining documents, observing behavior or interviewing participants integrating multiple factors in an interactive and holistic manner. For the qualitative researcher, interviews are the primary method to gather data to obtain participants' direct statements about experiences, feelings, perceptions, and knowledge (Merriam, 2009). In addition, the use of two or more methods to address research questions in investigating a phenomenon is a means of strengthening the validity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I collected data

from interviews, surveys, and a review of documents associated with bullying within Hall County Schools.

Ensuring confidentiality for student participants and the anonymity of parents and teachers was a critical factor in the development of this study. Prior to reaching out to study participants, I set expectations regarding the protection of participant identity. Provisions were made so that parents and teachers could complete their surveys anonymously. As was noted earlier, I recruited a research representative to conduct the actual interviews with students.

A secure, password-protected computer was utilized for data collection, analysis, and storage. All data were stored in password-protected files and folders on the computer, for an additional layer of protection. When not in use, I logged out of the computer, powered it off, and stored it in a locked file cabinet in my home office.

Prior to posting public information seeking candidates for this study, I met with my research representative and reviewed expectations, written procedures, and scripted protocols for communicating verbally and electronically with study participants. During that meeting we discussed all IRB requirements for addressing concerns that might arise during student interviews. I also identified when an interview should be stopped and how to document the reason the interview was stopped. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the emotional reactions that could occur from recalling traumatic events, procedures were outlined to stop the interview if the student demonstrated or expressed distress or requested not to continue with the interview. Scripted protocols were provided to the research representative to follow with the parent and the student in the event that an interview was stopped. A report template was provided for documenting a discontinued interview, along with procedures for informing me. In addition, the research representative was given a handout to be provided to the parent which

detailed further contact information should the parent have additional concerns. After each student interview, I met with the research representative to be briefed regarding any concerns that may have arisen during the interview. Information that was shared was factual in nature so as not to influence findings. As a matter of record, no interviews were interrupted or stopped, and no student or parent concerns were reported.

Student interviews were recorded on a portable handheld digital recording device. When not in use the recording device was stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. While in use, the recorder was kept in my possession at all times, until it was given to the research representative prior to an interview. The recording device was collected from the research representative within 15 minutes of the conclusion of the interview and transported in my personal locking briefcase to the locked filing cabinet in my home. For additional protection, the digital device for recording was password protected. Audio recordings were transferred to a password protected file on the secure password protected computer within 24 hours of the interview or prior to the next scheduled interview, whichever came first. Upon successful transfer the audio recording was deleted from the digital recorder. The handheld recorder was free of any recording for each interview. Once I transcribed interviews, they were stored in an electronic file on the secure, password protected computer and audio recordings were deleted from the electronic file.

A Qualtrics account was utilized for the survey. Survey participants received generic survey links to ensure the privacy of survey participants and no personally identifiable data, including IP addresses or respondent email addresses were collected. No information regarding survey participants was provided to the researcher.

Paper surveys were completed by 11 of the 12 students who participated in the interviews. No names were documented on the student surveys. Pseudonyms were used to represent students throughout the study. Each survey was collected by the research representative and provided to me at the same time as the recording device. Paper surveys were stored in the researcher's lockable briefcase and transported to the researcher's home office. Surveys were stored in a folder in locked file cabinet in my home office.

Upon successfully receiving final approval of the dissertation from the university, I destroyed all saved data. Appropriate methods were utilized to clear the computer used during the research project. Survey data collected through Qualtrics were disposed of by deleting the survey and the user account for the project.

My research representative contacted each of the eligible students' parent(s) by phone to provide them with a brief overview of the research study and invite them to an informational meeting. The meeting was held with each participant and their parent to provide a more detailed explanation of the purpose and rationale of the study as well as to answer any questions that participants might have had. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary. Participants were informed of how confidentiality was to be maintained and how security of all materials generated by the study would be safeguarded. All participants were asked to sign a statement acknowledging that they had been informed of the purpose and rationale of the study and how data would be collected and used. Parents were also required to sign consent forms for their children to participate and, following that process, students were asked to sign assent forms.

At the informational meeting, parents were provided oral and written instructions on how to complete a survey which was available to them online or in paper form. Those individuals who preferred a paper survey received the survey, completed it at a later time, and were provided

a stamped self-addressed envelope for survey return. Appointments at neutral prearranged locations, mutually agreed on by all parties, were made with parents who preferred to complete an online survey and did not have access to a computer or internet services, or they were completed at the location and time of their child's interview with the research representative. Parent surveys contained some open-ended questions in addition to a few selected-response survey questions. The research representative also established meeting times and dates with student participants at the informational meeting. At the designated time, each student met individually with my representative at a neutral prearranged setting that was private and quiet. They were first asked to complete the survey and then the semistructured interview followed. The interview questions were structured around the research questions defined within this study; it was anticipated that interviews would last 30–45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded. Participants were allowed sufficient time to think about and process questions. In addition, they were allowed breaks as needed and my representative was sensitive to indicators when students were frustrated, fatigued, or otherwise uncomfortable. The process was stopped in such instances and students were allowed a break, or allowed to discontinue participation. At the conclusion of the interview, participants left with their parents and my representative made appropriate field notes for reflection on the interview. Upon the collection of all surveys and completion of interviews, the data were organized as necessary and subsequently analyzed.

Teachers of students participating in the study were initially identified through Powerschool by the district Powerschool coordinator and an email from my NCSU account was sent to their district email address providing information about the research project and requesting their participation in the study via an anonymous survey. The email also included disclosure and informed consent information. In an effort to ensure anonymity, teachers were not

requested to sign an informed consent prior to participation. The voluntary completion of the survey served as their informed consent. This provided an additional level of security to prevent speculation or knowledge of which teachers actually participated in the survey. Teachers were informed in the first email that a system was set up to automatically send two subsequent reminder emails to all potential participants. Upon the deadline for completing surveys, the data were organized as necessary and subsequently analyzed. Table 4 provides information about the source of data for each research question and how the data were analyzed.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a process that seeks to reduce and make sense of vast amounts of information collected during research, often from different sources, so that impressions that shed light on a research question can emerge (Creswell, 2012). I used accepted qualitative analytic practices to interpret the data collected through interviews, observations, and document reviews to examine students' with autism, parents', and teachers' beliefs about the prevalence of bullying of middle school students with autism and their perceptions regarding this issue. Data collected were organized and audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional me. Data analysis is a reflective process, so initially, I spent time familiarizing myself with the information collected by reading and rereading it in its entirety and making notes in keeping with the research questions.

Table 4*Research Question and Sources*

Research question	Data source	Analysis technique
1. What is the prevalence of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying among middle school students with autism in the general education setting of Hall County Schools from the perspective of the students with autism, the students' parents, and the teachers?	Parent, teacher, and student surveys	Likert scale
2. To what extent do adolescents with autism, parents, and teachers have similar beliefs about what constitutes bullying?	Parent, teacher, and student surveys	Likert scale
3. What methods do adolescents with autism use to report instances of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying to parents, teachers, and other authorities?	Student interview, parent survey, and teacher survey	Open-ended interview questions and survey questions
4. What strategies do adolescents with autism use to address face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying?	Student interview, parent survey, and teacher survey	Open-ended interview questions and survey questions
5. How do adolescents with autism describe the responses of teachers to their reports of face-to-face or cyberbullying?	Student interview	Open-ended interview questions
6. What are the recommendations of teachers and parents for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying of students with autism spectrum disorder?	Parent survey and teacher survey	Survey questions

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is an exploratory perspective, encouraging you to consider and code all your data, allowing for new impressions to shape interpretation in different and unexpected directions as opposed to limiting data

examination to a predetermined framework (Creswell, 2012). An emergent coding scheme was utilized to analyze data collected from interviews, surveys, and documents. ATLAS.ti, a data analysis and research software program, was used for coding and organizing data. A matrix was created using an Excel spreadsheet to sort and code the raw data according to the research questions.

Some of the data collected in the study were quantitative in nature. The use of qualitative data better met the overall purpose of this study; however, the quantifiable data collected through the surveys and interviews also provided an opportunity to express outcomes in numbers that were representative by frequencies and percentages. It was informative to be able to indicate, for example, that 23 of the 26 teachers, or 88%, responded to a question in the same manner, which was then interpreted as the majority of teachers held the same belief regarding that question. While these data lacked context and could not replace the thick descriptions of instances of bullying behaviors that participants recounted during their interviews, it did provide concrete, measurable frequencies and percentages for interpretation.

Trustworthiness of the Study

An important aspect of qualitative research is attending to quality (Creswell, 2012). A case study must produce valid and reliable results in order to add to existing literature, be utilized for policy development, or be useful for the development of future research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these criteria is discussed with regard to the research that I conducted.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence the researcher portrays in the veracity of his/her research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to establish credibility, it is important for the researcher to spend sufficient enough time in the field to rise above his/her preconceptions and truly understand the culture, social setting, or phenomenon of interest (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The use of interviews, observations, and documents provided evidence for data triangulation and comparison of information gathered from multiple angles to support findings and eliminate the biases of the researcher by providing converging information from multiple sources (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Finally, to enhance the credibility of study findings, peer debriefing was used to test interpretations and findings. This form of “checks and balances” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 363) involves having a disinterested peer review, analyze, and critique researcher conclusions to determine reasonability.

Transferability

Transferability was defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994) as demonstrating the applicability of research findings to other contexts and locations, or establishing external validity. Thick descriptions were utilized within the study to provide sufficient detail of the research site, study participants, and documents reviewed ensure that readers are able to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Dependability

Dependability is concerned with demonstrating that the findings of a study are consistent and can be replicated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Providing transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of the research project to the development and reporting of findings,

much like an audit trail enables the reader to evaluate the accuracy and validity of the study assertions, interpretations, and conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Dependability of this study was facilitated by detailed documentation of actions, including methodological and data analysis procedures (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Confirmability

Confirmability describes the extent to which the study findings, interpretations, and conclusions are drawn strictly from participants and are not the result of researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There are several techniques for establishing confirmability. Triangulation of data is one method of establishing confirmability; however, alone, it is not adequate to eliminate researcher bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Reflexivity is another element to establish credibility and control biases, therefore establishing confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Reflexivity in the research process requires the researcher to be cognizant of his/her influence on the construction of meanings throughout the process, and an acknowledgment of remaining neutral while conducting research. In the following section I present my positionality as a researcher and identify my efforts to control for researcher bias to ensure that study results were data driven.

Subjectivity Statement

As an educator, I have 34 years of experience working in the public schools of North Carolina. As a director of Exceptional Children, my foremost concern is ensuring the implementation of a program that provides all children with disabilities appropriate opportunities to learn and develop based on each child's unique social-emotional, academic, and behavioral needs and to remove barriers that prevent that learning from occurring. Students with autism have deficits in social-emotional competence which can be a risk factor that makes them

susceptible to being bullied. My interest in pursuing dissertation research that explored the perspectives of students with autism, and their parents and teachers was prompted by the need to appropriately address the social–emotional needs of a population of students that I serve.

Because of the work I do as a director of exceptional children’s programs, it was imperative that I explore my positions as a researcher to reveal any personal or subjective biases that had the potential to interfere with study outcomes.

My professional and research interests were in determining the extent to which students with autism are bullied in the school setting and in providing intervention programs which provide students with autism social skills training and bullying awareness to foster social independence. The experience of working with students with disabilities has provided an extensive foundation in curriculum modification, skills remediation, behavior modification, and differentiation of instruction. I believe that all children are capable of experiencing success in school both academically and socially and that it is the responsibility of those individuals working with special needs students to be proactive in teaching and remediating social–emotional skills, as well as academic skills. My knowledge of exceptional children and appropriate practices for addressing the needs of exceptional children has allowed me to experience success in working with students with disabilities and their teachers. I hold strong values and beliefs about the responsibility of the teacher to meet the social–emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of children with disabilities and to insure the rights afforded to students with disabilities through IDEA. Harding (2007) suggested that while it may be impossible to remove all potential researcher bias by revealing researcher positionality, placing the researcher’s lived experiences in the context of the research and describing the influence of these experiences affords the reader the opportunity to make evaluative judgments about

researcher subjectivity. As I embarked on the research process, I was cognizant of how personal subjectivities influence the framework and methodology of my research.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

Every study, no matter how well it is constructed, has some delimitations and limitations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative case studies are sometimes viewed as having the most limitations and delimitations because they are generally specifically focused on a particular topic or group and conclusions cannot be generalized (Creswell, 2012). Since this study is focused on a middle school within a small rural district, the findings are not generalizable to broader groups or schools with different demographics. The data and findings are limited to this particular group of participants at these particular schools within Hall County Schools.

Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations of the current study were related to the constraints on generalizability and applications to practice that were accepted prior to implementation of the study. These delimitations are enumerated as follows:

1. The district selected was specifically chosen as a representative of small, rural districts in Eastern North Carolina and to meet the criteria of having a population of middle school students with autism in the general education setting which would yield an adequate sample size to be included in the study. Generalizing these findings to other geographic areas should be approached with caution.
2. Participants were specifically limited to Grades 6–8 because the district bullying report indicated the highest percentage of reported bullying episodes occurred at the middle school level. In addition, consideration was also given to the communication skills of students in this age group as opposed to younger students.

3. Students who opted to participate their parents, and their teachers were the only individuals who were included in the study; this resulted in outcomes which may be overrepresentative of a particular group of students with autism in one particular setting.
4. Parent and teacher participated through a survey and provided responses to survey questions and three open-ended questions. A survey was selected, rather than an interview in order to provide anonymity and in an attempt to gain the most honest responses. Further information may have been gathered from an interview with these participants.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study were factors that, once the study was implemented, were out of my control but may have affected the outcomes of the study. The limitations of the current study are listed as follows:

1. There were 18 students within Grades 6–8 in this district which would have been eligible to participate in the study. Only 12 of the 18 elected to participate, resulting in a small sample size. Given the small number of participants these data may not be generalizable to all geographic areas or demographics.
2. The vast majority of the students who participated in the study were of one gender. Gender disparity may impact the generalizability of the study.

Assumptions

During the completion of this study, I made the following assumptions about the students, parents, and teachers who participated:

1. During the survey, I assumed that participants, particularly the students with autism, understood the questions.
2. I assumed that the participants answered honestly and without fear of reprisal for their responses.
3. I assumed that the participants in my study were representative of the populations in the district from which they were drawn.

Chapter Summary

School bullying is a disturbing problem with multiple and serious consequences that school administrators and staff, parents and legislators are struggling to address (Gentry et al., 2015). Research has shown that youth with ASD are at an even greater risk of being victimized by bullying than their typically developing peers and students with other types of disabilities (Zeedyk et al., 2014). Difficulties with understanding and participating in social interactions, communication, and developing and maintaining peer relationships are some of the factors that make students with autism vulnerable to victimization; however, with the mandates of special education laws for students to be served in their least restrictive environment, the number of students with autism has steadily and swiftly risen in the mainstream setting (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The purpose of this study was to analyze the prevalence and reporting of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying of middle school youth with autism in Hall County Schools from the perspectives of the students with autism, their parents, and their teachers. This study also examined the beliefs of participants about bullying and the methods used to report face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying. Finally, the study examined the implications for the development or implementation of programs to prevent bullying and to teach adolescents with autism how to report and address bullying.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Chapter Introduction

Chapter 4 provides the results from the study of the prevalence and reporting of middle school students with autism from the perspectives of the student participants, their parents, and their teachers. The following sections address the results from the qualitative elements of the study that are included in Research Questions 1–6. The sections will include the responses of each group of participants relative to each research question.

The purpose of this study was to create a foundation of knowledge through interviews, open-ended surveys, and document review through which to identify the prevalence and reporting of bullying occurrences among mainstreamed middle school children with ASD. These insights were gained from the perspectives and beliefs of the students with autism, their parents, and their teachers. A qualitative case study approach guided the research investigation to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying among middle school students with autism in the general education setting of Hall County Schools from the perspective of the students with autism, the students' parents, and the teachers?
2. To what extent do adolescents with autism, parents, and teachers have similar beliefs about what constitutes bullying?
3. What methods do adolescents with autism use to report instances of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying to parents, teachers, and other authorities?
4. What strategies do adolescents with autism use to address face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying?

5. How do adolescents with autism describe the responses of teachers to their reports of face-to-face or cyberbullying?
6. What are the recommendations of teachers and parents for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying of students with autism spectrum disorder?

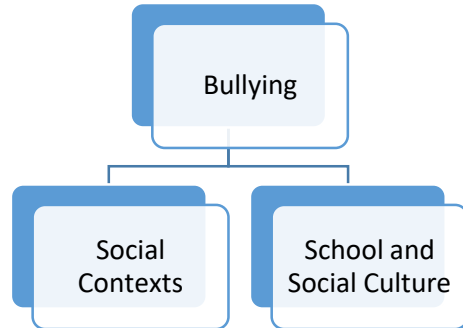
Qualitative research provides an opportunity for participants to express what is meaningful to them. Participants in this study had an opportunity to share their thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions through a survey and an interview. Parents and teachers were able to express their thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions through open-ended survey questions.

Results

Study results are based on the qualitative data obtained from interviews and surveys completed with middle school students with autism and survey results from parents and teachers. Responses from these sources were analyzed using ATLAS.ti., a qualitative software program that assists in data organization and analysis. Because trustworthy and credible qualitative research requires that researchers immerse themselves in the data to identify the breadth and the depth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I transcribed all interviews and responses to open-ended parent and teacher survey questions in order to increase my familiarity with the data. I also listened to the audio recordings of each of the interviews multiple times in order to explore the meaning of participants' experiences of victimization of bullying (Creswell, 2013). For data analysis, I chose to use an inductive approach following a thematic content analysis based on coding, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through the process of coding, several concepts and themes were generated and developed (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Overarching Categories Generated by the Data



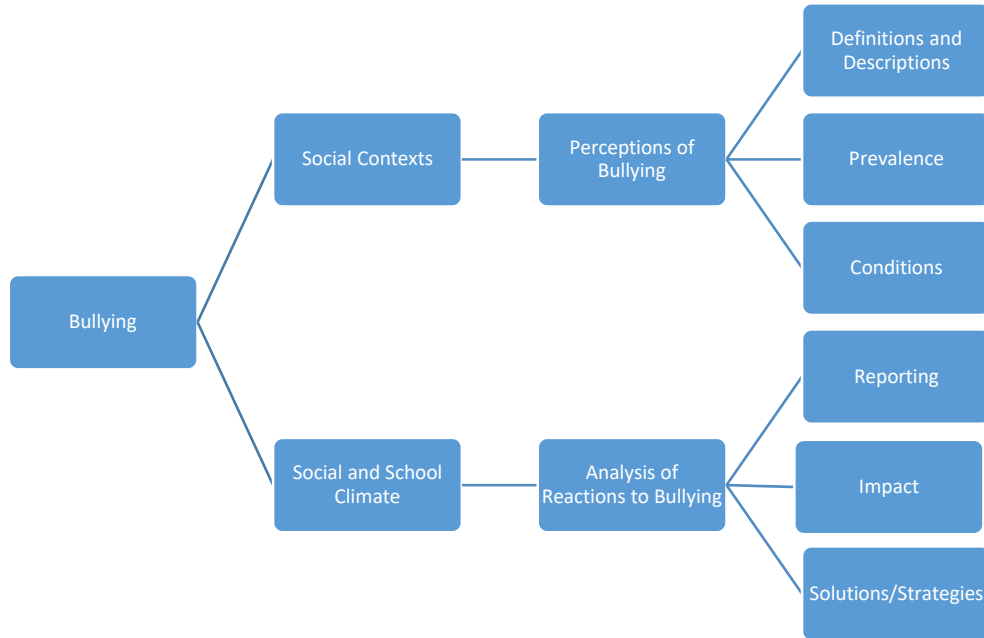
The themes emerged spontaneously in the course of student participants' interviews and responses to open-ended survey questions by students, parents, and teachers. In general, the information was considered significant and relevant as a category if it met one or both of the following criteria:

- It corresponded to a number of responses from participants regarding similar concepts or beliefs, and/or
- It was relevant to the themes that appeared necessary to understand the dynamics of school bullying and the resulting consequences or impact.

I begin the reporting of results with a description of the study participants. Study results are then reported in reference to the research questions and are represented by the two major themes of perceptions of bullying and analysis of reactions to bullying, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Overarching Themes of Social Contexts and Social and School Climate



Demographic Information About Study Participants

Study participants included 12 middle school students with ASD who were participating in the general education setting. Fourteen parents representing the participating students and 43 middle school teachers who provide daily instruction to one or more of these students also participated. These participants are described in greater detail in the following sections. No demographic information was collected on surveys for any group of participants.

Students

Twelve students with autism participated in the study. Of the 12 students, 11 participated in both the survey and the interview and one student only participated in the interview. This student declined to take the survey because he prefers to talk instead of writing any answers. He stated that writing was not something that he liked to do, even in school. He also declined to

orally answer any questions from the survey, preferring to move directly into the interview questions, so that he would be sure that he wasn't going to be tricked into writing. Due to the small sample size, some information regarding the sample population will be limited to generalizations in order to further protect the confidentiality of the students. The age of the students with autism who participated in the survey and the interview ranged from 11 to 14 years. The participants had a median age of 13 years and a mean age of 12.81 years. The vast majority of student participants were male. In order to further protect the confidentiality of the students, therefore, all students are referred to as male and male pronouns are used in the reporting of results. The racial and ethnicity makeup of participants also varied among the 12 students. All students were enrolled in Grade 6, Grade 7, or Grade 8. Participants' educational placements ranged from 80% to 100% participation in the general education setting.

Parents

Only parents of students who participated in the study participated in the survey. All parents participated in the survey electronically. The parents of each student were provided links to complete the survey by my research representative. Parents were given the option to complete a survey together for their child or they could elect to complete a survey separately. Surveys were completed by 14 parents. The research representative also provided parents with the survey links. Parent participation in the surveys was anonymous to me.

Teachers

Teachers of students who participated in the study were invited to participate in a survey. Links to the teacher survey were provided to all sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade teachers at each of the middle schools by my research representative, based on each student participant's school schedule. Links were provided to 33 teachers and responses were received from 26

teachers yielding a response rate of 79%. Teacher participation in the surveys was anonymous and no demographic information was collected about the teachers. Teachers did not know the identities of students that participated in the study. The disclosure and research project information that preceded the teacher survey, provided teachers with the knowledge that students with autism and their parents would also be targeted participants in this study.

Prevalence of Bullying of Mainstreamed Middle School Students With Autism

The first research question was stated as follows: What is the prevalence of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying among middle school students with autism in the general education setting of Hall County Schools from the perspective of the students with autism, the students' parents, and the teachers? The analysis for this query began with a question about the participants' understanding of bullying. This provided the data for the second research question: To what extent do adolescents with autism, parents, and teachers have similar beliefs about what constitutes bullying? On the survey, all three groups of participants were asked to provide a definition or description of what the word bullying means. Students were also given the opportunity to provide a definition or description of the term bullying in the interview.

Participants were then asked to rate how often acts of bullying happen to them (student survey), their child (parent survey), or their student (teacher survey). The subsections that follow provide the analyses of their responses to the questions about their understanding of bullying and its prevalence. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of participants.

Student Perspectives—Defining Bullying

On the student survey, participants wrote a brief definition of bullying or provided a description of bullying. Students also had the opportunity to elaborate on their description or definition of bullying during the interview. Examination of these descriptions, particularly how

they operationally defined bullying, provided insight into student understanding of this construct. Further analysis of the terminology used to describe bullying also provided evidence of student understanding.

Overwhelmingly, student participants identified or described bullying utilizing similar concepts and beliefs, despite there being a range of experiences and perceptions. In general, each of the students captured in their definition or description the following components:

1. a pattern of behavior,
2. harassment or intimidation,
3. an imbalance of power, and
4. physical or emotional harm to the victim.

These definitions or descriptions aligned with language and information that was a part of a previously implemented antibullying program utilized within the district.

Ethan offered a very textbook definition of bullying, stating,

Bullying is an act of power by one person over a victim by using physical, verbal, or mental intimidation, which happens over and over and takes away the victim's own free will. Bullying often results in either physical or mental harm to the victim.

Ethan then added, "It makes you terrified all the time—that isn't part of the definition, that is just my account of how being bullied made me feel. Is it okay if I said that?" Another student, Fred, described bullying as being like "someone kicking a sweet little puppy for no reason, but not just kicking it, doing it over and over again, every single day that they see it, because they can."

Adam included, "Being bullied makes a person feel helpless, like there is nothing they can do about it." Yet another student, Jaquez, stated,

Sometimes people bully you by spreading gossip about you that isn't true, and saying such bad things so that no one wants to be around you, and when they are they are jeering at you, or teasing you or whatever and you can't get away from it. It just makes you want to explode or leave school and never come back.

While some of the definitions or descriptions provided were not as precise as others, each did make reference to an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, a physical or mental component of harassment or intimidation which causes harm, and that bullying is persistent or repeated.

Within their definitions or descriptions, six of the 12 students also distinguished what they perceived as bullying from normal peer conflict or teasing. For example, one student, Barlow, said,

You know how a group of friends will say things to one another that someone that isn't their friend might think was mean, but really, they are just making fun. They don't mean for it to be mean and everyone in the group is laughing and they're having fun. Bullying is not like that. Bullying is to the point that someone is crying or angry and they aren't getting any joy out of the action, while the person who is doing it is. When you've been bullied, you hurt so bad on the inside that you don't want to come out of yourself. Your feelings can hurt as much as if someone hits you and it lasts longer. I would rather be hit.

Carl stated, "Not every time that someone gets hit is bullying, sometimes two people can have a fight and it is like a one-time thing. They whack each other and the next day they are friends again." He further explained that he often gets picked on weekly at school by other students, mostly because he is "smart and autistic," but he said that this behavior never leads to him feeling hurt, upset, or scared. "It really doesn't bother me," he said. "I usually just ignore

them, and it stops. If I don't respond, then they don't get a reward out of it." Houston proclaimed,

I know that bullying is a big deal and that really bad things can happen to kids because of it. I mean when I was in fourth grade my life was awful because of bullying and my mom would have to pull me out of bed in the morning and dress me herself and drag me out to the car and into school. It was really bad, but that isn't happening to me anymore. My mom can't get over it though. Like if I happen to say that someone was making fun of me because of my airplanes, she starts in on me about am I being bullied, how do I feel, is it making me sad, do I need to talk to someone? I'm just like, capital N, capital O, mom, I'm fine. That is just what regular kids do sometimes—they tease other people. I'm a rock—it rolls off and they stop. Totally different in my opinion.

Three other students, Goliath, Adam, and Carl, indicated that they get "teased or picked on" as frequently as weekly, but they each concluded that the behaviors were not to the extent of bullying. When probed to describe how the behavior was different, each described a very short duration of the occurrence and indicated that they did not feel threatened, hurt, or intimidated by it. One student said, "You know, it is the kind of stuff that you just ignore and it blows away—if it was bullying that ain't happening."

While these students seemed to demonstrate an understanding of the difference between typical peer conflict and bullying, the distinction was not as clear to Ken, who reported that "anytime that someone disagrees with me, I feel like that is a form of bullying, because it makes me feel sad and bad about myself." This same student provided the following definition of bullying, "Bullying is pervasive mistreatment of one person by another, either physically or emotionally, and it causes physical or emotional trauma to the person being mistreated." For this

student, concepts are very literal, and the emotional hurt is a key manifestation of bullying. Ken went on to say, “It is sometimes hard to figure out when it’s crossing the line of bullying and teasing. I feel like if you are emotionally hurt or physically hurt then it crossed the line.”

During the interviews, students were also asked to define or describe the meaning of cyberbullying. Ten of the 12 students elected to define cyberbullying. These students defined cyberbullying in similar terms (i.e., they described the construct as bullying that happens through social media or email without the physical components of face-to-face bullying, but often with more distressful or emotional components). Houston noted, “I think of it more as people calling other people names and sending nasty messages to them or threatening messages that make the person feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.” Bart responded,

Cyberbullying is emotional, more emotional because it is online. But it can really be worse than in-person bullying because it can be stronger, because the person comes at you harder and says things that they might not say to your face. And you can get so wrapped up in what they are saying that it messes with your head more. It is also worse because it is easier to hide it and not tell someone about it because you are embarrassed. It is a coward’s way to bully but it is harsh. You hear in the news about kids that commit suicide because of cyberbullying, and no one even knew about it until after they died.

Other students noted from their experience that sometimes cyberbullying was easier to stop. Ethan reported,

When I was cyberbullied, I just blocked all the kids that were involved from social media accounts and my phone. They kept putting things out there about me, but when they did not get a reaction from me, I guess they got tired of it and quit. I don’t really do much on

social media anyway, so it was no biggie for me. It was summertime, so it probably helped that I did not have to see them in school.

Goliath noted that cyberbullying was easier to report and “believable” because the evidence could be captured in a screenshot for documentation. He stated, “It was easy for me to show the evidence to my principal. The principal said that I outfoxed the ones that were calling me stupid. Who is stupid now?”

Of the 12 student participants, only three reported that they had experienced cyberbullying. This number is likely low because there is limited accessibility to cable and internet service in Hall County. A recent survey conducted by the county economic development chief and the company Cloudwyze indicated that less than 35% of Hall County residents have access to reliable internet service. In addition, only seven of the 12 student participants have their own personal cell phone and of the seven, only two students have a data plan allowing them to access the Internet.

The majority of the students interviewed articulated either a definition of the word bullying or a description of bullying that identified the major components of bullying including a repetitive pattern of behavior, harassment and intimidation, an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim, and the infliction of physical or emotional harm. The students used word associations and terminology that were distinctly similar to the vocabulary utilized in a prior antibullying curriculum used for a period of time in the school district. The distinction between normal peer conflict and bullying was not as clear to all the participants, though the majority of them were able to make a distinction between normal peer conflict and bullying. Students also demonstrated an understanding that cyberbullying is a form of bullying that occurs through social media or electron means, such as emails. Students also identified that cyberbullying is

more likely to create emotional distress rather than physical harm. Only a few students reported instances of cyberbullying, likely due to limited internet access and or personal devices. Of the instances of bullying reported, several students expressed that the evidence that could be collected from cyberbullying made their reports of bullying more believable to the authorities they reported them to.

Based on the surveys and responses to the interview questions in the early part of the interview, it is evident that the students conceived bullying as a form of harassment that results in distress or harm to the victims. They viewed bullying as having not only a physical impact, but also a critical emotional element. Some participants also described the strong emotional distress created by cyberbullying. The students recognized a difference between typical teasing and bullying, although they also indicated that sometimes there is uncertainty about when teasing crosses, the line into bullying.

Parent Perspectives—Defining Bullying

On the parent survey, participants were asked to write a brief definition of bullying or provide a description of bullying. Of the 14 parents completing the survey, six provided a definition of the term bullying and four parents provided descriptions of bullying. Four parents did not provide a response to this question. There was significantly greater disparity in the definitions provided by the parents than in the definitions provided by the students. This is most likely due to student participation in a standardized antibullying curriculum at school.

Overall, the definitions and descriptions of bullying provided by parents did not capture all of the components of a textbook definition; however, they did identify different methods and types of bullying, the frequency with which it occurred, and its negative impact on their children.

The parental responses lacked the important dimension of motivation behind bullying and their description of frequency did not always capture the repetitiveness of the behavior.

One parent reported that “any type of harassment should be considered bullying.” This parent further elaborated that the harassment could take many different forms, including “physical abuse and calling names and teasing . . . anything that makes a kid feel bad about themselves.” The same parent further stated, “What happens in schools today has been going on since I was in school. The difference is that it is on the news more.” Two other parents expressed difficulty in determining what constitutes bullying. One parent stated, “What teachers called me up and described as instances of bullying of my child, sounded like rough housing on the playground to me. My kid needs to be able to handle that kind of stuff.” Another parent stated, “What may hurt one child’s feelings, may not bother another child.” This parent further stated that “true bullying” resulted in serious harm to a child, not just hurt feelings.

Two other parents also provided responses indicating that bullying was a form of harassment, but they further qualified that the harassment was repetitive, occurring over a period of time, and identified someone was victimized by the bullying. In addition, each of these parents stated that there was a difference between bullying and normal peer conflict. One parent made the distinction that “children are going to tease one another or have disagreements that are isolated or infrequent, this is not bullying,” while another stated, “If it is bullying, there is a target, and the actions against that child, whether they are physical, emotional or verbal, happen very frequently and cause the targeted child a great deal of stress.” Another parent also described bullying as “pervasive and persistent” but also noted that the “intensity of one incident could also be considered bullying if the act were particularly heinous.”

Parent participants that provided descriptions of bullying reported a wide range of behaviors that they perceived as bullying:

My child was teased every day in fourth grade about how he talks. On the outside he appeared to ignore this teasing, but on the inside, it was very distressful for him. He began to pick at his skin. These areas would then become infected and this provided another thing for him to be teased about. This caused my child to go backwards in all the social skills that he had learned from counseling.

Another parent reported,

When my child's teacher reported to me that he was being bullied, I brushed it off. As a child with autism, he has behaviors that aggravate others and I chalked this up as being his fault. I did not realize that the teasing that he endured at school was so intense that it was making him have physical complaints of ailments in order to avoid being in certain classrooms. I also did not realize that a certain teacher allowed students to "address his annoying behaviors" in the class because they were disruptive, even to her. It took his EC [Exceptional Children] teacher calling me in for a second conference to help me see that my child's behavior at school was changing. He rarely contributed to his favorite science class anymore and he had begun to physically lash out at other students. His teacher felt that this was happening because of the bullying behavior he was enduring. She told me that just because he had behaviors that might bother others that it did not give others the right to bully him. I finally went to the principal and made a report. I look back on that with shame that I did not see what was happening to him. To me this describes bullying.

Another parent participant described how her child was physically attacked:

My child has always been bullied. We have changed schools in our district because of this and we do not have this problem anymore. My child was pushed and shoved around in the boy's bathroom and locker room by another boy for 2 months, until he was finally injured by a fall. My son is autistic. He prefers to be in his own world. The one connection he has with other children his age is sports. One mean person made something that he enjoyed. PE and sports, miserable for him.

Another parent described the following incident as not being an example of bullying:

As a parent of an autistic child, I know that my child is teased by other children. Teasing, however, does not constitute bullying. If my child is going to be successful in this world, he must learn how to handle this. He will either learn to ignore this behavior or how to confront the other person and tell them to stop.

The variance among parents' definitions and descriptions of bullying indicates the lack of a precise definition of bullying that has been regularly provided and reinforced through district and school communication. Although most parents demonstrated an understanding of the harmful effects of bullying, the absence of understanding the following key components of bullying may be detriments to effective recognition or intervention:

1. a pattern of behavior,
2. harassment or intimidation,
3. an imbalance of power, and
4. physical or emotional harm to the victim.

Several parent responses reinforced the importance of understanding each of the key components in order to distinguish between bullying and teasing. Their responses were more focused on how

they wanted their children to respond to perceived teasing without acknowledging how the situation was analyzed to determine that it was not an incident of bullying. Parent responses also lacked an overall emphasis on the long-term harm to victims, particularly the emotional impact of bullying. The need for an objective, concise definition of bullying that can be used by parents is an important determinant of consistency in the identification and reporting of bullying incidents.

Teacher Perspectives—Defining Bullying

In the teacher survey, participants were asked to write a brief definition of bullying or provide a description of bullying. Of the 26 teachers completing the survey, all provided a definition of the term bullying. Much like the students, 21 of the 26 teachers identified that they provided a definition of bullying that was reminiscent of the definition that was a part of the antibullying curriculum previously used in the district. Teachers that provided a different definition of bullying still identified a pattern of harassing or intimidating behavior which occurs over time, with the intent of causing injury or harm to another individual of a less powerful status, capturing the four key components of bullying. It was not unexpected that teachers would have a concise definition of bullying given the past implementation of an antibullying curriculum in this district; however, it was not expected that teachers would reveal that despite having a clear understanding of the terminology, they experienced difficulty in identifying bullying behavior in the school setting. This revelation will be further explored in the section entitled Teacher perspectives—prevalence of bullying.

Summary Statements of Perspectives—Defining Bullying

The perspectives of students regarding the meaning of bullying are summarized as follows:

- Students and teachers shared commonalities in defining bullying consistent with an antibullying curriculum previously taught in the district.
- Half of the students interviewed were able to distinguish between bullying and normal peer conflict or teasing.
- Parents demonstrated a lack of clarity in how they defined bullying.
- Not all parents were confident that their child could distinguish between teasing and bullying. They thought that their children were overly sensitive and should be able to learn to manage the “teasing” or “normal peer conflict” they were encountering.
- Parental reporting of incidents of bullying may be negatively impacted by the absence of a clear understanding of the following components of bullying:
 1. a pattern of behavior,
 2. harassment or intimidation,
 3. an imbalance of power, and
 4. physical or emotional harm to the victim.
- Despite understanding the definition of bullying, teachers have a difficult time identifying bullying.

Student Perspectives—Prevalence of Bullying

On the student survey, participants were asked to provide ratings regarding their perceptions of the frequency of bullying in their school and they were asked to elaborate on this

topic during the interview. Table 5 depicts the responses of 11 participants to each of the survey items related to the prevalence of bullying. One student elected not to participate in the survey.

Based on student responses to the survey, face-to-face bullying, including physical, verbal, and emotional forms, occurs much more frequently than cyberbullying. Although cyberbullying can and does sometimes originate on school property, most often it occurs outside of the school setting in the home (Riccardi, 2019). As previously reported, most students participating in this survey do not have access to devices or the Internet in their home, though two students did reveal that they receive or find online messages that tease them, call them names, spread gossip about them or threaten them on a weekly basis. This may partially explain the low incidence of cyberbullying. Face-to-face bullying behaviors of teasing, name calling, spreading gossip, and making threats occur much more frequently than physical attacks or taking personal property with two students identifying this as a weekly issue and eight reporting this occurring on a monthly basis. Face-to-face gang bullying and more extensive cyberbullying beyond receiving negative messages were reported by a much smaller number of students and these incidents were reported as occurring far less frequently than the other forms of bullying students were asked about.

Following the completion of the survey, students were interviewed by the previously noted research representative on my behalf. As is noted in Chapter 3, the research representative, had extensive experience working with children with autism, as well as prior experience working as a teacher and a director of exceptional children. She reported that she easily established rapport with the student participants in this study and with their parents. This was evident in the audio recordings as students discussed their experiences.

Table 5*Student Perceptions of the Prevalence of Bullying*

Item	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Not very often	Never
1. People attack me or steal my things. These attacks involve actions that could include hitting, kicking, punching, pinching, spitting, or other physical assaults.	0	0	1	7	2	1
2. People call me hurtful names, insult me, or threaten me.	0	2	8	1	0	0
3. People tell lies about me, gossip about me, or spread rumors about me that are hurtful to me.	0	0	3	7	1	0
4. A group or gang of people dare or force me to do things that I would not otherwise do.	0	0	0	2	8	1
5. I receive or find online messages about me that threaten me, insult me, or call me inappropriate names.	0	2	0	0	1	8
6. I receive or find online media (images, videos, animations, sound clips, etc.) about me that threaten me, insult me, or call me inappropriate names.	0	0	0	1	1	9
7. Other people pretend to be me or pretend to be someone else in order to do harm to me or to take advantage of me.	0	0	0	1	0	10
8. People make harmful polls about me and post online, in texts, or in emails to embarrass me.	0	0	0	0	0	11
Total	0	4	12	19	13	40

Perceptions about the frequency and nature of bullying incidents were captured in the interview responses of the student participants. Through the interview process the intense harassment from both face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying was revealed, exposing how deeply these experiences affected the participants' lives. The following content describes their experiences.

Perceptions about the frequency and nature of bullying incidents were also captured in the interview responses of the student participants. Adam reported that this has been a good school year for him. He has only been bullied once by a peer who called him inappropriate names referring to his sexuality and tried to spread rumors that he was a homosexual. This happened both in person and on the Internet. He stated that this only lasted a few weeks and that he just ignored the behavior. "My friends had my back and just kept telling me to take a deep breath and to picture blowing the ugliness away when a breathed out. It really helped."

In previous years he was bullied much more frequently. When asked to quantify the frequency he reported that in third and fourth grade it was daily and in fifth grade it was two to three times per month. Many of the times he was bullied, the perpetrators were the same group of boys, and it generally happened on the school bus and during recess time. Adam described these three to four boys as "very, very popular" and sneaky. He described himself as "super-duper sensitive to noise." He recalled how the group of boys would taunt him by making noises that were loud enough for him to hear and be annoyed, but not loud enough on the bus or the playground for the bus drivers or teachers to hear.

Back then, they would just make these noises to drive me crazy. I tried to ignore them but the more I ignored them the worse it got. They knew exactly how loud to do it to make it so that I was the only one that could hear it. I have super-duper hearing and the noises

they made were like what most people would think of as nails on a chalkboard. For me it was excruciating.

Adam reported that he always had a stomachache on the mornings when he had to go to school and in the afternoon when it was close to dismissal time. He stated that his mother tried to help by reporting it to the principal, but the bullying just got worse.

Then they just threatened to kill me for being a rat. Most of the time they wouldn't say it, they would just point at me and make a slicing motion across their throats. It was hell—I know I'm not supposed to use that word but it still makes my stomach hurt when I think about it.

In fifth grade, Adam's teacher became aware of the bullying behavior on the playground. He reported that she asked him about it, but he was afraid to tell her the truth. His teacher asked him to be her walking partner at recess time, so that she would be accountable for getting her steps in. Adam reported that the bullying on the playground stopped and things got better on the bus, because the "main bully" was moved to another bus. He reported that when that happened, the other boys left him alone. He stated that he felt certain that his teacher was responsible for having the main bully transferred from the bus.

Dennis has experienced bullying on the school bus this year. He shared how students on his bus stole his book bag on two occasions and threw it out of the bus window while the bus was moving. He also described how students would take turns trying to trip him as he walked down the aisle of the bus. The bus driver reported this behavior to the assistant principal and the administrator visited Dennis's home.

He talked to my mom and dad about what had been happening on the bus and he told me that he was sorry that I was being treated that way and that he had taken action to make

sure those behaviors did not continue. I was sort of embarrassed, but it also felt really good that someone was taking up for me. Then my parents told him that people would not be so mean to me if I would act normal. Really? I know I act different but does that mean that someone gets to trip me when I am just trying to get on or off the bus or that they get to steal my book bag and throw it out the window while other people just sit back and laugh?

Other student participants have also experienced physical bullying that involved theft of property. Ethan reported that this year his phone has been taken from him by other students five times. He indicated that he wasn't sure if they took his phone because they wanted it or if they took it just so they could "watch him explode."

They know that I am very protective of my phone—like I don't even want anyone to touch it. A lot of kids, and I mean a lot, just try to touch it to make me upset. Then they all just have themselves a big laugh. It isn't funny to me. It makes my heart race and my muscles bunch up and sometimes it makes me cry. That really gets them going then.

Then when a teacher has to get involved, they act like it is all my fault. The teachers are nice to me about it and they always help me get my phone back, but then they will say things like, "They are just teasing you," but it isn't teasing, it is meanness.

Finn participated on an athletic team. He loved the sport he was playing, but he reported that he dreaded every time he had to go into the locker room to dress out for practice or for games. While in the locker room other players would take his clothes and hide them, turn off the lights and push him around from different directions, or try to shove him out of the door while he was partially dressed.

I felt trapped and afraid. I knew exactly who was doing it. Actually, it was one main person that was behind it and I think others just did it because they were afraid of him. Lots of times I would fall down when they were pushing me and one time, I hit my head on the corner of a bench. That time I was bleeding when I came out of the locker room. One of the older guys felt bad for me and took me to the coaches' office. He stood up for me and told the coach what they had been doing. There were a lot of mad parents and some of the guys were pissed at me because they were suspended from school and benched at the games. They went for a spell and called me all kinds of names. Now that kind of stuff doesn't happen in the locker room because the coach or another adult is always in there. Ever since "Sam" stood up for me, he has kind of been like a big brother. Sometimes we hang out at lunch and stuff, but mostly he just makes sure no one bothers me.

Barlow described bullying behavior in the locker room after PE class. He stated that two students would hold him in the shower area while another student hid his clothes. This would often make him late for his next class. He reported that the same boys that bullied him were in his next class and that they would "burst out laughing" when he walked in late and "make rude sexual comments about what I had been doing in the locker room to make me late for class." He stated that the comments could be heard by other students but not by the teacher. "I finally stopped dressing out for PE class. It caused my grade to go down, but it was worth it." Eventually Barlow reported what had been happening to his parents and the school counselor.

Physical bullying can also occur without direct contact. Ken reported that every day he attended science class in the fifth grade, the student who sat in front of him harassed him by turning around in his seat and purposefully blowing his breath into Ken's face or belching in his

face and then saying, “What are you going to do about it?” Ken reported that he usually did not have an answer to that question, but one day he did throw up and it got all over the “belcher’s back.”

As noted earlier, Jaquez reported being the victim of verbal bullying by students. He described ongoing “teasing” and spreading of rumors that occurred so frequently, he felt hopeless of it stopping and feeling as though he had no escape. He went on to state:

This same thing happened to one of my friends. It was so bad, the teasing at school, that she cried every day, and she got sick, you know, depressed, and now she has school at home. It isn’t right because all those things that people were saying were wrong.

Sharing their perspectives regarding the prevalence of bullying, participants described both current and past bullying experiences that impacted their lives. With the exception of one, all students recalled at least one bullying experience this school year and they all indicated that the most frequent form of bullying during this school year occurred monthly and involved verbal incidents of name calling or teasing. The students reported recurrent experiences of bullying throughout their school careers; however, 11 of the 12 students interviewed expressed that bullying became less recurrent once they transitioned to middle school. Three of the students reported that while bullying had become less frequent, the physical intensity of the bullying had increased, making even one incident disruptive enough to alter continued participation in a focused interest of the student or in a school service, such as transportation. For instance, Martin decided that he would take private music lessons rather than being in the band, because of an incident that occurred in a practice room involving another student physically preventing him from leaving the room.

In terms of quantifying the frequency of bullying, it appeared during the interview that students struggled somewhat with the concept of time between incidents. This became apparent to me after reviewing interview transcripts for discrepancies in each participant's reporting. Time in terms of daily, monthly, and yearly is an abstract concept and may be difficult for some individuals with autism to accurately report (Endow, 2019). While this may not be applicable to all students participating in this study it is of note that some students did appear to be less accurate in reporting frequency. However, based on the number of examples of incidents each student reported, it is evident that they have been the victims of bullying behavior.

Parent Perspectives—Prevalence of Bullying

On the parent survey, participants were asked to provide ratings regarding their perceptions of the frequency of bullying at their child's school and they were asked to rate the frequency of how often their child experienced bullying at school. Parents were also provided an opportunity to provide an open-ended response regarding details of their child's experiences. Table 6 depicts the responses of 14 participants to each of the survey items related to the prevalence of bullying.

Based on parent responses to the survey, they perceive bullying as significantly less prevalent than the student participants in the survey. No parents had concerns of bullying occurring on a daily or weekly basis and only two parents reported bullying occurring monthly. Overall, the survey results indicated that parents perceive bullying as being an infrequent occurrence both at their child's school and involving their child.

Table 6*Parent Perception of Prevalence of Bullying*

Item	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Not very often	Never
1. How often do you think that bullying occurs in your child's school?	0	0	2	8	3	1
2. Peers bully my child face-to-face...	0	0	2	8	3	1
3. Peers cyberbully my child...	0	0	0	1	1	12
Total	0	0	4	17	7	14

Nine of the 14 parent participants provided further comments in this section. Two of the 14 parents shared a belief that their child's school setting was a safe environment. One parent noted that their familiarity with the staff at the school and the open communication they shared made them confident that their child was in an environment where bullying was not tolerated. Three parents recognized that bullying was harmful to children and indicated that it should be addressed to a greater extent by the school system; however, they did not express an interest in being a part of that process or learning more about the program being implemented by the district.

The comments of several of the parents related specifically to their child's response to perceived bullying. Two of the parents reported that if their child would fight back against the perceived perpetrator that the problem of "harassment" or "teasing" would stop. Another parent

stated that their child was highly sensitive to what other people said about them. The parent continued by stating,

If my child doesn't like what someone says to him or about him, the first thing he does is tell me that he is being bullied. We have had many discussions about the difference between teasing and bullying, which has become exasperating.

Another parent also shared similar concerns that their child "overreported" being bullied because they were not able to distinguish between "the usual back and forth teasing between kids" and "true bullying—like you see news stories about."

One area of commonality existed between the parent and student surveys. Both groups reported that cyberbullying occurs significantly less frequently, if at all, as compared to face-to-face bullying. Several parents reported in the comment section that their child did not have access to devices for social media engagement. Three additional parents reported that cyberbullying is not an issue with their student because they regularly supervise all online engagement and activity preventing the opportunities for this negative interaction.

It is evident from the information gathered from parents, that their understanding of the term bullying is significantly different from the understanding of the student participants, though most of them do recognize that bullying is harmful. Based on parent responses it appears most are content with the schools' efforts in providing a safe environment for their children. In addition, more than 25% of the parents believe that their child misperceives bullying or could resolve bullying by fighting back. The incongruence of the belief's regarding prevalence of bullying between parents and students is likely related to the differing perceptions that each group has about what bullying means. It is also probable that the perceptions of students and

parents differ due to their experiences. Students experiences are personal experiences, while parents are receiving reports of incidents.

Teacher Perspectives—Prevalence of Bullying

On the teacher survey, participants were asked to provide ratings regarding their perceptions of the frequency of bullying at their school and they were asked to rate the frequency of how often their students with autism experience bullying at school. Teachers were also provided an opportunity to provide an open-ended response regarding details of the experiences of their students with autism. Table 7 depicts the responses of 26 teacher participants to each of the survey items related to the prevalence of bullying.

Table 7

Teacher Perception of Prevalence of Bullying

Item	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Not very often	Never
1. How often do you think that bullying occurs in your school?	5	5	4	10	2	0
2. Peers bully my student face-to-face...	3	7	5	8	2	1
3. Peers cyberbully my student...	0	0	0	0	3	23
Total	8	12	9	18	7	24

Based on the results of the teacher survey, teachers believe that bullying is occurring within the schools that they work, and they believe their students with autism are frequent

victims of face-to-face bullying. Of those 26 survey responses by teachers, 58% reported that they believed their student or students with autism were likely to be bullied face-to-face at least on a monthly basis and 38% indicated that it would be more frequent than monthly. These findings are more aligned with the findings from the student surveys regarding the prevalence of bullying and significantly different from parent surveys which indicate a low incidence of bullying. Six of the 26 teachers noted on their survey that they had trouble in quantifying how often bullying occurs, though all were confident that it occurred more often than monthly. This is notable, as I also recognized a discrepancy between student interviews and their surveys in reporting the frequency of bullying incidents. Similarities do exist among the student, parent, and teacher surveys regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying. Each of the surveys depicts a low incidence of cyberbullying.

As a researcher, I had concerns that teachers would be reluctant to respond in ways that would indicate that bullying was an issue in their schools. Admitting that bullying is occurring is an admission that the schools are failing to control a behavior that potentially has long lasting negative impacts on children. However, this did not deter teachers from reporting their concerns. One teacher stated, "It's everywhere and it has been going on for a long time!" The playground, the cafeteria, the hallways, the bathrooms, the buses, and the locker rooms were all listed as places where bullying occurs by multiple teachers. Several teachers even stated that it occurred in the classroom during student led learning groups. In addition, 16 of the 26 teachers indicated that the antibullying curriculum previously used in the district has been abandoned by most teachers and is no longer considered a required component of their lesson planning. One teacher stated,

I am ashamed to admit it, but I haven't utilized the antibullying program in my class in 2 or 3 years. This survey has made me reflect on how often bullying is occurring and making me realize that as a district, we probably need to revisit this program in our SIT [School Improvement Team] meetings. This will not be a popular suggestion because we already have so much to cram into a day, but I am realizing that it is needed by our students and staff.

Teachers shared experiences of many different types of face-to-face bullying. "I am amazed at all the ways that children bully other children. I've seen quiet intimidation, demeaning actions and comments, degradation, isolation, and violent, physically aggressive bullying." They also expressed extreme frustration at their inability to intervene effectively. One teacher expressed her frustration of being inept at providing appropriate supervision of her students on the playground. She expressed concerns about multiple incidents of bullying that occurred at recess time, that by time she realized there was an issue and made it the area, the damage was done, and student witnesses would deny or cover up for the bully. Three respondents reported they felt many incidents that happened on the playground, in the hallways, at lunch, or in other unstructured times of the school day were not properly investigated. They identified time, lack of videos or other tangible evidence, lack of staff, and reluctance of witnesses to report as reasons for inadequate investigation. One teacher shared that she felt that her administrative team was reluctant to address bullying behavior by students from certain families due to their personal social connections with the families in the community. "I find this unforgivable, when you consider the repercussions of the lifelong impact this could have on children, both the bullies and their victims."

Several teachers also expressed concerns about their difficulty in determining and addressing bullying behaviors that are more subtle and easily hidden and often target the victim's social and emotional well-being. This was also indicated as a possible underreporting of bullying incidents. Examples that were cited included exclusion from social groups and friendships, physical ostracization (not allowing a student to sit at a table, in a bus seat, scooting desks away from the student), teasing and taunting, and purposeful, intentional intimidating looks and gestures. One teacher stated,

Physical bullying for the most part is obvious, but the catty, nasty, emotional bullying is insidious. You can see the impact on the kid being bullied. The withdrawal, the avoidance of certain people, a genuine look of fear or dread, is apparent; however, trying to verbalize and explain the actions of the bully or bullies comes out as weak support of the act.

The teacher went on to say that when you say to an administrator or a parent, "they were looking at her/him a certain way, or they will not allow the student to sit near them, or they are spreading rumors about the student" it doesn't adequately convey the intensity and seriousness of the situation. Another teacher stated that she was sure that most incidents of social emotional bullying go unreported unless someone can get physical evidence, such as written notes of threats to the victim.

More than one half of the teachers completing the surveys made comments that there were times when they reported bullying behavior to a parent of a child with autism, or to other teacher or administrators, that they were met with skepticism, doubt, or placement of blame on the child with autism due to their lack of appropriate social skills. One teacher was particularly articulate about her concerns.

I am amazed at the lack of compassion that some parents demonstrate towards their own child. They will excuse another student that is clearly mistreating their child to the extent that they avoid being around that student, to the point of hiding from them, by saying they realize their child has annoying behaviors and implying that they will change their behavior based on the negative reaction they receive by the bully. I have tried to explain that this goes beyond a negative reaction, that it is more intense and psychologically hurtful in my opinion, but it doesn't alter their opinion. I have a scared, miserable, and anxiety ridden kid in my class that I can't just wait around for their lack of social appropriateness or annoying behavior to be bullied out of them. I have to intervene the best I can at school and work with our school counselor and school psychologist to get these babies some help and to teach them some coping strategies. They cannot learn when fear and avoidance is their priority for survival. Of course, these are the same parents who show up to complain every time they feel like their child did not receive an appropriate accommodation on a test if they did poorly. I am all about parents being advocates for their children, but I am not sure these parents have their priorities in the right order. I can't imagine how this has impacted my students' views of themselves, if this is how their parents feel.

Other teachers shared similar concerns that parents responses to administrative and teacher concerns regarding their student being bullied were met with resignation that it was something that the student would have to learn to live with, that the student wouldn't be bullied if they fought back, and that the student needed to be more independent in taking care of himself or herself because they would not always have their parents, teachers, or other adults to take care of them. Teachers also shared concerns that other teachers and some administrators shared similar

beliefs as parents and tended to view that students with autism bring about bullying due to their own behaviors and that the consequences would be a method of changing the autistic students' behaviors. The following statement by a teacher is an exemplary summary of what was similarly stated by other teachers:

We've had opportunities to attend professional development in our district specifically on the topic of autism. Even though I am still learning, I do feel that I have a better understanding of autism and I feel that others that were in the same PD as me should also, but they don't. They don't understand the difficulty students with autism have in understanding the figurative use of language in conversation or the meanings that are often implied by others in social interactions through facial expressions and body language. Everything is so literal. Several years ago, we had a student that was led on by a group of peers to believe that one of the popular girls in his class was going to ask him to a dance. I am ashamed to say that there were adult staff members in our building that knew that this group was setting this student up, and, creating a situation that would ultimately cause this student undue stress, anxiety, and embarrassment, but they did not put a stop to it. The aftermath for this student was devastating. He could not understand why he was mistreated and all the progress that we had seen him make in socializing more and making friends was immediately reversed and he began isolating himself again, yet we had teachers that knew what was going on making comments such as, "This was a life lesson for him," "He is going to have to learn how to deal with these kinds of things," "Regular kids get picked on the same way." I 100% believe this was bullying. Socially and emotionally, it was hurtful, harmful, and had long lasting impacts.

There was a high degree of correlation regarding the student and teacher surveys regarding the prevalence of bullying of students with autism. Unlike some parent responses which hinted at an overreporting of bullying, teacher responses indicated that bullying is more likely to be underreported due to multiple factors which include the inability to clearly identify that the act is bullying. While most parents perceived their children's schools as safe environments, teacher responses and comments can be interpreted to imply that the schools in which they work may not be as safe as parents believe due to the frequency of bullying, they reported. While both teachers and students struggled with reporting the frequency of bullying, which was supported by the discrepancies between student interviews and surveys, as well as teacher comments on surveys, both groups substantiated the belief that bullying is prevalent in the school setting.

Summary Statements of Participant Perspectives—Prevalence of Bullying

The perspectives of participants regarding the prevalence of bullying are summarized as follows:

- Students believe that the prevalence of bullying in the middle school setting, based on personal experience, is less than in the elementary setting.
- Students and teachers shared commonalities in their beliefs that bullying is prevalent in the school setting.
- Approximately 25% of the parents surveyed believe that their child does not have an accurate understanding of bullying, may overreport bullying, and/or could stop the bullying by fighting back.
- Bullying may be underreported by teachers due to their struggle identifying if an act is bullying.

- It is possible that social emotional bullying is reported less frequently by teachers than physical bullying due to the difficulty in substantiating this type of bullying.
- More than ½ of teacher respondents believe that other teachers and parents feel that the behaviors of students with autism are antecedents to bullying events.
- Cyberbullying does not currently appear to be prevalent among the study participants.

Methods of Reporting Bullying by Mainstreamed Students With Autism

The third research question was stated as follows: What methods do adolescents with autism use to report instances of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying to parents, teachers, and other authorities? On the survey, parents and teachers were asked to report to whom and how their students report being bullied. During student interviews, individuals were asked to provide information regarding who they reported bullying behavior to and to describe how individuals responded to the report. These data address the fifth research question: How do adolescents with autism describe the responses of teachers to their reports of face-to-face or cyberbullying? The subsections that follow provide the analyses of the students, parents, and teachers responses to the questions about how and to whom students report bullying and the responses by students of their perspectives of teacher responses to their reports of bullying.

Student Perspectives—Reporting Bullying

During the interviews, middle school students with autism were asked to talk about experiences during school when they were bullied by other students. This was followed up with the following questions:

Did you report the bullying to anyone?

If so, who and how did the person respond?

If not, why did you not report the bullying to someone?

How did teachers respond to your report of bullying?

Table 8 depicts the responses of the 12 student participants to the interview question regarding if the bullying was reported and if so, to whom it was reported.

Table 8

Entities to Whom Students Report Bullying

Student	Teacher	Parent	Friend	Sibling	Other authority	Did not report
Adam	✓	✓				
Barlow		✓			School counselor	
Carl	✓					
Dennis					Bus driver	
Ethan	✓					
Finn	✓					
Goliath	Denies being bullied					
Houston		✓				
Jaquez	✓	✓				
Ken	✓					
Leon	✓					
Martin	✓				School counselor	
Total	8	4	0	0	3	0

As depicted in Table 8, 10 of the 12 students participating in the interviews reported their experience of bullying to either a teacher, school counselor, or their parent. Four of the participants reported their experience to both a teacher and their parent. One student denied being bullied and another student did not report his experience with bullying on the bus; however, the bus driver did report it to the assistant principal, who reported it to his parents. When asked, all 12 of the students were able to name at least one adult in the school building that they would feel comfortable talking with and reporting instances of bullying when necessary. Ten of the 12 students were able to name more than two sources of support within the school. Less than half of the students reported feeling comfortable talking about school bullying experiences with their parents, based on how their parents responded to their reports.

Leon initially was reserved during the interview. He provided mostly one- or two-word answers to questions and rarely elaborated until he started talking about his science teacher, his EC teacher, and the school occupational therapist. These were the three people he identified as people he felt safe talking to and who he would report to if someone were bullying him. Leon described a time when he was in sixth grade that he was being bullied during lunch and in the school bathrooms. He stated that he mostly tried to ignore the two boys that were bothering him, and he also tried to avoid being around them. Things escalated to the point that no matter where he sat in the cafeteria, the boys would find a way to sit at his table, even to the point of asking other students to move to another table. He stated,

I got to the point that I hated lunch and I avoided going to the bathroom at all when I was at school. Holding it all day wasn't easy, but it was better than meeting up with them in the bathroom.

One day his EC teacher asked him if he would stay after class and talk with her, and his science teacher, his occupational therapist. He said this made him a little worried even though he knew he had not done anything wrong. That day the three adults talked to him and told him they were worried about him. They each had noticed that he seemed worried and anxious because he was picking and biting his nails and that he was popping his “worry band” a lot more than usual. “I don’t usually do this,” Leon said,” but I busted into crying and I told them about the boys. It actually felt good to tell someone, but I knew my parents would not understand.” According to Leon, his teachers and the school therapist worked with the principal and the counselor, and the boys left him alone. He said that he wasn’t sure exactly what happened but a while later, his EC teacher asked him if he was willing to listen to an apology from the boys that had been bothering him.

I wasn’t sure that I really wanted to do that, but she promised me she would be right there with me, and they ended up being very sorry. We aren’t friend or anything, but they have not bothered me since. I know that my teachers and my OT care about me and I can let them know when things are not right. I trust them.

Adam reported that his teacher intervened when she realized he was continuing to be bullied after his mom had made a report to the school, and he stated that she made him her “walking partner” during recess time to keep him away from other kids that were hassling him. Martin, Carl, Ken, Goliath, and Houston also reported feeling comfortable reporting bullying to school personnel and were able to share instances when a teacher, school counselor, or coach were able to support them when they were having a problem. Houston, however, adamantly stated that he does not talk to his mom about things that happen at school. He claims that his mom was so upset by things that happened in the past, that she “overreacts” to anything that she

thinks may be bullying. He said that he did not want to cause his mom more hurt and stress and he felt like her overreaction would embarrass them both.

Ethan shared that he felt that he could tell his teachers that other students were bullying him, and that they are helpful in most all situations, but he does not think that they really think he is being bullied. He said that his teachers will often make comments that make him feel like they think that if he would change how he acts that some of the bullying would stop. For example, after an incident where his phone was taken by other students, and they taunted him with it until the last period of the day, one of his teachers intervened and was able to get his phone back, but then she said, "Let's face it Ethan, you were acting weird. That does not make their behavior right, but it doesn't make your behavior right either." Ethan stated, "I may act different sometimes, but I don't think that gives other kids the right to take something that belongs to me, just to upset me." Upon further probing, Ethan stated that he always tells school staff about incidents in which he feels bullied because they at least listen to him and try to help. He stated that his parents tell him that he needs to grow up and toughen up. He said,

My dad tells me all the time that I need to fight back and quit being such a wuss. If I tell him all of the things that other kids do to me, he would be mad at me, not them.

Dennis also reported that he does not report the bullying behavior that has occurred to him to his parents.

When the assistant principal came to my house and told my parents about what had been happening to me on the bus, they didn't even believe him, when he said it was bullying. My parents just want me to act normal. I know that I am different, but I don't always know when I am not acting normal. If I could change myself then I would be normal. It makes me sad that I can't make my parents happy.

While no student indicated that they reported bullying to a friend, several of them did refer to having a friend that would speak up for them and intervene when they perceived that other students were bullying them. Both Finn and Martin recounted times when a friend had supported them during an incident of bullying and they both indicated that their friends also reported the incident to school authorities. Martin shared, “I don’t have a lot of friends and I like to spend time alone because I like to read about weather, but it is nice to have someone that sticks up for you.” Finn also reported that when a friend has his back, it makes him feel better about reporting what has happened to his teacher or other school staff, because he has someone to substantiate the events that he reports.

When each of the students was asked how they reported that they were being bullied they all indicated that they made verbal reports to a trusted adult. None of the students reported sending an email, writing a note, or texting a message. In fact, one student asked me, “Don’t you know that those of us with autism don’t like to write?” and further stated, “Sometimes we don’t like to talk, but writing is even worse.”

Overall, of the 11 students that reported being bullied, each of them was able to identify at least one adult in the school building that they trusted to tell about incidents of bullying. In addition, all 11 students felt confident that when they reported bullying to school staff that they would receive help and support with the situation, though one student believed the teacher still blamed him for creating the problem. Only four students reported regularly telling their parent or parents about bullying that occurred at school. Their reasons for not sharing ranged from worrying about causing their parent stress, to feeling that their parents would not believe them, or would blame them for being bullied. Several students also reported that having a friend who

supported them by speaking up on their behalf and believing that they didn't deserve to be bullied increased their confidence in reporting to adults.

Parent Perspectives—Reporting Bullying

On the parent survey, participants were asked to identify who they thought or knew their child reported bullying behaviors to and how their child made the report of the bullying behavior. Parents were also provided an opportunity to provide an open-ended response regarding details of their child's experiences with reporting. Table 9 depicts the responses of 14 participants to each of the survey items related to reporting of bullying behavior.

Table 9

Parent Perception of Child's Reporting of Bullying

Reported to	Reported via	No. parent responses
Parent	In person	12
A friend	Written note, email, or text	0
A teacher or other school staff	Phone	1
A close relative	Anonymous bullying report system	1
Total		14

As depicted in Table 9, all 14 parents responded to the question regarding who they thought their child would report bullying to and how they would make that report. The majority of parents believed that their child would tell them about bullying behavior that occurred in the school. The parent and child concordance regarding who bullying is reported to is low, and may

be in part because middle school students do not always tell their parents about what is going on at school; however, several student participants were very clear during their interviews in their reluctance to report bullying to their parents because they felt that they would not be supported or because they had concern their parent might overreact. Given these data, it appears that parents may not be aware of the victimization their child is experiencing at school.

Teacher Perspectives—Reporting Bullying

On the teacher survey, participants were asked to identify who they thought or knew their students reported bullying behaviors to and how their student made the report of the bullying behavior. Teachers were also provided an opportunity to provide an open-ended response regarding details of their students’ experiences with reporting. Table 10 depicts the responses of 26 participants to each of the survey items related to reporting of bullying behavior.

Table 10

Teacher Perception of Students’ Reporting of Bullying

Reported to	No. teacher responses	Reported via	No. teacher responses
Parent	5	In person	24
A friend	1	Written note, email, or text	2
A teacher or other school staff	19	Phone	0
A close relative	1	Anonymous bullying report system	0
Totals	26		26

As depicted in Table 10, all 26 teachers responded to the question regarding who they thought their students would report bullying to and how they would make that report. There was a high degree of consistency between student responses to this same query and teacher responses. As did students, most teachers responded that they believed students would be most likely to report bullying to a teacher or other school staff member and that most of the reports would be made in person. Fifteen of the teachers provided additional comments regarding how bullying behavior is reported. These comments were alike in that they each described a conversation being initiated by the teacher with the student because the teacher had either observed bullying behavior, had noticed a level of distress in the student, or had been alerted by the student's parent or friend that there might be a problem at school. Most of the teachers felt that if they had not initiated these conversations, that the student would not have reported what was going on or would have waited until more significant consequences had occurred. This would explain the similarities between student and teacher responses and would also explain why school staff appear to be aware of the bullying that is occurring, but parents are not. It was also stated by six teachers in their comments, that they felt that students were more likely to report or "open up" and share with school staff their concerns about bullying because the students did not believe their parents would believe they were being bullied or would support them. Teachers supported this belief by citing times that when they spoke with parents regarding their child being bullied, the parent did not believe the teacher, or they did not perceive the actions reported as being bullying behavior.

Summary Statements of Student, Parent, and Teacher Perspectives—Reporting Bullying Behaviors

The perspectives of participants regarding the entities to whom students with autism reported bullying are summarized as follows:

- Eighty-three percent of the students responded that they reported bullying behavior to their teachers or other school staff members.
- There was a high degree of consistency between student and teacher responses regarding the entity to whom bullying was reported to and how it was reported.
- Nearly all parents believed that their child would be most likely to report bullying behavior to them rather than to a friend, school staff member, or other individual.
- Students reported concerns about parental skepticism or the possibility of an overreaction by parents as reasons they reported bullying behavior to some other individual.
- Bullying behavior may also be underreported to parents because middle school students often do not readily talk about what is occurring at school with their parents.
- Teachers' initiation of conversation with students with autism regarding concerns they had noted in observing these students' interactions with others may have precipitated bullying being reported by the student. Teachers often believed that if they had not initiated the conversation, the bullying might not have been reported.

Student Strategies for Addressing Bullying

The fourth research question was stated as follows: What strategies do adolescents with autism use to address face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying? During the interview, students were provided an opportunity to talk about ways that they have learned to cope with bullying

behavior or to help stop bullying behavior. The subsections that follow provide the analyses of the students' responses to these questions.

Ignoring and Avoidance of Bullying Behavior

All the students who reported being a victim of bullying spoke of times that they utilized avoidance behaviors, walking away, or actively ignoring as a means of dealing with bullying behavior in hopes that it would stop. While this was a popular means of coping, the results were not always positive. In some instances, the students reported that the bullying stopped, but the level of fear and anxiety that were created by avoidance still had a negative impact on the students. Leon reported that his anxiety while trying to avoid boys that were bullying him caused him to pick his skin until it bled and to bite his nails or pick his cuticles until they bled. These were behaviors that he had previously learned to avoid with a replacement behavior of a "worry band." But the behaviors returned due to the stress created as he attempted to ignore the bullying and avoid the boys that were the perpetrators. Leon reported feeling like he was living in fear. When Adam was being bullied on the bus, he began to have severe stomach aches in the morning and in the afternoon shortly before the bell rang for dismissal. He began to attempt to avoid going to school and it resulted in a struggle each day between him and his mother. Adam shared,

At that point when I was trying to avoid going to school, man, it was bad at school and at home. At first my mom didn't know what was going on and she thought I was just being belligerent, and using my stomach hurting as an excuse, so then I was punished at home and if I went to school, I was punished by the bully. And my stomach really did hurt, I wasn't making that crap up. It really just sucked.

Finn described how there were times that he ignored the bullying actions that were perpetrated against him, but he found that he could not ignore the emotional impact inflicted by the event.

Yeah, I have ignored the things that they did to me or acted like it didn't bother me, but it really made me wonder what it is that is so bad about me that they can treat me that way. It's like I'm not even a real person. They don't care that I have feelings and that they are embarrassing and humiliating me. Sometimes I hate myself for taking it.

Similarly, Jaquez recalled how someone he knew was now homeschooled because he had become depressed due to bullying. He shared,

He was kind of a basket case, you know. He did what everyone told him to do, you know, about ignoring the bully and just staying away, but there is just only so much you can take. Like having someone treat you that badly every day is too much and I get it. I feel that way too. Like you bottle it up, and bottle it up, all this hurt and the feelings of not having anyway you can change it. It makes you feel beat down and you think, how can I make people like me? How can I quit acting weird, or different so that people will just leave me alone. I don't think that it is too much to ask for people to just be nice and kind. Why do my problems because I'm autistic make people dislike me so much? I would change myself if I could, but I've tried and it doesn't work.

Despite students' perceptions that the use of the strategy of ignoring or avoiding bullying behavior was effective, these situations depicted that this strategy can also create a negative emotional consequence for students.

Other students recognized the shortcomings of trying to avoid being around the perpetrators, pointing out that you can't avoid riding the bus if that is "the only way you have to get to or from school" and "you eventually have to go to the bathroom or somewhere else in the school building that puts you in the hallway, the cafeteria, or outside that makes you an easy target." Barlow, Houston, and Martin individually pointed out that while ignoring the bully or

bullies may help in some situations, there were other times that it made the bully or bullies angry and more intent on harassing them. Houston commented that when he was in fourth grade the boy who bullied him became more aggressive when he tried to walk away from him.

I really tried hard to do what both my mom and my teachers suggested. Just pretend like you don't see or hear him. The first couple of times I did this he would keep following me for a while and he would be louder with his nasty words about me, but then he would stop when he thought teachers would hear or see him. But then one day, it was like my walking off made him snap. He came running at me from behind and jerked me around by my shoulder, shoved me into a wall, and then got so close to my face that he was spitting on me when he talked. He told me I would never walk away from him again and that I would listen to him when he was talking to me.

Barlow and Martin also recounted events in which the bully became enraged by their failure to respond to bullying behavior. Barlow articulated that he believed that this response by the bully was because by not acknowledging him or reacting, he had taken away the bully's control over the situation. This embarrassed the bully in front of others.

I didn't act like he wanted me to, so he didn't get what he wanted which pissed him off. Initially I felt pretty good about that because I felt like I had won, I had gotten one over on him, but that was before I realized that it made this person even more determined to make me miserable.

In a similar observation, Martin shared,

I wish ignoring someone treating you badly was as easy as people think and that it worked the way they think it does. For normal people, it probably would work if they were just having a bad day and taking it out on you, but for those people that have

harassed me in the past, they treat it like it is their job to make me miserable. Not always, sometimes ignoring would work, but there were times when it just made them more intent on making my life hell because not getting a reaction out of me made them look less powerful and that is not acceptable to a bully.

Though avoidance behaviors, walking away, or actively ignoring were predominate strategies used by study participants as a means of dealing with bullying behavior, these strategies had a negative emotional impact on several participants, and there were times that the tactics appeared to have exacerbated the bullying behavior.

When participants were asked how they learned the strategies of avoiding or ignoring bullies, the sources included their parents, their teachers, or another school staff member. No students reported this strategy as one learned from the antibullying curriculum used in the district. Open-ended responses to questions in both the parent and teacher surveys support that ignoring the bullying behavior is a response that both teachers and parents suggest to students, though several teachers noted they did not believe this to be an effective strategy for stopping bullying behavior.

Peer Relationships

Several of the students reported having a friend or a positive peer relationship in school and that they found this relationship to be impactful on reducing or eliminating bullying behavior. However, most of them did not have such a relationship with peers. Those students who reported having positive peer relationships in school, spoke of this relationship as providing them a sense of confidence and empowerment. They used phrases such as, “I know they have my back,” “I don’t worry as much when he is around,” and “I know that he will stick up for me.” These statements indicated that these students with autism felt a sense of safety and security

when these peers are around. Student study participants who were active in school extracurricular activities, such as sports or clubs and/or those who are active in other community activities such as church, were more likely to report having friendships. While these students referred to friends, they did not report or describe the bonds that would constitute what most would consider a typical friendship. Instead, their descriptions were more of classmates who may have shared a common interest, such as football, and classmates displaying tolerance, acceptance of differences and offering some protection to students they recognized as being vulnerable.

Adam's description of his friend group summarizes this well:

I have a group of friends that I sit with at lunch and stuff. They are nice to me. It's not like I really talk with them a lot. Most of the time I just hang out, I don't even know who or what they are talking about, but I know that other people are not mean to me when I'm with them. I also know that when they know I am upset, they tell be to use my techniques and to breathe. They seem like they care about me.

Whether these relationships are considered friendships or meaningful peer relationships, as described by Adam, these relationships have had a positive impact for these students.

Several students spoke specifically about why they did not have friends. Their reasons varied from a lack of trust of peers to a lack of interest or to commonalities with peers. Barlow stated that he sees how peers who are "friends" treat one another.

I don't like how they talk to one another. They take picking on one another too far. It may not be bullying, but it is close enough. I've seen girls cry over what other girls say to them that are supposed to be their friends. I don't want that.

Carl reported that this year he is often picked on by others, but he doesn't feel like it rises to the level of bullying. He further elaborated that, in addition to autism, his own personal interest in video gaming separates him from his peers.

Gaming is what I like to talk about. It is everything to me. Other kids at school don't want to hear it. They get annoyed by me talking about it. At first some of them would ask me to play online, but I don't play online. I'm not allowed so they don't have any interest in the games I play.

One student also reported his preference of being alone. He reported that other people his age annoy him. He stated that while some people think that he is annoying, that he finds them just as annoying. He prefers to read than interact with peers.

Participants did not identify having a peer as a strategy that they had learned for coping with bullying. Rather each description of these positive peer relationships pointed to a typically developing peer recognizing that another student was being mistreated and in need of assistance. Open-ended responses to questions in both the parent and teacher surveys supported that when their child had positive peer relationships with at least one typically developing student, there seemed to have a positive impact (e.g., the child experienced less bullying behavior). Only three parents reported that their child had a supportive peer; however, five other parents indicated that they believed that if their child had a friend at school that they might experience less bullying behavior. Two parents spoke specifically of their efforts to involve their children in activities in the community, at church, and in extracurricular school activities to encourage socialization. However, one of the parents stated,

I can set up opportunities for my child to socialize, but I can not make him want to socialize. He has no interest in making friends and being around other people. If he is not made to actively participate, he will choose to sit and read or draw his action figures.

Teachers also reported efforts to involve students with autism in small groups in the classroom and in small counseling groups to improve their socialization skills and opportunities to have facilitated interaction with others in a structured setting. Similar to the parent comment, one teacher stated, “I can see how it does some of our students good, but then there are others that have no interest in interacting with other students.”

Seeking Help From Teachers or School Staff

Eleven of the 12 students participating in the study reported they utilized talking with and reporting to teachers or school staff as a means of coping when they experienced bullying behavior. Each of the participants also reported having a positive relationship with at least one teacher or staff member in their school. More than 75% of the students were able to name multiple adults in the school setting whom they considered trusted individuals.

Reporting to school personnel was described as a last resort action by all but three of the students interviewed. Most students tried to address the bullying behavior they were facing by first using avoidance behaviors. In some cases, the student did not report the bullying behavior until they were approached and asked about situations by teachers and other school personnel. This would result in action being taken to address the bully.

The students said that they felt that reports of bullying to adults in the school resulted in a meaningful action occurring. While each of the students felt confident that reporting to school staff would result in action being taken, several students reported that sometimes the bullying didn't stop immediately, and that sometimes, after reporting it would get worse before it got

better. Reasons for delays in consequences that were noted by students included lies told when confronted about their behavior, the social standing of bullies within the school, and the social standing of the bully's family in the community. Martin relayed the following:

When I talked to the band director about how another student was harassing me, he took note and he saw it himself, so the guy couldn't lie his way out of it. I know that he reported it to the principal, because he called my mom to let her know what was happening. He told her the principal was investigating and that because this kid's dad is big wig at the hospital that it had to be handled carefully. My band director made sure to have me practice in a room he could see, but this kid was still giving me problems, just not as obvious. By the time he got in trouble for bullying me, my mom and I had already decided that I should drop band and take private music lessons. It kind of sucks since I am missing out on band, but I'm okay with being the only student too.

Despite the delays in some instances, more than 75% of the students felt that after making reports there was eventually a consequence for the perpetrator.

Another student also stated that he uses reporting to staff when he is bullied. Ethan reports using this strategy often, despite feeling as though sometimes the teachers who respond and help him also feel like he brings part of the problems on himself. He shared,

I can tell that they get exasperated with me. You know their shaking their heads and they make comments about how I should realize my reaction only makes them do it more. But even though they may feel that way, they also know that what is being done to me is wrong and they make it stop.

Martin stated that his reporting to his teacher led to his classmates having an opportunity to learn more about his autism and how it impacts him. Martin spoke of a time that a team of people from his school district came and did some lessons in his class about autism.

Fourth grade was a very, very bad year for me. Lots of things at school bothered me a lot and I did not know how to handle it. Most of the time if it was a noise, I would put my hands over my ears and scream. I'd scream if it was too loud in the cafeteria or if the fire alarm went off. I also would get very agitated by the other children in my class touching my things. This would make me scream too. I didn't like screaming and I didn't like how it made everyone look at me but I could not do anything about it then. I'm better now because I go to therapy and I have other ways to cool down, but back then it was bad. Anyway, these ladies came and talked to my class about how I have autism and how by brain processes things different from other kids' brains. They explained that is why sometimes I would scream because my brain was processing something differently than the way they did. They also played some games that helped my class to understand more about what I felt like. I remember them telling about how some people see a frog and jump back and scream because they are scared of frogs, while someone else may want to hold a frog and watch it being a frog. It helped me understand too. After that, my teachers and the kids in my class were better and didn't seem to get as angry with me. Some of them would help me do my breathing exercises when they saw me getting upset. I think that the people coming and talking to my class and teachers to help them understand what being a kid with autism was like was the best help for me.

The students in this study were all perceived to have positive relationships with school staff members. When asked how they learned the strategy of reporting bullying to a teacher or another

school staff member, nine of the 12 participants remember this as being a strategy taught in the antibullying curriculum used by the district. However, of interesting note, some of them were initially perplexed by the question. Seven of the students initially hesitated before responding in a manner that appeared to insinuate that they were puzzled about who else they might report to.

Summary Statements of Student Strategies for Addressing Bullying

The perspectives of participants regarding students' strategies for dealing with bullying are summarized as follows:

- Avoidance behavior, walking away from bullies, and ignoring bullies are the most common strategies used by students with autism in response to bullying behavior.
- These strategies are generally not effective and may at times exacerbate bullying behavior.
- A positive peer relationship with another student often reduces the bullying incidents of students with autism.
- A positive relationship between a student with autism and a typically developing student may develop, but those described by the participants appeared to often lack the reciprocity of friendship.
- Students often do not report bullying experiences.
- Seeking help from teachers or other support staff is perceived by students to be the most effective measure to address bullying.
- All students reported having at least one trusted adult in the school. Most were able to name two or more.
- Adult intervention does not necessarily end the bullying immediately, but students believe that over time it is effective.

Parent and Teacher Recommendations to Diminish Bullying of Students With Autism

The sixth research question was stated as follows: What are the recommendations of teachers and parents for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying of students with autism spectrum disorder? On the surveys, parents and teachers were provided an opportunity to provide a response to an open-ended question regarding their recommendations for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying. The subsections that follow provide the analyses of the parent and teacher responses to these questions.

Parent Recommendations to Diminish Bullying

Despite the fact that 13 of the 14 parents acknowledged that their child had been a victim of bullying to some degree, only four of the parent respondents offered recommendations for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying of children with autism. Several parents commented that they did not have any suggestions and that they felt like the school did a good job of providing a safe environment for their children and responding appropriately when their students experience bullying in the school setting. One parent suggested that teachers stop babying their child and let them experience natural consequences. Other parents commented that they did not have any suggestions or left the question blank. This may be an explanation for why students are less likely to report bullying to their parents when they need support. If students perceive that their parents are not able to help them with bullying issues they experience, they may be more inclined to seek out or talk to a school staff member whom they perceive will be more effective in finding a resolution.

Parent responses for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying included having a district policy addressing bullying, providing better monitoring of students, and helping parents find resources to better assist in understanding their child and autism. A review of these three

recommendations, along with the additional parent comments in this section, raise concern that the parents of children with autism may not have been adequately connected with the school and that improved communication was necessary.

Teacher Recommendations to Diminish Bullying

Teachers provided multiple recommendations for diminishing bullying of students with autism and many of their suggestions overlapped. Of the 26 respondents, 17 teachers offered suggestions for improving the school environment for students with autism by reducing the number of bullying incidents. The most frequently repeated recommendation was a reinstatement of the former antibullying curriculum used in the district in years past. This was recommended by 15 teachers. Some of the comments regarding this recommendation were

- I'm not sure what happened and why we no longer use the antibullying curriculum. It is not like anyone said, "Stop teaching that," it just seemed to phase out without anyone really realizing it. I think that it probably happened when our district started using a social-emotional program. This is also a great program, but it does not address bullying straight on. Our students need that and when they had it they responded to it.
- When administrators stopped requiring it in lesson plans, people stopped teaching it. This was not because there were not issues. With all the things we have to teach in a day, I am not exactly looking to add something else, but I believe it is needed.

Based on these recommendations it appeared that the abandonment of this curriculum was not isolated to one or two classrooms.

The second most frequent suggestion, which was recommended by 13 teachers, was the need to improve supervision during times of transition of students between classes and during

less structured times such as lunch, physical education, and arrival and dismissal times. Teachers reported in their recommendations that this was most often the time that bullying occurred. It was also noted by most of the teachers that this would benefit all children. Two teachers also reported that staff members had been directed to be visible in the hallways, entrances, and exits during transitions; however, they noted that many staff members do not make it out of their classrooms. A teacher commented that this increases student vulnerability to bullying. This recommendation for improved supervision coincided with a similar one suggested by a parent.

Eight of the teacher respondents supported a need for better communication among educators, parents, and the community about bullying policies and procedures, disciplinary impacts of bullying, and the impact of bullying on mental health. Several of the participants also suggested that there be a parent component of the antibullying curriculum, so that parents would know the signs of harassment to look for and how to talk to their children about bullying. This also correlates with a parent suggestion of improved communication and connecting parents with resources.

The recommendation of a parent support group to assist parents in learning how to better understand their children with autism was suggested by three teachers. One teacher noted that for parents in the county where the study occurred, no support group for parents of children with autism existed within a 45-mile radius. A teacher further elaborated that in a low-wealth rural county this makes finding support difficult for working parents and the travel is cost-prohibitive to most. She stated, “We have parents that have to make decisions about spending money to put gas in their car to get to work or putting food on the table.” There are also many areas within this district where cable services and internet services are extremely limited or nonexistent. This further limits parents’ access to information.

One teacher suggested that IEP teams and parents should more closely review whether the regular education setting is the most appropriate environment for students with autism. This teacher made particular note of the difficulties students with autism encountered and created in their classroom. This recommendation was the only suggestion that implied that students with autism would experience less bullying if they were placed in more restrictive, self-contained settings.

Summary Statements of Parent and Teacher Recommendations to Diminish Bullying of Students With Autism

The perspectives of participants regarding parents' and teachers' strategies for dealing with bullying are summarized as follows:

- Few parents made recommendations for diminishing bullying of students with autism.
- Some parents found the school environment in which their child was being educated to be safe and appropriate for their child.
- Based on the few recommendations made by parents, there appeared to be a need for better communication between the schools and parents.
- Teachers' recommendations for diminishing the bullying of students with autism included reinstatement of the antibullying curriculum used previously, improvement of supervision of students during transition and unstructured times, improved communication about bullying policies, procedures, and curriculum between the school and parents, and the formation of a support group for parents of students with autism.
- Three of the recommendations of teachers to diminish bullying correlated with parent recommendations.

Review of District Policies and Curriculum Related to Bullying

District Policies

At the time of this study, Hall County Schools had three policies related to bullying. These were located in the documents section of the Board of Education division of the website related to bullying. These policies outlined a discrimination, harassment, and bullying complaint procedure, described a prohibition against discrimination, harassment, and bullying, and defined harassment. It is notable that two of these policies had not been updated since 2004 and 2010, respectively. Based on the North Carolina School Boards Association's policy recommendation and changes in law, these policies should have been updated in 2019. Prior to this date, the policies were in compliance with the then current laws.

As a part of the school district's practices at the time of the study, new employees were provided a review of policies during orientation and are required to sign a form stating they had been made aware of the policies, knew where to locate the policies, and understood that they were expected to be knowledgeable about and comply with school policies. In addition, school administrators were required to review this information with their school employees at least once yearly during the opening staff meetings of the year.

In the fall of 2015, Hall County Schools implemented an evidence based antibullying program. Because the selection of this curriculum was unique to this district, the name of the program is not disclosed. This program was developed by a leading international bullying prevention expert and was deemed appropriate for use with students in elementary through high school grades. The program included components that address four district levels: the school level, classroom level, individual level, and community level. Training on the implementation of this program was provided by a certified trainer from the parent production company. In

addition, there were six more trainings over the next 2 years, to train new employees and to sustain the fidelity of program implementation. Documentation, including training documents, staff development agendas, purchase orders, and sample lesson plans from the district office supports that this program was fully implemented through the year of 2017. Based on teacher responses to open-ended questions in my study, it seems that the administrative emphasis on the inclusion of this program as a part of the curriculum dwindled and eventually faded completely between 2017 and 2018.

Summary of Statements Regarding the Review of District Policies and Curriculum Related to Bullying

The perspectives of participants regarding district policies, curriculum, and practices related to bullying are summarized as follows:

- The district has the required policies regarding bullying in place, though there are updates that should be adopted by the board.
- District employees are provided information and access to district policies.
- Beginning in 2015, the district implemented an antibullying curriculum for Grades K–12.
- Implementation of the antibullying curriculum was abandoned by 2018.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the findings revealed by the research investigation. The findings are organized around the research questions and themes that emerged from the data analysis regarding the perceptions of middle school students with autism, their parents, and their teachers. The interview items to which these participants responded included questions about the definition of bullying, the prevalence of bullying of students with autism in middle school, how

bullying is reported, the strategies students with autism may use to cope with bullying, and the recommendations parents and teachers have for diminishing bullying. Data from interviews and student, parent, and teacher surveys and document analysis disclosed the study participants' understanding of the prevalence and reporting of bullying of middle school students with autism.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter Introduction

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings reported in Chapter 4 and the conclusions that I have drawn from the study. The chapter also addresses the implications of these findings as policymakers and practitioners review current practices, procedures, and policies. I conclude with the limitations of the study and with recommendations for future research.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the prevalence and reporting of face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying of middle school students with autism in the general education setting, in Hall County Schools, a rural district in the southeastern United States. I explored the perspectives of students with autism, teachers of the student participants, and parents of student participants relative to this phenomenon. In particular, the study examined whether students with autism believe that they are being bullied, how they report that information, and what strategies they have developed to cope with bullying behavior. The study also examined the identification and reporting of bullying of autistic students from the perspectives of the students' teachers and parents as well as their perspectives on how to diminish the bullying of students with autism in the school setting.

Bullying is the intentional and repeated infliction of negative behavior against another person resulting in harm to that person. The action may be physical, verbal, or written and it may cause physical harm or be detrimental to an individual's social-emotional well-being. To execute this study, I conducted surveys with the teachers and parents of the middle school students with autism who participated in the study. This survey queried teachers and the students' parents about their beliefs regarding the prevalence of bullying of students with autism in the middle

school, about how bullying was reported, and about their perspectives regarding how bullying of students with autism in the middle school setting could be diminished. To explore teacher and parent perspectives in greater depth, some of the survey questions allowed for open-ended responses. In addition, a brief survey was completed by the students with autism who participated in the study, followed by a structured interview to ascertain meaningful, firsthand insight from these students about their experiences with being bullied, how they reported being bullied, and the strategies that they used to cope with being bullied. The interview protocol enabled me to capture not only the incidents of bullying experienced by student participants, but also the raw emotions the retelling of these events elicited. Finally, I reviewed and assessed district documents, policies, and procedures related to bullying in the study school district.

Summary of Findings

I analyzed findings from the responses to the parent and teacher surveys. To gain deeper insights into the teacher and parent perspectives about bullying of middle school students with autism, I analyzed the emergent themes from an examination of responses to open-ended questions on the surveys. To gain deeper insights into the survey responses of the student participants with autism, I analyzed emergent themes in their responses to survey responses and to questions posed during the student interviews. Due to my position as an exceptional children's director and human resources director within a school district in eastern North Carolina, the student interviews were conducted and recorded by a colleague who served in the role of my research representative. There is a moderate to high degree of transience among students within school districts in Eastern North Carolina. Due to the sensitivity of this research and the involvement of students with disabilities and the chance that I might encounter participants or their parents within the context of my work, it was determined that participant confidentiality

and elimination of any prospect of coercion would best be achieved if a third party research representative met with students and parents and conducted student interviews on my behalf.

The study addressed the six research questions listed as follows.

1. What is the prevalence of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying among middle school students with autism in the general education setting of Hall County Schools from the perspective of the students with autism, the students' parents, and the teachers?
2. To what extent do adolescents with autism, parents, and teachers have similar beliefs about what constitutes bullying?
3. What methods do adolescents with autism use to report instances of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying to parents, teachers, and other authorities?
4. What strategies do adolescents with autism use to address face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying?
5. How do adolescents with autism describe the responses of teachers to their reports of face-to-face or cyberbullying?
6. What are the recommendations of teachers and parents for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying of students with autism spectrum disorder?

Research Question 1 assessed the prevalence of bullying of middle school students with autism in the general curriculum setting in Hall County Schools from the perspectives of the student, teacher, and parent participants. Surveys for each participant group were utilized to gather these data and additional information was gathered during individual student interviews.

An analysis of the data revealed that students and teachers reported that bullying behavior occurs much more frequently in the school setting than parents reported. Students and teachers,

for the most part, described the behavior as occurring in a range of weekly to monthly. Eleven of the 12 student participants reported being bullied at least once during the school year, and 10 of the students reported that verbal bullying including calling names, making insulting comments, and making threats occurred at least weekly to monthly. Teacher respondents also reported a high frequency of bullying of students with autism; 14 of the 26 teachers reporting that bullying occurs at least weekly and monthly in the school setting and 10 additional teachers reporting that bullying occurs at least yearly. Further analysis of data revealed that face-to-face bullying occurs much more frequently than cyberbullying, which was reported to be extremely rare, and only reported by three students and parents. This finding was repeated across all the participant groups and may be due to limited technology access and online access for students in the home setting. In addition, data from both the student group and teacher group supported that face-to-face bullying behaviors of teasing, name calling, spreading gossip, and making threats occur more frequently than physical attacks or taking personal property. Eight of the 12 students reported that they have experienced less bullying in middle school than in elementary school.

Overall, parents reported that they believed bullying was overreported by their children and school staff. Several parents further indicated they believed that what their children experienced at school was not bullying, but rather typical teasing behavior that may have been brought on by the odd behaviors their children display due to their autism. In addition, these parents believed that their children needed to learn how to control their own behaviors and needed to learn how to “take up for” themselves to avoid being teased. Previous research has shown that parents and the family environment indirectly impact the occurrence of bullying (Duncan, 2004). Parents who dismissed their children’s reports of bullying, focused on their children’s behaviors that evoke bullying behavior, or emphasized the children’s need to be more

independent and aggressive in dealing with bullying behavior inadvertently contributed to their children's unwillingness to report bullying to the parents and potentially to authority figures. The perceived lack of parental support by both students and teachers created challenges and obstacles for establishing effective interventions. This was especially frustrating to teachers who felt that the parent's lack of concern or their denial allowed for administrators to minimize the significance of bullying incidents the teachers reported, resulting in poor investigation or no investigation of the incidents, and the enforcement of few disciplinary measures.

Research Question 2 assessed the extent to which parents, teachers, and students with autism have similar beliefs about what constitutes bullying. The surveys for each participant group asked for the respondent to provide a definition or description for the word *bullying*. Responses to this question were analyzed for reference to the following components which aligned with language and information that was part of a previously implemented bullying prevention program utilized by the school district:

1. a pattern of behavior,
2. harassment or intimidation,
3. an imbalance of power, and
4. physical or emotional harm to the victim.

Analysis of responses revealed that overwhelmingly, all of the student and teacher respondents captured all four of the aforementioned components in their definition or description of bullying. This is likely related to the previous utilization in the district of an antibullying curriculum. Despite teachers having a very clear understanding of the constituents of bullying, multiple teachers noted that they still sometimes have a difficult time identifying whether some actions are bullying. This appeared to be especially so when the bullying was manifested in ways

that were not physical in nature, but instead targeted a student's social–emotional well-being. Unlike the review of responses from teachers and students, the analysis of parent definitions revealed a larger disparity among this group of respondents. Further, only two parents captured all four of the major components of bullying in their definition. The majority of parents only cited one or two of the components of the definition of bullying in their responses.

Research Question 3 assessed how and to whom students with autism reported instances of bullying from the perspectives of the students, teachers, and parents. Surveys for each participant group were utilized to gather these data and additional information was gathered during individual student interviews. Despite the findings that parents believed that their students were more likely to report bullying to them than to school staff or others, student responses reflected that they are most likely to report being bullied to their teachers or other trusted school staff members. There also existed a high degree of consistency between student and teacher responses, as teachers believed students were more likely to report bullying to them rather than to their parents or other family members. During interviews, several students described times in the past that they had tried to report bullying to their parents; however, such reports did not result in resolving the issue because either the parents did not think that what was described was bullying or they overreacted to the information and caused additional anxiety for the students. Teachers also believed that students may also be more likely to report bullying to them or school staff members because the adults in the school setting ask pertinent questions or initiate these conversations with them when they notice concerns.

Question 4 assessed the strategies that students with autism report using to address bullying. I also addressed these methods through related questions in the student interview protocol. Analysis of student responses revealed that they used several different strategies,

though students also reported that none of the strategies used were an entirely effective way of eliminating bullying behavior. One student participant denied being bullied and did not report any strategies. Avoidance, walking away, and ignoring the bullying behavior were reported by 11 of 12 interview participants as being the most frequently used strategies, though most stated that these methods were rarely effective at ending the bullying. Indeed, three of the students indicated that in some instances, such strategies made the bullying worse. In addition, four students reported that even if these strategies were effective at stopping the bullying, they created other negative consequences for them. These consequences included emotional distress, being unable to sustain avoidance behaviors, and exacerbation of the bullying behavior.

Another method of addressing bullying behavior used by 11 of the 12 students was reporting bullying behavior to a teacher or other school staff member. Though nine of the 12 students were reluctant to report bullying to adults, this strategy was perceived by 11 of the students to be the most effective measure to address bullying when compared to other strategies. That said, three of the 12 specifically also stated that this method does not always stop the bullying.

Though not reported by a majority of the student participants, several of the students reported that peer relationships sometimes served as a strategy for addressing bullying. Four students discussed the impact that a positive peer relationship with a typically developing student had on them and how it made them feel empowered, protected, safe, and more secure. These students described times that their “friend” either intervened on their behalf, supported their report of bullying behavior to an adult, or deterred the bullying behavior.

Question 5 assessed student responses regarding the ways that teachers responded to the student’s report about being bullied. This question was addressed with students using the student

interview protocol and additional information from the teacher's perspective was collected from open-ended responses on the teacher survey.

Analysis of student responses revealed that 11 of the 12 students felt that reporting bullying behavior to a trusted teacher or school staff member resulted in a meaningful action. One student reported that, although he felt comfortable reporting bullying behavior to a teacher and that the teacher always addressed his concern, the teacher at times was visibly exasperated with him and stated that his behaviors contributed to the bullying. Another student reported that his teacher's concern about how he was bullied led her to arrange for a group to work with his classmates to better help them understand autism. Fifteen of the 26 teacher respondents commented to an open-ended question indicating that they often take the lead in approaching students with autism who are being bullied and encouraging them to talk about and report what is happening to them. The same 15 respondents reported that if they had not started the initial conversation that the behavior would not have been reported or it would have been reported much later, at a point when the extent of the bullying had increased.

Question 6 assessed parent and teacher recommendations for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying of students with autism. This question was addressed with parents and teachers through an open-ended question on the parent and teacher surveys. Though nine parents provided a response to this question, only four parents made recommendations for diminishing bullying. Other parent responses were positive comments about the safe environment of the school and about how the school currently handles bullying. Parent recommendations for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying behavior included having a district policy that addressed bullying, providing better monitoring of all students, allowing students with autism to experience the natural consequences of their behaviors, and assisting parents in finding resources

to aid them in better understanding their child and autism. Of the 26 teacher respondents, 17 teachers offered suggestions, many of them overlapping, for improving the school environment and reducing the number of incidents in which children with autism were bullied. Teacher recommendations included reinstatement of the antibullying curriculum used previously in the district, improvement of supervision of students during transition and unstructured times, improved communication about bullying policies, procedures, and curriculum between the school and parents, and the formation of a support group for parents of students with autism. Three of these recommendations correlated with parent recommendations.

As a final element of inquiry in this study, I conducted a review of district policies and curriculum related to bullying revealed that the district had required policies addressing bullying in place; however, it was apparent that there were updates that should be considered by the board. This analysis also included the fact that the district implemented an antibullying curriculum for Grades K–12 in 2015; however, the curriculum had not been implemented as a district requirement since 2018. In addition, there was a process in place to ensure that all district employees were informed of their responsibility to be familiar with board policies and that they had knowledge of how to locate board policies. Board policies were also made available to the public on the school district’s website.

Discussion of the Study Findings

The perspectives of middle school students with autism, their parents, and their teachers were ascertained through carefully constructed data gathering instruments that provided information needed to answer the study’s research questions. These questions were designed to enable a better understanding of the similarities and differences in each group’s beliefs about the prevalence and reporting of bullying of middle school students with autism who participated in

the general education setting. It is increasingly acknowledged that contextual variables such as parents, peers, teachers, school culture, and communities have a significant impact on the incidence and perpetuation or extinction of bullying (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Barboza et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2000; Furlong et al., 2003; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Mishna et al., 2005; Olweus, 1993). Several themes and subthemes emerged from the data provided by the students with autism, their parents, and their teachers. The findings of this study are examined through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory illustrating the relationship between the variables within each microsystem (parents, teachers, administrators, school climate/environment), the mesosystem, and the exosystem as they relate to the student. The discussion that follows addresses the conclusions drawn based on the qualitative analysis presented in Chapter 4.

Identifying Bullying and the Prevalence of Bullying

With the exception of one student, all of the student participants in this study reported being subjected to bullying by peers in the school setting. This was consistent with the response of teachers regarding the prevalence of bullying of students with autism in the school setting; however, parent reports regarding their child's bullying victimization were much fewer in number. Student participants' accounts of the extent of bullying, which ranged from low to severe levels of bullying that were emotionally and physically detrimental, were a finding of particular concern, as this reinforces that bullying is a common reality for children with autism in this school setting. This finding is especially concerning when student responses are compared to the low prevalence of bullying reported by the parents of these students. The level of prevalence reported by both the teachers and students is consistent with some of the higher estimates found

in studies of the bullying of students with autism such as those by Little (2002), Wainscot et al. (2008), and Humphrey and Lewis (2008).

Despite the fact that the literature supports that the top-rated concerns among parents of students transitioning from elementary school to middle school were bullying and peer relationships (Zeedyk et al., 2014), the lower rates of victimization reported by parents in this study need not have been completely unexpected. Stockdale et al. (2002) found that parents of middle and high school students tend to report lower rates of bullying incidents than students do. This may be explained by the fact that middle and high school children do not always talk to their parents about their experiences in school (Mishna, 2004). However, in multiple cases, parents included in this study revealed in open-ended responses to survey questions that their child did report bullying behaviors to them, but they did not believe what was reported was “actually bullying.”

In terms of defining bullying, there was a high degree of correlation between student and teacher responses. Both students and teachers were able to identify or articulate an understanding of the four components of the definition of bullying which was adopted by the district for use in conjunction with a bullying prevention program implemented in the district in prior years. This definition was derived by district staff from components of the definition provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011) from its Uniform Definition Bullying Project and the definition for bullying developed by Olweus (2013) and utilized in his curriculum, The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. In general, the parents defined and understood bullying differently than students and teachers. Parent definitions of bullying were much less precise than those of students and teachers. Their definitions captured the elements of harmful behavior and an imbalance of power; however, they lacked the identification of a pattern of behavior or an

understanding of the social and emotional consequences of bullying. In addition, multiple parents reported that they thought bullying was overidentified by school staff. These discrepancies suggest a lack of effective communication between the school and home setting about bullying and bullying prevention. Including a parent component in the bullying prevention program, as well as increasing communication with parents regarding bullying would likely result in increased parent awareness and understanding of bullying within the school setting and how it may impact their children. While there is limited research addressing parental experiences and involvement in discussing bullying with their children (Holt et al., 2021), parental involvement has been found to be a key element in successful school bullying prevention programs (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). The findings in this study are supported by implications of research conducted by Stives et al. (2021) suggesting that schools must do a better job of involving parents in bullying prevention training so that there is a commonality among the messages that students are receiving about bullying and how adults, both parents and school staff, respond on behalf of the students.

Bullying Experiences

This study found that face-to-face bullying was far more prevalent than cyberbullying. All three participant groups reported a low incidence of cyberbullying, with only three students having encountered minor instances of problems online which were eradicated prior to becoming concerns that impacted their daily life in the school setting. Unlike the participants in this study, Kuo et al. (2014), found that students with autism were frequent internet users with a high interest in social networking sites and fantasy gaming activities and that they spend twice the amount of time on the Internet than their typically developing peers. Both students and parents reported very limited access to technology devices as well as limited internet connectivity

capabilities; these factors likely contributed to the lack of cyberbullying experienced by students in my study, despite the nationwide increase in this form of bullying (USDE, 2013). This conclusion is supported by the North Carolina Department of Information Technology's (2019) broadband indices report which reported that 47% of households in Hall County did not have access to broadband subscriptions, and 25.5% had no access to internet services. In addition, both parents and students reported a high level of parental monitoring and enforcement of time restrictions when the opportunity presented itself for online activities such as visits to the homes of friends or family with internet capability or to places where public Wi-Fi is available. Teachers also reported that the district internet filter, the use of shared screens (the teacher has access to view each student's screen on her/his computer), and frequent interaction and movement by the teacher around the classroom significantly limit student access to social media forums, gaming, and student-to-student messaging.

Data from both the student group and teacher group supported that face-to-face bullying behaviors of teasing, name calling, spreading gossip, and making threats occurred more frequently than physical attacks or theft of personal property. This is consistent with bullying literature findings that verbal and peer interactive/relational bullying is more prevalent than physical bullying (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Scheithauer et al., 2006). Student participants recounted situations of face-to-face bullying in which they were fearful and therefore avoided riding the bus, attending school, engaging in extracurricular activities such as band or sports, eating in the cafeteria, participating in class, and walking in the hallways. One student shared that the bullying situation on his bus was so bad that he would have stomach aches in the morning and in the afternoons when it was time to ride the bus. He would often miss the bus in the morning; this created tension and strife between him and his mother and caused his grade in reading to go

down because he missed important reading instruction when he arrived at school late. In addition, it was a struggle every afternoon for his teacher to get him on the bus; this resulted in frustration and tension between them. Another student shared his experience of trying to avoid an individual in the hallways by lagging in the gym locker room until after the bell rang for all students to be in class. Even though this made him late to class, which he found embarrassing and often resulted in lunch detention, the reward of not having to be exposed to a bully was worth the consequence. Avoidance of situations such as these, directly or indirectly, negatively impacts the student's education, relationships with family and school staff, and creates increased anxiety and stress which in turn is detrimental to their emotional status. The impact of victimization on these students is consistent with findings in bullying literature that supports that the self-concept of victimized students is negatively impacted and that their stress levels are significantly heightened. Both of these impacts can lead to mental health concerns, school avoidance or failure and exacerbate isolation (Cappadocia et al., 2012).

Teacher responses to open ended survey questions corroborated the impact of bullying on students' participation and comfort in the school setting. Several teachers also noted what they perceived as their own inability to appropriately identify low-level bullying and intervene to stop it before it progressed to a more serious level. This finding is supported by bullying literature that suggests that as children get older, verbal and social bullying increases. Perpetrators come to realize that these actions can be as hurtful, or more hurtful than physical bullying, and can be carried out more covertly (Woods & White, 2005). These covert acts make it more difficult for adults to identify and intervene in bullying situations. One teacher in my study shared,

If it has gotten to the point that a student is not coming to school because they are fearful or cannot bear the humiliation another student or adult causes them, I feel like we are too

late. How will we ever convince that child that they will be safe in school? Yet I know there are times that I cannot appropriately monitor my students and feel comfortable that no one is being harassed or bullied. In addition, there are times that I suspect that a student is being bullied, but I do not have any means to substantiate it. I have no evidence other than gut feelings and changes in a student's behavior that are difficult to articulate in a way that adequately captures what is occurring.

One teacher reported that she was aware that she had a student with autism who would not verbally participate in her class even though she knew from other teacher reports that the student verbally participated in their classes. The teacher believed that this student was intimidated by another student in the class, who is not in her other classes, who has previously teased and mocked her in the class. Even though the teacher has stopped that behavior in the class, she feels that the bully continues this behavior outside of the class in less structured settings where there is no direct supervision by school staff. Many other teachers also cited unstructured and less supervised settings such as the hallways, cafeteria, recess, bus rides, and arrival and dismissal settings as times when bullying occurs most often and goes unaddressed by school staff. These settings decrease adult-to-student proximity and further complicate the identification of verbal and social bullying, which are more easily disguised during socially interactive times. These teacher observations are consistent with literature findings that corroborate that verbal and social bullying is more difficult to identify and substantiate than physical bullying and is more likely to go undetected and unreported (Sutton et al., 1999).

Relationships

Positive adult and peer relationships played important roles in the determinations of student participants about to whom they reported bullying to. These relationships also influenced

the strategies that they used to cope with bullying. Children with autism are at a greater risk of social isolation and relationship difficulties due to the social challenges that often accompany autism (Rowley et al., 2012). Only four of the 12 students in this study referenced a friend during the interview, and in each case the friend was viewed as a source of support and protection. Further probing of students regarding their friendships revealed that these relationships lacked the social–emotional reciprocity of typical friendships and were based on mutual interests, such as sports, or simple acts of kindness. Regardless, these students felt empowered by their “friendship” and their confidence was bolstered by having the support of a peer. For each of these students, a peer stepped in to deter bullying, or reported bullying on behalf of a student; however, none of the participants initiated the request for help from friends. These findings resonate with literature that consistently finds that students with autism struggle to make and maintain friendships (Bauminger et al., 2008). However, when they do have positive peer relationships, the social support from that relationship may protect them from bullying (Sofronoff et al., 2011).

All the students in this study had positive relationships with adult staff members at school, something which has been identified in the literature as important for a successful school experience for a child with autism (Dillon et al., 2014). Students identified reporting to a teacher as the most reliable way to address bullying that would most likely result in a change in the bullying behavior. Their recounting of teacher intervention during interviews revealed the trusting relationship the students had with their teachers. Students also reported feeling comfortable talking to their teachers and confident that these teachers would do their best to address the bullying that was reported. Even though two students reported that certain teachers sometimes pointed out how their own behaviors may have been annoying, the teachers still

intervened because the bullying was an inappropriate response to annoying behavior. It is important to note that teacher participants reported that if they suspected or observed a student being bullied, they often had to prompt the student to tell them what was happening.

During the interview when the student participants were asked how they learned the strategy of reporting bullying to a teacher or another school staff member, nine of the 12 participants remember this as being a strategy taught in the antibullying curriculum used by the district. However, of interesting note, some of them were initially perplexed by the question. Seven of the students initially hesitated before responding in a manner insinuating, they were puzzled about who else they might report to. In reflection, this is not surprising as the adults in school are expected to treat all children in a fair and consistent manner. While there are certainly adult outliers, for the most part, it is likely that school staff are providing what may be the most stable, structured, and consistent environment a student with autism encounters during a day. This continuity builds trust for students with autism. In addition, over ½ of the students also indicated that their parents encourage them to report bullying to their teachers or the school staff.

Students did not perceive their parents as very helpful; they felt that their parents did not believe they were being bullied. In one case, the student felt the parent would overreact. This perception of lower level of support from parents is surprising and concerning, as the analysis of literature reveals that typically parents of students with autism take on a staunch advocacy role for their child (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Moore, 2007). The finding in my study makes it even more critical for school staff to understand the important part that they play in providing a school environment in which bullying behavior is addressed in a manner consistent with research emphasizing the central role of school in bullying prevention (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

Coping Alone

One strategy used by multiple students was to attempt to deal with the bullying themselves. Tactics included ignoring the bully, avoidance of the bully, and walking away when bullying occurred. Eleven of the 12 students reported using at least one of these strategies; however, no one reported that the strategies were effective in stopping the bullying. In some instances, it made the bullying worse. One student said, “It was like, it just made him madder and then he was coming at me and harassing me even more—like it was his job.” Even if one of these strategies was initially successful, it did not have the desired effect of extinguishing the bullying behavior, as students reported that the behavior might stop for a short period of time, but then it would start over again.

These findings are indicative of the need of a social support system for students with autism. The literature is clear that children with autism experience challenges in forming social relationships that place them at greater risk to be socially isolated and to have difficulty forming and maintaining peer relationships (Cappadocia & Weiss, 2011; Rowley et al., 2012). This accentuates the need for school staff and parents to work cooperatively in analyzing student needs and helping them through social skills groups to strengthen their social and communication skills. This skill deficit should be incorporated into a student’s IEP or 504 plan as a goal with the objectives addressing their social and communication skills. Research by Humphrey and Symes (2010) affirmed that inclusion of students with autism in the mainstream setting is more effective when there is work in developing the skills necessary for social support, thereby reducing the likelihood of victimization.

Parent and Teacher Suggestions for Reducing Victimization

Family educational involvement and parent–teacher relationships are important for supporting student outcomes and have unique implications for families of children with ASD. Thus, it was important for me to seek the recommendations of both parents and teachers, those individuals most involved with these students, for diminishing the bullying of children with autism in the school setting. Research supports that parent and school partnerships aligned to address the unique social and emotional needs of students with autism positively impact the child’s resilience to victimization, especially when implemented when the child first enrolls in school (Chang et al., 2014).

The response rate of parents regarding suggestions for diminishing the number of incidents of bullying was extremely low; only a fourth of the parents provided a response. It is not known if the low response rate correlates with the overall parent response that bullying is not prevalent or if they do not feel informed enough to offer suggestions. Three of the four parents who responded indicated that they would like to have access to resources to better understand their child and autism. These findings are concerning because they may suggest that a family has limited history of accessing resources with providers in early childhood services; this can be a predictor of limited educational involvement (Garbacz et al., 2016). In addition, two parents also suggested that the school district have a policy addressing bullying behavior, and one parent suggested improving the monitoring of students. The lack of parent responses and what appears to be a vague awareness of how bullying may be impacting their students are surprising, as literature supports that bullying is a primary concern of many parents of students with ASD and that such parents have a heightened sensitivity to the serious negative consequences of bullying victimization (Stives et al., 2019).

Many of the teacher recommendations for diminishing bullying of students with autism were reflective of those indicated by parents. Teachers indicated a concern that the attention to bullying and attention to the impact of bullying on students have diminished since 2018. They reported that policies and procedures related to bullying are no longer regularly reviewed with staff, students, and parents and that the antibullying curriculum implemented in 2015 has been abandoned by the classroom teachers. A new district-wide social–emotional learning support program was implemented in 2019; however, teachers’ responses indicate that this program does not specifically or adequately address bullying. These concerns are validated by research that supports that an effective program builds on what is known about bullying prevention in general terms. Effective programs involve clear communication and engagement of school staff, students, parents and district support personnel in the implementation, alignment to district policies and procedures, and outcome assessment (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014).

Results of this study were consistent with previous research that indicated that teachers needed more training to effectively intervene in bullying situations (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Nicolaides et al., 2002; Pepler & Craig, 2011). Teachers shared similar concerns as the parents about a need for increased supervision of students during unstructured times of the day such as before school, during class changes, recess time, lunch, and in extracurricular activities. It is not enough, however, for students to just be monitored. As noted by teachers when discussing prevalence of bullying, they at times struggle to identify subtle forms of verbal and emotional bullying and they identified a desire to learn how to detect this type of covert bullying. In addition, the lack of continued training and implementation of the bullying prevention program negatively impacted teachers’ sense of efficacy in identifying and dealing with bullying behaviors. These findings were consistent with research that identified ongoing training and

sustained supports must be in place for teachers to feel confident and effective in addressing bullying behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Pepler & Craig, 2011).

More than half of the teacher respondents recognized a need for the previously used bullying prevention program or an updated version of the program to be implemented and embedded into the daily schedule as a standard curriculum taught by all, as had been the case in the past. Several teachers expressed that the current social–emotional learning program being implemented at the time of this study did not adequately address bullying prevention. Research supports that social–emotional learning has been shown to be an effective component in comprehensive bullying prevention interventions; therefore, schools should focus on bullying prevention programs that incorporate social–emotional learning (B. H. Smith & Low, 2013). Studies of evidence-based bullying prevention programs indicate that training teachers to detect and address bullying in the classroom and in less structured environments such as the playground, cafeteria, and school transports is critical to empowering teachers to feel more confident in identifying and addressing bullying as it occurs (Alsaker, 2004; Schroeder et al., 2014). The significance of teachers’ role in the early identification of signs of victimization and effective intervention of bullying has been well documented in the literature (Leff, 2007; Olweus, 1993; Pepler & Craig, 2000). In my study, positive teacher–student relationship was found to serve as a protective factor against bullying.

Policies and Practices

The North Carolina General Assembly has developed laws and regulations that address bullying of all types, including cyberbullying. North Carolina general statutes require local school boards to adopt policies prohibiting bullying and harassing behavior. These policies must specifically include key policy and procedural elements, including

- Statements prohibiting bullying or harassing behavior;
- Definitions of bullying or harassing behavior that are no less inclusive than the definition in state law;
- Descriptions of the types of behavior expected for each student and school employee;
- Disciplinary consequences and remedial actions for a person who commits an act of bullying or harassment;
- Procedures for reporting and investigations, including designation of the principal or a designee as the person responsible for the investigation;
- Statements prohibiting reprisal or retaliation against anyone who reports an act of bullying or harassment, and consequences for reprisal or retaliation; and
- Statements regarding how the policy will be publicized within the district (School Violence Prevention Act, 2009).

Hall County Schools has such policies in place; however, at the time of review, the policies required updating to include harassment and cyberbullying. Policies are available to the public on the district website and based on the district administrative handbook, principals should review these policies with their staff on at least a yearly basis to ensure staff familiarity with the policy requirements. Parents are provided information about these policies on the district website, as well as through communication in the form of a paper copy of the district *Parent/Student Handbook*. The *Parent/Student Handbook* can also be found on the district website under the headings of Parent Information and Student Information. The district has tried to publicize both the policies and procedures in a virtual format and a tangible handout to meet the needs of those parents without access to technology or the Internet.

With respect to pertinent policy, the significant issue the district is facing is not the absence of policies and procedures regarding bullying, but rather the fact that there is no ongoing communication occurring about bullying. For 3 years, there was staff training and regular daily dialogue among teachers, parents, students, administrators and even in the community about safe school environments through a bullying prevention program. Schools were also implementing a framework of positive behavior supports and the intervention and prevention components of the bullying prevention program integrated well with this. The implementation of both programs slowly subsided beginning in the spring of 2018. They have not been resurrected since that time. As evidenced by the comments of study participants, this lack of regular communication about bully prevention has left teachers feeling inadequate about their responses to bullying and has left parents feeling uninformed.

Given the prevalence of bullying reported in this study and the concerns reported by students, teachers, and parents, it would be appropriate for this district to consider the results of this study in conjunction with any data the district has collected. Such data should drive development of a plan of action. Teacher and student responses to questions regarding the definition of bullying, descriptions of bullying, and responses to bullying reflected a common understanding, presumably learned from the previous bullying prevention program. While it would be difficult to determine the extent to which teachers and students have benefited from this program, one can infer from the literature that the implementation has resulted in positive outcomes (Brewin et al., 2008; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010).

Just as students must develop trust with teachers and other school support staff in order to develop positive relationships, parents have to experience the same thing to develop such positive relationships. The school district and schools can accomplish this, at least in part,

through transparent communication. Parents were aware there was a bullying prevention program in place and now they have no information about why the program is not in place and what is going to be used in its place. It is important for the parents and students to know the school's stance on bullying and if there is going to be another proactive and systematic means of addressing bullying to replace the previous program. The district should find a way to publicize and highlight the policies regarding bullying and harassment along with any curriculum or program that may be implemented to continue providing a safe environment for students. Such actions are supported in the literature by findings that a positive school culture can have a profound effect on increased positive relationships and often less bullying as a consequence (Morewood et al., 2011).

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study contributes to the understanding of bullying of middle school students with autism, from the perspectives of the students with autism, their parents, and their teachers: however, several delimitations and limitations are noted. The findings of this study are limited to the perceptions of the participants in one small, low wealth, rural school district in eastern North Carolina and are likely not generalizable to areas of differing demographics.

Delimitations of this study were related to the constraints on generalizability and applications to practice that were accepted prior to implementation of the study. The study is limited by the grade level of the participants, which only included students with autism in sixth through eighth grade. This rendered findings relative to a narrow band of students in a K–12 district. In addition, the findings of this study may be over representative of middle school students with autism participating in the general curriculum for the majority of their day. Literature indicates that students with autism in the general education setting experience a higher

risk of bullying (Campbell et al., 2017), thus the student participants in this study, along with their parents and teachers, represent an important group to provide insightful perceptions and beliefs; however, it does not represent the perspectives and beliefs of students with autism who spend the majority of their days in special education setting, nor those of their parents or teachers. In addition, teachers and parents of the students participating in this study completed a survey with additional open-ended questions. At least one parent of each student participant responded to the survey and 26 teachers completed the survey. Conducting interviews with these two groups of participants may provide more detailed responses yielding a more in-depth understanding of their beliefs and perspectives.

Limitations of the study include factors that occurred after study implementation that were beyond my control and may have impacted the outcomes. Male youth accounted for the vast majority of the participants in this study. While male individuals are more likely to have a diagnosis of autism than female individuals (Kreiser & White, 2014), it should not be assumed that this sample is representative of that finding. The gender disparity of the sample population may impact the generalizability of the study. An additional factor impacting generalizability is the relatively small sample size of 12. There were 18 middle school students with autism that were eligible to participate in the study; however, only 12 chose to participate. Generalizability is compromised given the limited number of participants.

Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice

A number of implications emerged in the discussion of the findings presented in this chapter that have a bearing on students with autism, bullying, and what can be done to reduce the prevalence and risk of it occurring, specifically within this vulnerable population. The findings provide implications for development and review of policies and professional practices. The

following discusses implications for local education agencies, administrators, teachers, and school support staff.

Implications for Policy

Bullying has long been viewed as a normal part of growing up for children and adolescents. For many years it was tolerated in schools and often referred to as “kids being kids” and little thought was given to the potential long term consequences of this behavior. Bullying is now recognized as a national major public health problem that has long term consequences including poor health, anxiety, depression, school phobia, poor school performance, and increased risk for suicide (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). While the potential exists for any student to be bullied, students with autism participating in a general education setting are three times more vulnerable to bullying by other students (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Federal and state governments have responded to this concern by adopting antibullying laws and policies, including those specific to schools. While laws and policies are made to strengthen the efforts to prevent and appropriately respond to bullying, the effectiveness of them can only be determined through research and evaluation. The following findings from this study are suggested for consideration as district policies addressing bullying are evaluated, particularly as to how they relate to students with autism, and how they may be amended to contribute to successful implementation:

- Review and, as necessary, update discipline and bullying policies annually to reflect changes in state or federal legislation;
- Review and select an evidence-based bullying prevention program which includes a component of social–emotional learning, a component to address parent involvement,

and prevention and intervention protocols which reflect the needs of students with autism, including assisting them to make reports about bullying;

- Require that the bullying prevention program be incorporated into the curriculum;
- Develop a plan of implementation and ongoing training for all staff for teaching the curriculum and for employing developmentally appropriate strategies for bullying prevention and intervention;
- Incorporate implementation of the bullying prevention program into administrator and staff evaluations;
- Collect and analyze district data related to bullying incidents annually to determine if the outcomes warrant changes in policy or practice;
- Develop a comprehensive, district wide model of student support services that ensures all students have knowledge of and access to at least one adult in the school setting that they can safely report incidents of bullying;
- Collect data to analyze the fidelity of the implementation of the bullying prevention program and adjust the training and implementation plan based on the outcomes;
- Provide training for all district and school administrators in developing and supporting positive school and district cultures;
- Develop a plan for reporting of bullying behavior as well as a procedural guideline for administrators to follow to investigate, report to parents and other appropriate individuals the outcomes of the investigation, consistent measures to address bullying behavior if identified, and provide support for the victim;

- Develop a system of publication and communication to inform all parents and community stakeholders of the district plan for addressing bullying and provide accessibility to the selected bullying prevention program; and
- In addition to improved communication of bullying policies provide district wide training for parents to assist and engage them in appropriate parental responses to bullying.

Implications for Practice

Policies adopted by school boards reflect the mission and vision of the district as defined by the board and they generally outline standards of conduct, conformity with legal responsibilities and guidelines, and consistent ways of handling situations. Practices are the way that business is generally conducted in a setting. Practices should be reflective of the district's mission, vision, and philosophies; however, they are often influenced by the culture and habits of the individual schools. It is critical that schools frequently reflect on practices and ensure that they have not shifted and become ineffective or unethical over time. While policies are critical to set standards, it is the practice which most impacts students on a daily basis. This study revealed a lapse in practice which negatively impacted students, teachers and parents when the district abandoned the antibullying program over a period of time.

School administrators must be cognizant of their school culture and climate and ensure that students with autism learn in a supportive, caring and safe environment without fear of being bullied. Student participants in this study expected that they would be picked on or bullied because of their differences, but they did not expect that they would not be supported by their parents and some teachers when they reported bullying. They need to know that if bullying occurs, how they should respond, and that they will be able to tell a trusted adult and know that

incidents will be dealt with promptly and effectively. Teachers need to feel confident in their ability to identify bullying, effectively intervene, and to expect consistent administrative investigation of reported bullying. Parents need to be informed of the antibullying program and be provided learning opportunities so that they will be able to better communicate with their student about bullying.

Persistent bullying can severely inhibit a child's ability to learn effectively. The negative effects of bullying can have an impact on a person for their entire life. Students with autism are at a higher risk of being bullied than their neuro-typical peers. Based on the findings of this study, I make the following recommendations for decreasing the bullying of middle school students with autism in the general education setting:

- Lessons from the selected antibullying curriculum should be incorporated into each teacher's daily lesson plan and should be looked for by administration during observations;
- A formal document for reporting bullying behavior should be readily available to all staff for quick and easy submission;
- Staff, students, and parents should be provided written documentation acknowledging the receipt of a bullying report and a time frame for expecting a response;
- All staff should participate in professional development to develop an understanding of shared responsibility for meeting the academic and social-emotional needs of students with autism and other disabilities;
- All staff should participate in ongoing professional development to increase their ability to identify and address bullying, including covert bullying;

- Increase adult supervision of students during less structured times of the school day, such as in the hallways during class changes, in the cafeteria, during recess, in the bathroom, entering and exiting the building in the morning and afternoon, and during assemblies;
- All staff should participate in staff development to increase awareness and understanding of students with ASD other disabilities affecting communication and social skills that increase their vulnerability to bullying;
- Communicate regularly with parents about the specific skills and strategies to avoid bullying, specific vocabulary being used in the curriculum, and encouraging students to report bullying in order to foster improved coordination and reinforcement of learning at home;
- Provide a social skills group to help students with autism and other social skill deficits to develop social competencies and gain skills necessary to identify a potential bullying situation and to respond appropriately;
- Incorporate social skill deficits into a student’s IEP or 504 plan as a goal with the objectives addressing their social and communication skills needs;
- Have students select a “safe person” and a “home base.” Reinforce strategies to teach the student how to address bullying in a safe way, including walking away after they have responded to a bullying situation and accessing their “safe person” or “home base”;

- Cultivate a school culture which conveys to the school community that an inclusive school-wide culture and the explicit teaching of civility and tolerance are essential to prevent bullying, particularly bullying of students with disabilities; and
- Teachers must build and model positive relationships with students with autism.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study contributes to the existing knowledge base about bullying of middle school students with autism in several ways. First, interviews conducted with the students elicited deep, rich insights into their experiences of bullying in school. This is one of just a few studies that includes personal accounts told by the students with autism of their experiences as victims of bullying. Their willingness to tell about their experiences of bullying offers a courageous example, one that invites others into an open dialogue about bullying as it relates to autism and one that raises awareness of the consequences of bullying that goes unaddressed. Despite the fact that children with autism have communication disorders that may make it more difficult to talk about their experiences, it is clear from the accounts provided by the participants in this study that they are able to articulate their encounters with bullying and how these experiences make them feel. Because only middle school students with autism were included in this study, future researchers should expand the scope of this study by conducting interviews with both elementary and high school students with autism who are participating in the general curriculum. Purposive sampling for such a study should be undertaken to ensure that gender representation among the participants is representative of that in the overall population of students with autism who participate in general education.

The parents and the teachers of students with autism participated in this study through a survey that also included open ended questions. This allowed for a comparison of the perceptions

of bullying between each group of participants. Future studies also should include interviews with students' parents and teachers; such dialogues would provide more detailed data regarding their observations and responses to bullying of the children they represent. In addition, more insight would be gained regarding the similarities in beliefs and perceptions of each of the related participant groups if the parent and teacher responses were linked to the response of the student they represent. In addition, this may lead to further research on the differences in experiences and support students with autism receive from their parents and teachers and how such interactions impact their responses to bullying. In addition, while multiple participants were utilized in this study to compare several different perspectives and beliefs about the bullying of students with autism, the inclusion of typically developing students in the general education setting in future studies would provide a more comprehensive view of bullying of students in the school setting.

This study was limited to a small student sample from a small, rural, low wealth district in North Carolina. Consideration should be given to expanding the research into multiple districts of varying size across the state of North Carolina. This would provide a larger sample size that is more statistically representative of youth with autism and would include geographic and demographic diversity. This would add to the generalizability of the findings and it would allow for gathering more descriptive accounts of bullying experiences of students with autism.

Participant surveys and interviews for this study were all completed prepandemic. Given the tremendous impact of COVID-19 on our students, which created a loss of learning, loss of socialization, and a loss of resources both from the school and the community for an extended period of time, consideration should be given to a postpandemic study. Given the risk factors associated with autism, which increase the vulnerability of these students to victimization, it

would be worthwhile to investigate if students with autism have experienced an increase in risk factors, such as communication difficulties, anxiety, physical behaviors related to self-soothing and if there is also an increase in victimization.

Lastly, this study found that some of the student participants who experienced victimization lacked parental support. This finding was different from previous research that found that parents played a pivotal role in reporting that their child was being bullied (Zablotsky et al., 2012). Research is warranted to shed additional light on the knowledge and skills parents need to acquire through training to support their child with autism and the role that parents can play in decreasing their child's victimization.

Chapter Summary

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior that has become increasingly pervasive in school settings. The consequences of bullying manifest as poor physical health, anxiety, depression, poor school performance, school avoidance, and increased risk for students. While no student is immune to bullying, research suggests that students with autism are particularly susceptible to bullying victimization and may be at least three times more likely to be bullied than their typically developing peers. The findings in my study reveal a major challenge and call for heightened concern for the well-being and safety of students with autism who participate in the general education setting. Such concern is particularly warranted in light of the difficulty with social skills, interactions, and communication that are often manifestations of autism.

This study examined the prevalence of bullying of middle school students with autism participating in the general education setting from the perspectives of the middle school student with autism, their parents, and their teachers. The extent to which the participants shared similar beliefs about what constituted bullying was also explored. Adolescent students with autism

shared their experiences with reporting bullying, the actions that were taken based on their bullying reports, and strategies they employed to address bullying behavior. Parents and teachers also shared their recommendations for reducing bullying incidents within the school.

The study revealed that the student and teacher participants shared a common understanding of the definition of bullying and agreed that bullying is prevalent in the school setting. Students recounted bullying experiences that substantiated the prevalence of bullying. Parents did not demonstrate an expansive understanding of what constitutes bullying and expressed an overall satisfaction with school safety and their children's learning environment. The study revealed that students are more likely to report bullying to a trusted adult staff member at school rather than to a parent. These students expressed strong confidence that staff members would address such situations. In addition, I found that the students developed coping strategies to address bullying behavior, though the strategies are frequently ineffective. The study determined that teachers and parents share similar ideas about how to reduce the number of bullying incidents in the school setting.

The study included an analysis of survey responses by 12 parents of student participants with autism and 26 teachers of student participants with autism. It also included interviews with the 12 student participants with autism. The collective results from the interviews and surveys of the study participants revealed that students with autism have experienced some form of bullying while attending school. In addition, the results demonstrated that student participants had a positive relationship with at least one staff member to whom they felt comfortable making reports of bullying. The respondents also provided recommendations to improve the communication regarding bullying prevention, strategies for addressing bullying, and reporting bullying behaviors to reduce the incidence of bullying of students with autism.

The study concluded with a set of recommendations for policy and practice. Critical components of the recommendations included district selection and implementation of a bullying prevention program that includes a component of social emotional learning; integration of the bullying prevention program into the curriculum; accountability for implementing the program; and incorporation of parent communication and education as part of the bullying prevention program. Recommendations also include suggestions for future research to address the limitations of this study.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey of Parents of Middle School Students With Autism

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project to explore the prevalence and perceptions of the bullying of middle school students with autism. This survey will provide information from your perspective as a parent of a middle school student with autism. The purpose of this study is to examine whether students with autism believe they are being bullied, how they identify that they are being bullied and how they report that information to authorities. The study will also examine the identification and reporting of bullying of autistic students from the perspectives of the students' teachers and parents. It is intended that this research will provide data to discern whether there is evidence that may indicate a need for the implementation of a program in Hall County Schools to assist adolescents with autism in reporting and handling bullying behavior.

Below you will find a brief questionnaire regarding your child and bullying experiences. You will not be asked to provide your child's name in this survey. All responses will be completely anonymous and treated as confidential.

Context of Bullying

1. Briefly provide a definition or description of what comes to mind when you hear the word "bullying".
2. How often do you think that bullying occurs in your child's school? (select one and respond with strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree)
__Daily __Weekly __Monthly __Yearly __Irregularly __Never

Face-to-Face Bullying and Cyber-Bullying Experiences

3. Peers bully my child in face-to-face situations (select one and respond with strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree):

Daily Weekly Monthly Yearly Irregularly Never

4. Peer bullying of my child includes (select all that apply and respond with strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree):

Physical Bullying (e.g. hitting, punching, pushing, kicking, taking of possessions, etc.)

Verbal Bullying (e.g. name calling, threatening, teasing, insulting, etc.)

Emotional Bullying (e.g. spreading of gossip, rumors or lies, encouraging my child to engage in dangerous or risky behaviors, etc.)

5. Peers cyberbully my child (select one and respond with strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree):

Daily Weekly Monthly Yearly Irregularly Never

6. Peers cyberbully my child using (select all that apply and respond with strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree):

text messages emails social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, SnapChat etc.)

web forums, chats, or blogs

If you would like to provide more detail about your child's experience, please answer the following questions.

1. Please share any details about your child's experiences with face-to-face bullying by peers:

2. Please share any details about your child's experiences with cyber-bullying by peers:

-
-
-
3. In general, when peers bullied my child face-to-face, my child reported this action to (select one person and respond to frequency of reporting and reporting with strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree):

Person	Frequency of Reporting	Way of Reporting
__Me or another parent	__very often __often __sometimes __rarely __never	__in person __via text, email, etc __over the phone __other (explain)_____ _____
__A friend	__very often __often __sometimes __rarely __never	__in person __via text, email, etc __over the phone __other (explain)_____ _____
__A sibling	__very often __often __sometimes __rarely	__in person __via text, email, etc __over the phone __other (explain)_____ _____

	__never	_____
__A teacher or other school official	__very often __often __sometimes __rarely __never	__in person __via text, email, etc __over the phone __other (explain)_____
__Other person (explain, but do not identify the person by name) _____ _____ _____	__very often __often __sometimes __rarely __never	__in person __via text, email, etc __over the phone __other (explain)_____

4. In general, when peers bullied my child face-to-face, my child reported this action to (select one person and respond to frequency of reporting and reporting with strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree):

Person	Frequency of Reporting	Way of Reporting
__Me or another parent	__very often __often __sometimes __rarely	__in person __via text, email, etc __over the phone __other (explain)_____

	<input type="checkbox"/> never _____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> A friend	<input type="checkbox"/> very often <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never	<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> via text, email, etc <input type="checkbox"/> over the phone <input type="checkbox"/> other (explain) _____ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> A sibling	<input type="checkbox"/> very often <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never	<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> via text, email, etc <input type="checkbox"/> over the phone <input type="checkbox"/> other (explain) _____ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> A teacher or other school official	<input type="checkbox"/> very often <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never	<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> via text, email, etc <input type="checkbox"/> over the phone <input type="checkbox"/> other (explain) _____ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Other person (explain, but do not identify the person by name) _____ _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> very often <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never	<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> via text, email, etc <input type="checkbox"/> over the phone <input type="checkbox"/> other (explain) _____ _____

5. To what extent has my child learned effective strategies to address face-to-face bullying by peers (respond to each statement by choosing one of the following: strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree):

has not learned any effective strategies

has learned 1 or 2 strategies, but they are not effective in helping my child cope or stop the bullying

has learned effective strategies to cope, but they are not effective in stopping the bullying

has learned effective strategies to cope and stop the bullying

my child does not experience face-to-face bullying at school

6. To what extent has my child learned effective strategies to address cyber-bullying by peers (respond to each statement by choosing one of the following: strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree):

has not learned any effective strategies

has learned 1 or 2 strategies, but they are not effective in helping my child cope or stop the bullying

has learned effective strategies to cope, but they are not effective in stopping the bullying

has learned effective strategies to cope and stop the bullying

my child does not experience cyber-bullying

If you would like to provide more detail about your child's experience, please answer the following questions:

I would like to share the following details about my child's coping strategies with face-to-face bullying and/or cyber-bullying by peers:

Appendix B: Survey of Teachers of Participant Middle School Students With Autism

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project to explore the prevalence and perceptions of the bullying of middle school students with autism. This survey will provide information from your perspective as a teacher of a middle school student with autism. The purpose of this study is to examine whether students with autism believe they are being bullied, how they identify that they are being bullied and how they report that information to authorities. The study will also examine the identification and reporting of bullying of autistic students from the perspectives of the students' teachers and parents. It is intended that this research will provide data to discern whether there is evidence that may indicate a need for the implementation of a program in Hall County Schools to assist adolescents with autism in reporting and handling bullying behavior.

Below you will find a brief questionnaire regarding your student and bullying experiences. All responses will be completely anonymous and treated as confidential.

Context of Bullying

1. Briefly provide a definition or description of what comes to mind when you hear the word bullying.
2. How often do you think that bullying occurs in your school? (select one and respond with strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree):
 Daily Weekly Monthly Yearly Irregularly Never

Face-to-Face Bullying and Cyber-Bullying Experiences

3. Peers bully my student in face-to-face situations (select one):

Daily Weekly Monthly Yearly Irregularly Never

4. Peer bullying of my student includes (respond with strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree):

Physical Bullying (e.g. hitting, punching, pushing, kicking, taking of possessions, etc.)

Verbal Bullying (e.g. name calling, threatening, teasing, insulting, etc.)

Emotional Bullying (e.g. spreading of gossip, rumors or lies, encouraging my child to engage in dangerous or risky behaviors, etc.)

5. Peers cyberbully my student (select one):

Daily Weekly Monthly Yearly Irregularly Never No Knowledge (if your answer is no knowledge of cyber-bullying skip numbers 7,9,11,13, &15

6. Peers cyberbully my student using (respond with strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree):

text messages emails social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) web forums, chats, or blogs

7. If you would like to share details about your student's experiences with face-to-face bullying by peers, please respond here

8. If you would like to share details about your student's experiences with cyber-bullying by peers, please respond here:

-
-
-
9. In general, when peers bullied my student face-to-face, my student reported this action to:
(select one person and respond to frequency of reporting and reporting with strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree):

Person	Frequency of Reporting	Way of Reporting
__Parent	<input type="checkbox"/> very often <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never	<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> via text, email, etc <input type="checkbox"/> over the phone <input type="checkbox"/> other (explain) _____ _____
__A friend	<input type="checkbox"/> very often <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never	<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> via text, email, etc <input type="checkbox"/> over the phone <input type="checkbox"/> other (explain) _____ _____
__A sibling	<input type="checkbox"/> very often <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never	<input type="checkbox"/> in person <input type="checkbox"/> via text, email, etc <input type="checkbox"/> over the phone <input type="checkbox"/> other (explain) _____ _____

___ Me, another teacher or other school official	___ very often ___ often ___ sometimes ___ rarely ___ never	___ in person ___ via text, email, etc ___ over the phone ___ other (explain) _____ _____
___ Other person (explain, but do not identify the person by name) _____ _____ _____	___ very often ___ often ___ sometimes ___ rarely ___ never	___ in person ___ via text, email, etc ___ over the phone ___ other (explain) _____ _____

10. In general, when peers cyber-bullied my student, my student reported this action to (select one person and respond to frequency of reporting and reporting with strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree):

Person	Frequency of Reporting	Way of Reporting
___ Parent	___ very often ___ often ___ sometimes ___ rarely ___ never	___ in person ___ via text, email, etc ___ over the phone ___ other (explain) _____ _____

<p>__A friend</p>	<p>__very often</p> <p>__often</p> <p>__sometimes</p> <p>__rarely</p> <p>__never</p>	<p>__in person</p> <p>__via text, email, etc</p> <p>__over the phone</p> <p>__other (explain)_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>__A sibling</p>	<p>__very often</p> <p>__often</p> <p>__sometimes</p> <p>__rarely</p> <p>__never</p>	<p>__in person</p> <p>__via text, email, etc</p> <p>__over the phone</p> <p>__other (explain)_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>__Me, another teacher, or other school official</p>	<p>__very often</p> <p>__often</p> <p>__sometimes</p> <p>__rarely</p> <p>__never</p>	<p>__in person</p> <p>__via text, email, etc</p> <p>__over the phone</p> <p>__other (explain)_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>__Other person (explain, but do not identify the person by name)</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>__very often</p> <p>__often</p> <p>__sometimes</p> <p>__rarely</p> <p>__never</p>	<p>__in person</p> <p>__via text, email, etc</p> <p>__over the phone</p> <p>__other (explain)_____</p> <p>_____</p>

11. To what extent has my student learned effective strategies to address face-to-face bullying by peers (respond to each with strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree)?

has not learned any effective strategies

has learned 1 or 2 strategies, but they are not effective in helping my student cope or stop the bullying

has learned effective strategies to cope, but they are not effective in stopping the bullying

has learned effective strategies to cope and stop the bullying

my student does not experience face-to-face bullying at school

12. To what extent has my student learned effective strategies to address cyber-bullying by peers (respond to each with strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree)?

has not learned any effective strategies

has learned 1 or 2 strategies, but they are not effective in helping my student cope or stop the bullying

has learned effective strategies to cope, but they are not effective in stopping the bullying

has learned effective strategies to cope and stop the bullying

my student does not experience cyber-bullying

13. If you would like to share details about your student's coping strategies with face-to-face and/or cyber-bullying by peers, please respond here:

Appendix C: Survey of Middle School Students With Autism About Their Face-to-Face and Cyberbullying Experiences

Thank you for your participation in this research study about your experiences with bullying in middle school. As we discussed in the informational meeting with your parents, this survey and interview will provide information from your perspective as a middle school student with autism about bullying experiences you may have had. The purpose of this study is to examine whether students with autism believe they are being bullied, how students with autism identify that they are being bullied and how students with autism report that information to authorities. The study will also examine the identification and reporting of bullying of autistic students from the perspectives of your teachers and parents. It is intended that this research will provide data to determine whether there is evidence that may indicate a need for the implementation of a program in Hall County Schools to assist students with autism in reporting and handling bullying behavior.

- There will be two parts to this process. First I will ask you to complete a short survey about any bullying experiences. Please answer this survey as well as you can. The survey does not have correct or incorrect answers. You may ask me any questions that you have while working on the survey.

Face-to-Face Bullying

Face-to-Face Bullying	Frequency of Bullying	Severity of Bullying
People attack me or steal my stuff. These attacks involve actions that could include hitting, kicking, punching, pinching, pushing, spitting, or other physical assaults.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Weekly	<input type="checkbox"/> Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly	<input type="checkbox"/> Sort of Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yearly	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very often, Irregularly	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Never	
I report this to others <input type="checkbox"/> very often, <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes, <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never.		
People call me hurtful names, insult me, or threaten me.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Weekly	<input type="checkbox"/> Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly	<input type="checkbox"/> Sort of Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yearly	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very often, Irregularly	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Never	
I report this to others <input type="checkbox"/> very often, <input type="checkbox"/> often <input type="checkbox"/> sometimes, <input type="checkbox"/> rarely <input type="checkbox"/> never.		
People tell lies about me, gossip about me, or spread rumors about me that are hurtful to me.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Weekly	<input type="checkbox"/> Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Monthly	<input type="checkbox"/> Sort of Severe
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yearly	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Severe

	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very often, Irregularly <input type="checkbox"/> Never	
I report this to others __never.	<input type="checkbox"/> very often, <input type="checkbox"/> often	<input type="checkbox"/> sometimes, <input type="checkbox"/> rarely
A group or gang of people dares me or coerces me to do things that I would not otherwise do.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly <input type="checkbox"/> Yearly <input type="checkbox"/> Not very often, Irregularly <input type="checkbox"/> Never	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Sort of Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not Severe
I report this to others __never.	<input type="checkbox"/> very often, <input type="checkbox"/> often	<input type="checkbox"/> sometimes, <input type="checkbox"/> rarely

Cyber-bullying

Cyber-bullying	Frequency of Bullying	Severity of Bullying
I receive or find online written messages about me. These messages threaten me, insult me or call me inappropriate names.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly <input type="checkbox"/> Yearly <input type="checkbox"/> Not very often, Irregularly <input type="checkbox"/> Never	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Sort of Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not Severe
I report this to others __never.	<input type="checkbox"/> very often, <input type="checkbox"/> often	<input type="checkbox"/> sometimes, <input type="checkbox"/> rarely

__never.		
I receive or find online media (images, videos, animations, sound clips, etc.) about me. These messages threaten me, insult me or call me inappropriate names.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly <input type="checkbox"/> Yearly <input type="checkbox"/> Not very often, Irregularly <input type="checkbox"/> Never	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Sort of Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not Severe
I report this to others __never.	<input type="checkbox"/> very often, <input type="checkbox"/> often	<input type="checkbox"/> sometimes, <input type="checkbox"/> rarely
Other persons pretend to be me or pretend to be someone else in order to do harm to me or to take advantage of me.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly <input type="checkbox"/> Yearly <input type="checkbox"/> Not very often, Irregularly <input type="checkbox"/> Never	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Sort of Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not Severe
I report this to others __never.	<input type="checkbox"/> very often, <input type="checkbox"/> often	<input type="checkbox"/> sometimes, <input type="checkbox"/> rarely
People make harmful polls about me and post them online, in texts, or in emails to embarrass me.	<input type="checkbox"/> Daily <input type="checkbox"/> Weekly <input type="checkbox"/> Monthly <input type="checkbox"/> Yearly <input type="checkbox"/> Not very often, Irregularly	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Sort of Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not Severe

	__Never	
I report this to others	__very often, __often	__sometimes, __rarely
__never.		

Appendix D: Semistructured Interview Protocol and Interview Questions for Middle School Students With Autism About Their Face-to-Face and Cyberbullying Experiences

- Next we will talk about your experiences with bullying. I will ask you some questions while we talk to make sure I completely understand what you say. Please answer the questions with as much detail as you can remember.

I will also be using this small recorder to audio record our conversation, so that the researcher can listen to it over and over to make sure that she correctly reflects what you said in her writing, that you talked with me about. Do you have any questions for me today before we get started? Remember, we talked about this in our first meeting with your parents, if you decide that you do not want to continue participating in the interview at any time, all you have to do is say stop. It is okay for you to stop if you feel uncomfortable. Do you have any questions about that? Will you ask me to stop if you become uncomfortable? Okay, let's get started.
- What does bullying mean to you? What do you think of when you hear the word bullying?
- What does the word cyber-bullying mean to you? What do you think of when you hear the work cyber-bullying?
- Have you learned ways that help you cope with bullying or help you stop bullying behavior? Tell be about them? How did you learn these strategies?
- Tell me about your experiences with other students in your school bullying you in face-to-face situations.

Where did it happen? Who was around?

Tell me how you felt during this incident.

What did you do? How did you handle the situation?

Did you report the bullying to anyone? If so, how did that person respond? If not, why did you not report the bullying to someone?

- Tell me about your experiences with other students that have cyber-bullied you during online activities. These online activities could have been texting, emailing, on social media, on blogs or website

What form of communication did the cyber-bullying involve?

Tell me how you felt during this incident.

What did you do? How did you handle the situation?

Did you report the bullying to anyone? If so, how did that person respond? If not, why did you not report the bullying to someone?