Teacher Perspectives on Bullying Towards Primary-Aged Students with Disabilities

By

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Abstract

Bullying is an international phenomenon that impacts up to 70% of students. Research has consistently demonstrated that students with special educational needs are overrepresented as victims of bullying. Despite this high prevalence, limited research has explored teachers’ perspectives on this topic and the challenges they face in preventing bullying in the classroom. This study used a qualitative approach consisting of semi-structured interviews with two educators who are committed to anti-bullying education and inclusion. The purpose of the study included an exploration of strategies and practices used by educators to prevent and respond to bullying behaviour towards students with disabilities. This study looked at various disabilities, such as Autism, ADHD, physical disabilities, and Learning Disabilities. The study found that participating teachers primarily employ preventative approaches to bullying behaviour by creating an inclusive classroom environment, integrating anti-bullying education throughout the curriculum, and being involved in school and classroom-wide anti-bullying initiatives. Moreover, involvement in professional development specific to bullying was identified as a necessary component of reducing bullying behaviour in schools. Participants also identified many challenges they experienced, including lack of teaching staff to adequately support the integration of students with disabilities in a mainstream classroom.

Key Words: bullying, inclusion, anti-bullying education, special education, disabilities, preventative approach
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

The issue of school bullies and their victims has been researched extensively in recent years and it has been found that bullying impacts as many as 70% of students (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Bullying is an international phenomenon that has been documented in Canada, the United States, England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and Japan (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). It is known that victims of bullying endure many negative short and long-term effects including, though not limited to, depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, and lower academic achievement (Little, 2002). Students who experience bullying and cyberbullying are also at risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010). Although bullying has received much attention in the field of education, it is a complex problem with many underlying layers that researchers and educators continue to try to uncover (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). However, why it remains a problem in today’s society is a topic of continued debate among both educators and researchers (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012).

Despite the great interest in bullying within the scientific and professional communities, there is still no universally accepted definition of bullying (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). The most commonly cited definition is that of Dr. Dan Olweus, a pioneer in bullying research who conducted most of the initial research and continues to contribute to the field of bullying research today (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). Olweus defines bullying as negative actions that are carried out repeatedly over time and are characterized by an imbalance in strength (Olweus, 1993). The imbalance of strength, or power, is a key characteristic of bullying behaviour (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). This imbalance allows for a clear distinction between bullies
and victims, based on the fact that one side is usually physically or psychologically stronger than the other(s) (Ibid).

Moreover, Glumbic and Zunic-Pavlovic (2010) distinguish between three types of bullying behaviour: physical bullying, verbal bullying, and relational bullying. Physical bullying refers to hitting, kicking, hair pulling, pushing, slapping, etc. (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). Verbal bullying, the most common form of bullying, involves actions such as threatening, name calling, insulting, and teasing (Ibid). Lastly, relational bullying focuses on excluding and isolating others, which is achieved by ignoring, spreading rumors and influencing others not to associate with a particular individual (Ibid).

In addition to the abovementioned types of bullying, cyberbullying has received much attention in recent years due to an increase in the use of modern technological devices, specifically mobile phones and the internet (Slonje & Smith, 2008). The term “cyberbullying” refers to bullying through the use of electronic communication tools (Li, 2007). It can take place via several forms of media, including text messages, email messages, phone calls, and pictures/video clips (Slonje & Smith, 2008). While all four types of cyberbullying are common, Slonje and Smith (2008) found email to be the most common form of victimization using modern technology among adolescents.

In contrast to traditional forms of bullying behaviour, the majority of cyberbullying takes place outside of the school environment (Ibid). Another factor that separates cyberbullying from other forms of bullying is the limited gender differences related to victim and bully behaviours (Ibid). While it is more common for boys to engage in bullying behaviour, Slonje and Smith (2008) found that both boys and girls were equally likely to take part in cyberbullying. Similarly,
the literature on cyberbullying does not show a significant difference in victimization between genders (Ibid).

Additionally, children with disabilities are commonly targeted as victims of bullying. In particular, children with Asperger’s Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorders have been described as the “perfect victims” of bullying because of these students’ profound lack of social skills (Little, 2002). Having few friends and being socially excluded, issues described by Little (2002) as commonly faced by students with disabilities, can increase a child’s risk for being a victim of bullying. Additionally, Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) explain the vicious cycle of bullying; victims tend to feel badly about themselves, predisposing them to being bullied. This, in turn, makes them feel worse about themselves and thus vulnerable to even more victimization (Ibid).

1.1 Research Problem

While bullying has been researched extensively in recent years, there has been limited research that explores bullying among students with disabilities (Mishna, 2003). The lack of research on bullying within this population is surprising given that 67% of students with special educational needs are victims of bullying, compared to 25% of students who do not have special educational needs (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Today, the majority of students with disabilities are educated in integrated settings alongside peers without disabilities, which may place them at an increased risk of victimization (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012).

Students with disabilities, both visible and non-visible disabilities, experience bullying more frequently than their peers without disabilities (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). Disabilities that are overt and observable, such as Muscular Dystrophy and Spina Bifida, can be categorized as “visible” disabilities (Ibid). Children who are regarded as being physically different from their
peers are likely to be targets of bullying behaviour (Sweeting & West, 2001). In contrast, disabilities that are less physically obvious and require more time to recognize are referred to by Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) as “non-visible” disabilities. The latter category of disabilities includes learning disabilities (LD) and ADHD, among others (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). Limited research has explored the relationship between LD’s and bullying (Mishna, 2003). However, the research consistently shows that children and youth with LD’s are more likely to be rejected, not accepted, and neglected by their peers (Ibid). Besides the vulnerability of being victims of bullying, Flynt and Morton (2004) highlight the prevalence of bullies among students with LD’s.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The goal of my research was to learn how primary teachers identify and respond to bullying behaviour towards students with disabilities. The primary goal included getting a better understanding of what bullying towards students with disabilities looks like, and what teachers do to prevent and respond to this type of behaviour. This includes gaining knowledge of any teaching strategies used to promote inclusion and ultimately prevent the occurrence of bullying towards students with disabilities.

1.3 Research Questions

The main research question that guided my study was: what indicators of bullying behaviour do a small sample of primary school teachers see exhibited towards students with disabilities and how do they instructionally respond to these indicators through their teaching practice?

The following were my subsidiary questions:
TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON BULLYING AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

1) What does bullying behavior towards students with disabilities typically look like, based on these teachers’ experiences and perspectives?

2) What do these teachers look for as indicators of victimization in their students with disabilities? How do they perceive these as similar and/or different from bullying behavior of students without disabilities?

3) What instructional strategies and approaches do teachers use to prevent bullying behavior? How do students respond to this instruction?

4) What instructional strategies do teachers use to respond to bullying behavior? What outcomes do teachers observe from students?

In this research, I addressed efforts to prevent bullying behavior and responses to bullying of students with a broad range of disabilities (both invisible and visible disabilities), including developmental disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorders, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities and physical disabilities.

1.4 Background of the Researcher/Reflexive Positioning Statement

As a future primary/junior teacher, it is inevitable that I will encounter situations in which one or more of my students are bullying others and/or are being bullied by their peers. It is my responsibility as a teacher to be aware of what bullying looks like and to intervene upon suspicion that a student is a victim or perpetrator of bullying. Moreover, it is likely that I will have at least one student in my classroom who has a disability, whether it be a learning disability, autism spectrum disorder, developmental disability, physical disability, or multiple disabilities. These students tend to face many challenges when integrated into a classroom setting, including a lack of peer friendships, academic difficulties, poor social skills, and being
teased by their peers (Little, 2002). Through creating an inclusive classroom based on mutual respect and diversity in which differences are accepted and celebrated, I will be taking an active approach towards eliminating situations that could lead to bullying. I agree with Hehir (2007) that inclusion should be a priority in education, as it plays a central role in the integration of individuals with disabilities into all aspects of society. Furthermore, inclusion provides students with the education needed to compete for jobs alongside individuals without disabilities, demonstrating to individuals in society that disability is a natural aspect of life (Hehir, 2007).

As a researcher and teacher candidate it is important that I acknowledge and explicitly state my reflexive positioning to my research topic. Throughout the majority of my primary school experience, in particular kindergarten to grade three, I was a bully. I have limited memories of this experience, but I do recall teasing and saying mean and hurtful things to my peers. Most of the targets of my bullying were girls, but sometimes boys as well. I mostly engaged in covert and subtle bullying behaviour, such as excluding others, and making fun of/being mean to my peers.

In addition to engaging in bullying behaviour, I was diagnosed with ADHD in grade 2. However, it is obvious that I endured many negative consequences of my ADHD long before the diagnosis. I did not have many close friends in primary school, and my ADHD prevented me from engaging in academics and learning the material as easily as my peers. Both of these factors likely led to my bullying behaviour, but were also a consequence of the behaviour. I was caught in a cycle of bullying: I didn’t have many friends because my behaviour was very unpredictable and I was known to be mean to my so-called “friends”, and therefore they did not want to be friends with me. Since I did not have many friends to talk to or play with, I looked for attention in other ways, and therefore engaged in bullying behaviour.
Looking back on my experiences as a bully in primary school and my struggle with self-esteem throughout high school, I have a lot of empathy and compassion towards students who are bullied. Even though I was the one doing the bullying, I realize now that I was using it as a defense mechanism because of my own insecurities and being made fun of for having ADHD. In my experience as a bully who has a disability, I presume that it is most likely the following factors that contributed to my engagement in bullying: low self-esteem, impulsivity, lack of self-regulation, lack of positive relationships with teachers and peers, and difficulty staying on task and focussing my attention in class, leading to disruptive behaviours.

Despite my personal connection to my research topic, having experience with bullying and being diagnosed with a disability, I recognize that this is merely one experience of bullying. I did not approach my research through a lens in which I believed that I knew everything there is to know about the topic. I am practicing reflexivity through acknowledging my own personal experience and what led me to conduct this research. I remained open-minded throughout the research process and approached the topic through many different lenses, without solely regarding the lens that reflects my own personal history with bullying.

1.5 Preview of the Whole

The first chapter of my MTRP includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions guiding my study, and a discussion of how I came to be involved in this topic through a reflexive positioning statement. Moreover, Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature in the areas of bullying (cyberbullying, homophobic bullying, characteristics of victims, bullying among students with disabilities), inclusive vs. segregated education, disability education and theories, and anti-bullying programs and teaching strategies. Chapter 3 provides the methodology
and procedures used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. In Chapter 4 I report the research findings and discuss their significance in light of the literature. Lastly, in Chapter 5 I make conclusions and recommendations for teaching practice, and I suggest areas for further reading and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas of bullying, including definitions and different types of bullying behaviour, the prevalence in the general population, and potential negative outcomes of bullying. Furthermore, I discuss the characteristics of individuals who are victims of bullying, common characteristics of students with disabilities, the different types of settings in which these students are educated, followed by a review of the research that has been done regarding bullying and students with disabilities. Thirdly, I provide an overview of the literature related to disability education and theories, and how to successfully integrate these topics into the classroom. I end the chapter with a discussion of anti-bullying programs and teaching strategies that have and have not worked in preventing and/or reducing bullying behaviour.

2.1 Bullying

Definition

The issue of bullying and the negative long-term impacts on victims has been researched extensively in recent years (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). According to Bell Carter and Spencer (2006), it is an international phenomenon that is documented in the literature in North America, England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and Japan. However, there is still no universally accepted definition of bullying (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). The definition most commonly cited is that of Dr. Dan Olweus; a pioneer and key contributor in the field of bullying research (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). Olweus defines bullying as the repeated exposure over time to negative actions carried out by one or more students (Olweus, 1993).
Additionally, for a behaviour to be considered “bullying” it must include three essential elements: repetition, harm, and unequal power (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). Glumbic and Zunic-Pavlovic (2010) consider the unequal distribution of power to be the key feature of bullying behaviour. This unequal distribution is based on the fact that the bully is physically or psychologically stronger than the victim, and thus implies that there is a clear distinction between victims and bullies (Ibid).

### 2.2 Types of Bullying

Bullying can be divided into three categories: physical, verbal, and relational bullying (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010). Physical bullying includes actions such as hitting, kicking, hair-pulling, and slapping (Ibid). Whereas verbal bullying refers to threatening, name calling, insulting, and teasing (Ibid). The third type of bullying discussed by Glumbic and Zunic-Pavlovic (2010) is relational bullying; ignoring, spreading rumors, and convincing others not to associate themselves with a particular individual. The most common form of bullying consistently reported by researchers is name-calling and teasing, followed by hitting or kicking and isolating others (Sweeting & West, 2001). Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) note that name-calling can be one of the most stressful teasing behaviors that children must cope with, and its effects on the child are often underestimated by adults.

#### 2.2.1 Cyberbullying

The increase in access to new technology in school environments has shown many positive outcomes, such as providing students with opportunities for social interaction and enhancing collaborative learning experiences (Li, 2007). However, the recent shift towards a modern technological world of communication has given rise to a new form of bullying termed “cyberbullying” (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Tokunaga (2010) asserts that cyberbullying
victimization has received a lot of attention in the media in recent years. The prevalence of cyberbullying is not surprising, given the fact that 97% of youth in the U.S. have access to the internet in some way, whether it be at school and/or in their home (Tokunaga, 2010).

Cyberbullying can be defined as the use of electronic communication devices to bully others (Li, 2007). Cyberbullying is a term that encompasses many different ways of communicating information, including text messages, picture/video clips on mobile phones, email messages, chat rooms, instant messages, and websites (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2006). Slonje and Smith (2008) found that the majority of cyberbullying behaviour took place through email messages. Furthermore, Li (2007) proposes a holistic approach to cyberbullying-related interventions, given the close relationships between bullies, cyber-bullies, and their victims.

2.2.2 Homophobic Bullying

An additional form of bullying that has received attention through increased prevention and awareness efforts in schools is bullying related to one’s sexual orientation, or homophobic bullying (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). While schools are meant to be a positive, welcoming, and safe environment for students to learn and develop friendships, many lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students do not feel this way about school (Birkett et al., 2009). LGB youth frequently experience homophobic harassment, or bullying, by their peers and school staff (Ibid). It was found that many LGB students experience teasing and peer victimization compared to their heterosexual peers (Ibid). Unfortunately, many school administrators and teachers are unsupportive and unaware of the needs of their LGB students (Lipkin, 2002).

Furthermore, Birkett et al. (2009) emphasize the significant influence of the school environment for all students, particularly those who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or
bisexual. A positive school climate can help to prevent negative outcomes and homophobic bullying among LGB students (Birkett et al., 2009). A positive school climate is one where students feel like they are important, where the staff and their peers care about them, and where they feel that their personal and academic development and achievement are priorities (Ibid).

2.3 Prevalence

The recent implementation of anti-bullying initiatives within schools is understandable and necessary, given the significant amount of students who are affected by it. According to Beaty and Alexeyev (2008), bullying impacts as many as 70% of students. The prevalence of bullying is the highest among younger students in most samples, and tends to decline with age (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Moreover, Cappadocia, Weiss, and Pepler (2012) note that verbal and relational bullying are more common among older children, while physical forms of bullying seem to decrease with age.

Though the majority of bullying research has focussed on the negative effects of bullying on the victims, it can cause lifelong damage to both victims and bullies (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Glumbic and Zunic-Pavlovic (2010) describe bullies as being aggressive, strong, tough, confident, and impulsive. Despite the limited research on bullies and their characteristics, it has been proposed that bullies are from families with relationship and marital difficulties, and financial and social problems (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Lastly, the reason given most often by bullies for engaging in this behaviour is the desire to feel powerful, followed by a need for attention (Ibid).

2.4 Negative Outcomes

In addition to the emotional and family difficulties that are commonly experienced by bullies, their bullying behaviour can have many serious and long-term negative impacts on the
victims. Little (2002) identifies the short and long-term negative health outcomes associated with peer victimization: depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, and lower academic achievement than students who are not victims of bullying. Also, students who are bullied are 3-4 times more likely to experience health problems such as headaches, gastric-related issues, and insomnia (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) add difficulties concentrating and avoidant behaviour to the list of potential negative effects of bullying.

Victims of bullying are also more likely to experience social isolation, lower participation in activities at school, and negative self-perceptions (Sentenac, Gavin, Arnaud, Molcho, Godeau, & Gabhainn, 2011). In severe cases, children who experience bullying have ran away from home, contracted chronic illnesses, and even committed suicide (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). A review of cross-sectional research findings conducted by Klomek et al. (2010) revealed that victims of bullying exhibit significantly higher levels of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than those not involved in bullying. This holds true for bullying and victimization that take place both inside and outside of the school environment (Klomek et al., 2010). Although the majority of research on bullying and suicide has focussed on high school students, this association has also been found in elementary school students (Klomek et al., 2010). The need for teachers to take action towards eliminating bullying among school-age children is highlighted through the devastating impacts that bullying can have on victims.

2.5 Victims of Bullying

Characteristics

While limited research has focused on bullies, the literature surrounding victims of bullying is extensive. Even though boys are more likely to be bullies, both boys and girls are equally likely to be victims of bullying (Sweeting & West, 2001). However, the differences lie in
the type of bullying behaviour that is enacted upon them (Sweeting & West, 2001). Whitney and Smith (1993) found that bullies were more likely to engage in physical bullying towards boy victims, specifically hitting. Whereas girls were more likely to be taunted and isolated, which can be classified as verbal and relational bullying, respectively (Whitney & Smith, 1993). Moreover, Glumbic and Zunic-Pavlovic (2010) describe victims as lonely, unpopular among their peers, rejected, anxious, having low self-esteem, and not likely to retaliate. Victims of bullying tend to be students who don’t “fit-in” with their peers, are seen by their peers as physically weak, cry often/are sensitive, are overweight, have a short temper, are quiet, do not assert themselves, receive good grades in school, and are withdrawn (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008).

Additionally, Sweeting and West (2001) suggest that bullies target individuals who are considered to be different from the majority of students in the school environment with regards to ethnic origins, physical appearances, or special educational needs. These students, in addition to those with the above-mentioned characteristics, are vulnerable to being victims of bullying because bullies know that they will not fight back (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). This leads to what Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) call a vicious cycle; students who have low self-esteem and feel badly about themselves tend to be bullied, which makes them feel worse about themselves, thus predisposing them to even more bullying.

2.6 Students with Disabilities

2.6.1 Characteristics

While there are many different types of disabilities, the needs and abilities of students with disabilities vary based on their disability. Moreover, each student with a disability has their own individual strengths and challenges. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, a disability that ranges from students who are nonverbal to those who have average to above-average
intellectual abilities, experience socio-communicative and behavioural difficulties (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Communication and social skills impairments, which are common among these students, can contribute to problems in forming and maintaining friendships with peers (Cappadocia et al., 2012).

Also, children with Autism often experience mental health issues, such as anxiety (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Similarly, children with Asperger’s Syndrome, an Autism Spectrum Disorder that is considered “higher-functioning”, have difficulties interpreting the nonverbal behaviours of others (Little, 2002). This includes behaviours such as tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, jokes, and body language (Little, 2002). Given how essential nonverbal behaviours are in both communicating to others and interpreting what others have said, it is easy to see how individuals with Asperger’s can encounter difficulties socializing with their peers and maintaining friendships.

Likewise, in studying students with physical disabilities and students whose disabilities are less obvious through their appearance, Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) found that both groups tended to be less popular, have fewer friends, and experience loneliness. In addition, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), emotional disorders, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities commonly display a lack of social awareness (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). These students often perform at a lower academic level than their peers without disabilities (Ibid).

Research conducted by Mishna (2003) shows that students with learning disabilities (LD) experience psychosocial difficulties, poor academic performance, and social skills deficits. The academic problems experienced by these students can lead to poor self-esteem and frustration, which may create barriers to developing social skills (Mishna, 2003). Additionally, children with
LD’s are likely to be rejected, not accepted, and neglected by their peers (Ibid). It is common for these students to appear to lack competence in effective communication skills, and have a reduced ability to show empathetic behaviour, thus contributing to the likelihood of being rejected by peers (Ibid). Sweeting and West (2001) add that individuals with language, hearing, and visual impairments are likely to experience loneliness, unpopularity, and victimization.

2.6.2 Inclusive vs. Segregated Settings

In addition to full inclusion into mainstream schools, students with disabilities are educated in a range of settings, including resource classrooms and full-time special education classrooms (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). The effectiveness of separate schools and classrooms for students with disabilities is unclear and continues to be challenged (Ibid). The vast majority of students with disabilities are taught alongside their peers without disabilities in integrated settings (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Even though students with disabilities are increasingly being integrated into general education classrooms, teachers have focussed primarily on their academic achievement (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). With a lack of emphasis placed on social integration, these educators are unknowingly placing their students in a vulnerable position to experience rejection and victimization from their peers. Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) highlight the significance of this issue by adding that students with disabilities in inclusive settings often feel ostracized.

While Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) emphasize the challenges faced by students with disabilities in inclusive settings, Hehir (2007) believes that integration into the general education environment should be a priority. According to Hehir (2007), inclusion plays a central role in the integration of individuals with disabilities into all aspects of society. Inclusive settings give students the education they need to obtain jobs in today’s society and demonstrates to individuals
without disabilities that disability is a natural aspect of life (Ibid). As advocates of inclusive education, Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) view the practice of separating children with disabilities and children without disabilities as highly problematic. Lastly, the purpose of special education, as expressed by Hehir (2007), is to minimize the impact of disability and maximize the opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in schooling and the community, which is difficult to achieve in a segregated school environment.

### 2.6.3 Bullying and Students with Disabilities

Whereas bullying is an international phenomenon that affects students without disabilities, evidence suggests that children with disabilities may experience bullying more frequently than their peers (Bourke & Burgman, 2010). Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) found that students with special educational needs are overrepresented as victims of bullying. Specifically, 67% of these students have been victimized, compared to 25% of their peers without disabilities (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Likewise, a review of bullying literature conducted by Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) concluded that students with both visible and non-visible disabilities experience bullying more often than their general education peers. However, children with disabilities affecting their appearance experience bullying twice as much as children whose disabilities are not as physically obvious (Sweeting & West, 2001).

Children with disabilities report peer relationships and exclusion from school life as ongoing problems (Little, 2002). These attributes can consequently increase the likelihood that students with disabilities will be bullied (Ibid). Individuals with disabilities, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and Nonverbal Learning Disabilities (NLD), have been described as the “perfect victims” of bullying due to the severity of their communication and social skills deficits (Ibid). These students are vulnerable to being bullied because bullies know that they are
not likely to retaliate (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). As many as 75% of students with ASD’s and NLD’s experience some form of bullying, including emotional bullying, being excluded by their peers, and physical assault (Little, 2002). Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders who frequently experience victimization tend to have higher levels of anxiety, hyperactivity, self-injurious and repetitive behaviours, and over-sensitivity (Cappadocia et al., 2012).

Additionally, Glumbic and Zunic-Pavlovic (2010) discuss possible reasons for the greater prevalence of victimization of students with disabilities, including a lack of the following personal qualities valued by peers: intelligence, physical appearance, physical abilities, and social skills. Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) added four factors that predicted victimization among students with physical disabilities: receiving extra help in school, playing by themselves, having fewer than two quality friendships, and being male. Furthermore, bullying creates additional challenges for student with disabilities, besides the academic difficulties that are associated with many disabilities (Ibid).

Students with LD’s experience academic difficulties and poor academic performance, which can increase the likelihood of being victimized by peers (Mishna, 2003). Accordingly, Sweeting and West (2001) report that children with learning difficulties in mainstream schools get teased more frequently and have fewer friends than their peers. In addition, the hyperactivity and distractibility common among this population are primary factors that contribute to the poor adjustment of students with LD’s (Mishna, 2003).

Flynt and Morton (2004) assert that children with learning disabilities who have poor social skills and are ostracized by their peers are more likely to be victims of bullying. The characteristics, behaviors, and accompanying difficulties of many children with LD’s and other
disabilities are similar to those used to describe victims of bullying (Mishna, 2003). It is thus not surprising to see the high prevalence of bullying among individuals with disabilities.

Despite the high prevalence of bullying that targets this population, there is limited knowledge regarding the relationship between bullying and students with disabilities (Flynt & Morton, 2004). The majority of research on disabilities and bullying has focussed on the risk of being bullied, with limited knowledge of the actual experiences of students with disabilities who are bullied (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Moreover, Mishna (2003) underlines the need for more research to understand the academic and psychological impact of bullying on students with disabilities.

2.7 Disability Education and Theories

2.7.1 Social Exclusion

Children with disabilities experience their disability in terms of impairment, being different, physical barriers, and people’s negative behaviours towards them (Connors & Stalker, 2007). Many children with disabilities encounter hurtful and unfriendly reactions from others (Ibid). Students with disabilities are often excluded from friendship groups of children without disabilities (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010). Although students with disabilities experience the negative effects of bullying, there are several protective factors that reduce the likelihood of these students being victimized.

Little (2002) observed that having friends may act as a buffer against peer bullying and physical victimization. Likewise, social skills, number of friends, and quality of friendships have been described as moderators of peer victimization (Sentenac et al., 2011). Bourke and Burgman (2010) discovered that one of the main coping strategies used by students with disabilities who
experience bullying was turning to friends for support. Likewise, peer friendships and interactions are essential factors needed for social skill development during childhood (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). The importance of social inclusion within this population is highlighted by the negative experiences many children with disabilities face through being socially excluded. Social exclusion is a socially constructed process, has no single factor that can remove it, and is in constant need of conceptual analysis (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010).

As we are all part of various social and environmental contexts, multiple factors contribute to our social behavioral patterns (Mishna, 2003). These factors include individual characteristics, social interactions, and ecological and cultural surroundings (Ibid). Sweeting and West (2001) propose that victimization is a process that begins with labelling based on factors perceived by others as being different from what society considers to be the norm.

The social exclusion experienced by students with disabilities reflects society’s views of disability and the influence it can have on students within the school environment (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Negative cultural attitudes towards disability can undermine opportunities for all students to participate fully in school and society (Hehir, 2007). Society's pervasive negative attitude about disability often makes the world unwelcoming and inaccessible for people with disabilities (Ibid). Moreover, a lack of social acceptance and inclusion of students with disabilities is often an outcome of their peers not being educated on diversity and accepting others for who they are (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012).

The majority of social exclusion and bullying experienced by students with disabilities results from a lack of understanding of their condition (Ibid). A systemic–ecological framework can enable educators and the general population to better understand and address bullying, particularly involving the victimization of students with disabilities (Mishna, 2003). Similarly,
the approach to special education described by Hehir (2007) requires giving students the resources, skills, and opportunities needed to live a meaningful and positive life with their disability.

Constraints in the socio-contextual environment of students with disabilities, such as teacher’s attitudes and the availability of educational resources, can lead to social exclusion (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Students with disabilities experience social exclusion from both teachers and students (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Hehir (2007) emphasizes the importance of involving students with disabilities in education-related decisions and encouraging them to develop and use skills that are most effective and appropriate to meet their needs. There is a need for all schools to promote learning that addresses and embraces difference, with a focus on inclusion (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010).

Children develop attitudes about peers with disabilities based on the degree of their knowledge about the disability and their observations of adults’ attitudes towards disabilities and inclusion (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Many cultures throughout the world have a negative perception of individuals with disabilities (Bourke & Burgman, 2010). Lindsay and McPherson (2012) encourage clinicians to teach children how to explain their disability and individual needs to their teachers and peers, thus facilitating inclusion and demystifying any negative perceptions of individuals with disabilities.

2.7.2 Critical Disability Studies

Although there is continued debate surrounding the education of students with disabilities in an inclusive setting and how to successfully create an inclusive school environment, critical disability studies support the notion of inclusion (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010). Booth
(2002) defines inclusive education as the increasing participation of learners in the culture, curricula and communities of their neighbourhood centres of learning. As part of inclusive education, Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) stress the need for teachers to engage in creative pedagogies, as opposed to normative teaching, which emphasises competition and narrow philosophies of achievement and success.

Additionally, Salmon (2010) differentiates between self-exclusion and the promotion of disability cultures. Self-exclusion involves the creation of a distinct group whose members have a specific disability, while the promotion of disability cultures is a collaborative effort through which individuals with common experiences come together to form alliances and friendships (Salmon, 2010). The former group excludes others who do not have a particular disability, whereas the latter unites individuals of all walks of life with similar experiences, regardless of their impairment.

2.8 Anti-bullying Programs

Despite the high prevalence of bullying among students with disabilities and the limited research exploring the relationship between them, researchers and educators have identified factors that contribute to the prevention and reduction of bullying. Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) indicate that school interventions can dramatically reduce the prevalence of bullying. I will discuss concepts that are commonly mentioned as being essential to anti-bullying programs in the paragraphs to follow, including: proactive interventions, a whole-school/community approach, and talking openly about accepting individual differences and abilities.

Traditional anti-bullying programs, such as the Olweus Bully Prevention Program (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999), employed a more reactive approach to bullying. The
Olweus Bully Prevention Program was implemented in Norway in response to a severe bullying incident that received international attention (Olweus et al., 1999). This program was designed to help identify bullies in schools and to help bullies and their victims cope with the negative outcomes of bullying (Ibid). Anti-bullying interventions that have shown the most success in recent years have taken a more proactive approach to bullying, focusing on the cognitive and emotional dimensions of bullying, moral sensitivity, empathy, and conflict-resolution pedagogy (Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburn Jr., & Sanchez, 2007).

A proactive approach to anti-bullying efforts includes explicit classroom discussions about what bullying looks like, what to do if one is a victim of bullying, how to appropriately react as a bystander of bullying, and alternative ways that bullies can deal with their emotions (Ibid). Little (2002) encourages teachers and school administrators to implement proactive interventions to facilitate peer acceptance and prevent victimization. Using this approach, teachers should teach training in social skills to help bullies, victims, and bystanders learn how to overcome bullying (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). Moreover, Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) assert that dealing effectively with bullying can improve school climate, increase student academic achievement, and reduce incidences of violent behaviour in schools.

One of the factors most frequently cited in bullying research as an essential component of anti-bullying programs, which helps to create a positive school climate and reduce bullying incidences, is the inclusion of a whole-school approach. A hallmark of anti-bullying interventions is the involvement of all elements of a school in order to create a safe environment (Mishna, 2003). Likewise, Raskauskas and Modell (2011) believe that a “whole-school” approach is the key to success for any anti-bullying program. This approach includes creating a supportive school environment where students feel safe to report any bullying incidences and are
certain that staff care about their wellbeing and will respond to bullying appropriately (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011). Additionally, Lindsay and McPherson (2012) add that it is the responsibility of all educators to recognize when a student is being excluded and actively encourage others to include them.

The whole-school approach discussed by Raskauskas and Modell (2011) involves educating and involving everyone in the school community about bullying and their roles in preventing and eliminating bullying behaviour. The three areas commonly addressed in a whole-school approach are awareness building, efficacy building, and skill building (Ibid). Moreover, all adults included in the school community can support children to acquire and develop important social skills such as: emotional and behavioural regulation strategies and coping skills, ignoring peer provocation, interacting with supportive peers, problem solving, and communicating assertively (Cappadocia et al., 2012).

In addition to a proactive whole-school approach to anti-bullying programs, educators are encouraged to actively discuss exceptionalities and disabilities with their students, focussing on accepting individual differences and abilities (Ibid). Bourke and Burgman (2010) recommend that schools focus on these children’s abilities and their contribution to school life, rather than their impairments and limitations. Moreover, poor social acceptance and unsuccessful inclusion of children with disabilities are often the result of their peers not being taught effectively to value and appreciate diversity (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Factors related to disability knowledge are significantly associated with better attitudes towards students with disabilities (Sentenac et al., 2011).

In order to prevent and reduce bullying among students with disabilities, Sentenac et al. (2011) suggest the inclusion of a disability component in anti-bullying programs and policies,
and to take into account students’ environment. Equally, Mishna (2003) recommends adding disability awareness to the curriculum to promote acceptance and to reinforce the effects of anti-bullying programs for children and adolescents with disabilities. Children with disabilities are valuable contributors to school programs that teach children to notice bullying and how to assist children who may be at risk (Bourke & Burgman, 2010). Lastly, Bourke and Burgman (2010) emphasize the need to include students with disabilities in policy implementation and discuss punishments they perceive to be fair for students who go against these rules, which are important ways to empower children who are or have been bullied.

2.9 Conclusion

In reviewing the literature on bullying and the victimization of students with disabilities, I have gained awareness of how prevalent it is within this population. However, there remains gaps in the literature and limited research has been conducted on effective ways for teachers to identify and respond to bullying behaviour involving students with disabilities. Also, I have explored the social exclusion that many individuals experience through the perspective of critical disability studies. Lastly, I have provided an overview of the literature on anti-bullying programs that have shown success in preventing and reducing bullying, including the use of a proactive, whole-school approach where students are educated about disability awareness and encouraged to accept others, regardless of their differences. Chapter 3 will explore the methodology and data collection procedures that will be followed for the next stages of the research process.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the research methodology process. I begin the chapter by reviewing the general research approach, procedures, and instruments of data collection. I elaborate on the methods used to identify and recruit participants, including sampling criteria, sampling procedures, and participant bios. I explain data analysis procedures, and review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. Furthermore, I identify various methodological limitations, but I also identify several strengths of the methodology. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with key methodological decisions and rationale for these decisions, related to the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research approach that involved a literature review and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Qualitative research, including interviewing, provides a method for collecting rich and detailed information about how individuals experience, understand, and make meaning of events in their lives (Clifford, n. d.). Relatedly, one of the main factors that distinguishes qualitative research from other research approaches is the desire to expose the human part of the story (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). This research approach was the most appropriate for my topic and research questions because it allowed me to get a better understanding of my participants’ specific experiences and stories related to the research topic, and factors surrounding these experiences.

Decisions about research methods depend on the issues and topics being studied, the research context, and other components of the research design (Maxwell, 2013). Whereas
qualitative research allows people’s stories to be heard, Jacob and Furgerson (2012) assert the importance of this for many reasons: it helps us describe people, explain phenomena, and can lead to improvements in many fields of study. Maxwell (2013) states that it is not only what is being told by the participants that is of value, but how it is told, and the data surrounding what is being told, all of which can be interpreted through qualitative research. While the study was conducted with 2 participants, a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable for this study to get a deep understanding of the participants’ perspectives and experiences related to the topic, which could not have necessarily been accomplished through a quantitative approach.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument of data collection used in this study is the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B). Interviews allow the researcher to gather in-depth information of their participants’ experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic (Turner, 2010). Also, Clifford (n.d.) highlights that interviews can be tailored specifically to the knowledge and experience of the interviewee. There are many forms of interview design that can be developed to obtain rich and thick data through a qualitative research lens (Creswell, 2007). Interview protocols can range from unstructured, or minimal structure, to a more structured approach (Maxwell, 2013). Turner (2010) notes that the general interview guide, or interview protocol, is more structured than an informal conversational interview, while allowing for some flexibility. The interview protocol used in this study falls somewhere in the middle of the continuum, with prepared interview questions that relate to the research questions and purposes, while remaining flexible and open to the direction that the interview may take.

One of the strengths of less structured interview approaches is the opportunity for the researcher to focus on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ between
individuals and/or settings (Maxwell, 2013). Cohen and Crabtree (2006) define semi-structured interviews as involving a formal interview between the researcher and participants, which is guided by an ‘interview guide’ that has been developed by the researcher. The ‘interview guide’ is a list of questions and topics that need to be addressed during the interview, usually in a particular order (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The interviewer follows the guide, but is able to follow the natural rhythms of the conversation that may stray from the guide, when he or she feels this is appropriate (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Lastly, Cohen and Crabtree (2006) state that semi-structured interviews are most appropriate when the researcher only has one opportunity to interview the participants, as is the case in the present study.

3.3 Participants

In this section I review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment, and I review a range of possible avenues for teacher recruitment. I have also included a section where I will introduce each of the participants.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

The participants were recruited based on the following sampling criteria:

- Teachers will have a minimum of 5 years teaching experience
- Teachers will have demonstrated leadership and/or expertise in the areas of anti-bullying education, diversity/equity, and inclusion.
- Teachers will have worked for at least 2 years in an inclusive school setting (as opposed to segregated schools for students with disabilities).

I recruited teachers who have a minimum of 5 years teaching experience, because I was interested in learning from teachers who have taught students with a wide range of abilities and
needs, including various physical, cognitive, emotional, and/or intellectual disabilities. The more years of experience the teachers have, the more students they are likely to have taught, and the more likely they are to have encountered students with varying abilities and disabilities.

A second criteria teachers had to meet was demonstrating leadership and/or expertise in the areas of bullying, diversity/equity, and/or inclusion. This may be in the form of providing professional development opportunities for colleagues, having completed a graduated degree with this focus, or leading a school-wide initiative or project that focuses on one of more of the aforementioned areas. I have chosen this criteria because I was interested in learning from teachers who are actively involved in promoting inclusion and diversity in their classroom, including ways in which they address and respond to bullying behaviour.

Lastly, teachers recruited for my study have worked for at least 2 years at an inclusive school, which excludes schools that are specifically for students with disabilities. This criterion was chosen because I was interested in learning how teachers promote inclusion and diversity in their classrooms, with specific relation to bullying towards students with disabilities, and what this bullying behaviour looks like. The literature consistently points to the fact that students with disabilities are over-represented as victims of bullying, while the bullies are usually students without disabilities.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures/Recruiting

Creswell (2007) discusses the importance of selecting the appropriate candidates for interviews. He stresses that the researcher should use one of the various types of sampling strategies, such as criterion based sampling or critical case sampling, to obtain qualified candidates that will provide the most credible and reliable information to the study (Creswell,
2007). The primary sampling procedure that I have chosen as the most appropriate for my research study is purposive sampling. Also called purposeful selection, purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of particular settings, persons, or activities to provide information that is relevant to the researcher’s questions and goals (Maxwell, 2013).

Selecting those settings and individuals that can provide the researcher with the information that is needed to answer the research questions is the most important consideration in participant selection decisions in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). Another sampling strategy I used was convenience sampling. This approach was appropriate for my study since I have worked in the education field in Montreal for a couple of years, and have kept in close contact with many teachers and educators who met the sampling criteria I have established. Moreover, I have developed a professional relationship with a network of teachers in Toronto through my two practicum experiences at OISE; my associate teachers (AT’s), supply teachers, principals, and support staff at my practicum schools, in addition to some professors at OISE in the CTL department.

To recruit participants, I contacted the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)’s “Equitable and Inclusive Schools team” of educators by email. This team consists of staff throughout the TDSB who are committed to integrating fairness, equity and inclusion into daily life in their respective schools. I provided them with an overview of my research study, and the participant criteria, and asked that these individuals or organizations distribute my information to teachers that they believe might fulfill the criteria. I provided my information to the individuals I contacted, as opposed to having them provide me with the names and email addresses of teachers to contact. This helped to ensure that participation was voluntary, and that participants did not feel pressured to participate in any way.
Additionally, I contacted teachers in Montreal whom I have met through volunteering at schools and working for two years at a school for students with disabilities. While one of the criterion specifies that participants must have worked at an inclusive school for at least 2 years, I ensured that each teacher I contacted met this criteria. I also contacted teachers with whom I have met in social settings, such as through a friend or at the gym, ensuring that they fulfill all of the outlined criteria. Lastly, I contacted professors at OISE whose areas of interests and/or research included one or more of the following: inclusion, diversity/equity, and anti-bullying education.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

*Marilyn*

Marilyn worked for an organization in Toronto, Ontario that provides workshops, professional development opportunities for school staff, resources and programming for youth, families, and educators around issues of equity, inclusion, and bullying. The organization’s main goal is to prevent child abuse and promote positive social change. At the time of the research she had been working with this organization for the past 5 years as a co-facilitator of bullying prevention intervention workshops for school staff and students across Ontario. In addition to her experience in this position, she had 2.5 years of teaching experience as a high school teacher from 2007-2010, teaching Business Studies and Special Education. During this time Marilyn coordinated an equity council that was led by students. Marilyn’s commitment to inclusion and anti-bullying education and extensive experience leading workshops with students and educators have contributed to my research study and understanding of my topic.
Lisa

Lisa was an elementary school teacher in Montreal, Quebec, and she had been teaching for 20 years. At the time of the research she had been teaching at her current school for 16 years, and it was her 6th year teaching grade 3. Lisa had many students in her classroom who had a disability, including Autism and ADHD, and she had witnessed some minor forms of bullying towards these students. Lisa’s dedication to anti-bullying education and creating an inclusive classroom was evident in the many activities and resources she incorporated into her classroom around this topic. Due to the teacher’s strike in Quebec, Lisa was not able to partake in any extra-curricular activities at the time of the interview. However, she remained involved in the school community through implementing school-wide anti-bullying initiatives within her classroom.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process involves making sense out of what was uncovered from the interview stage and compiling the data into groups of information, which Creswell (2007) calls themes or codes. Prior to analyzing my data I transcribed my interviews, which were all audio-recorded. Clifford (n.d.) emphasizes the importance of audio-recording all interviews, thus minimizing loss of information, and allowing the interviewer to attend fully to the interviewee. Once I had my interview transcripts, I began coding the transcripts, using my research questions as an interpretive tool. Coding is the main categorizing strategy in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). The goal of coding is to rearrange the data into categories that facilitate comparison between items in the same category, and that aid in developing theoretical concepts (Maxwell, 2013). Each transcript was coded individually, and I then grouped similar codes together and created categories of data. Consequently, I grouped similar categories together and identified
themes that emerged from the categories. These themes or codes are consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas that were common among research participants (Turner, 2010). As a second level of coding I read the categories and themes beside one another, and synthesized themes, and/or created subthemes, where it was appropriate.

A later stage of the analysis involves the meaning-making process; speaking to what matters about the theme, given what existing research has already found. I coded my data looking for common themes and divergences in the data, as relevant to the research questions. Maxwell (2013) refers to common themes in the data as ‘similarity relations’, which involve resemblances or common features, which are based on comparison. He adds that similarities and differences are used to define categories and to group and compare data by category (Maxwell, 2013). However, the primary focus is not to sort data into categories that are independent of context, but to look for relationships that connect statements and events into a coherent whole (Maxwell, 2013). I also looked at null data, which includes what participating teachers did not mention, and why that is important.

### 3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

While Stevens (n.d.) stresses that research is essential to the successful promotion of health and wellbeing, it is crucial to take the necessary steps to ensure the health and wellbeing of all participants throughout the research process. Relatedly, the primary consideration in any research study should be to ensure the dignity, rights, safety, and wellbeing of the participants (Stevens, n.d.). This includes respecting participants, understanding issues related to power relations between the researcher and participants, and taking into account all ethical considerations throughout the research process (Honan & Gitsaki, n.d.). Ethical considerations in qualitative research can be more complex than those in quantitative research, since the methods
used are more personal, can be more intrusive, and there is a greater emphasis placed on the researcher-participant relationship (Stevens, n.d.).

The ethical review procedures that I established and followed in my study were put in place to protect the rights and wellbeing of participating teachers. Firstly, all participants were assigned a pseudonym, and were notified of their right to withdraw their participation in the study at any stage of the research. Stevens (n.d.) emphasizes the importance of ensuring that participation in the research is voluntary. Moreover, participants’ identities will remain confidential, and any identifying markers related to their schools or their students were excluded. It is essential for researchers to treat all data with appropriate confidentiality and anonymity (Stevens, n.d.). There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts, and to clarify or retract any statements before I conducted data analysis, also known as ‘member-checking’. Maxwell (2013) refers to member-checks as the most important way of confirming that information was not misinterpreted by the researcher, and that participants’ voices and perspectives are heard. All data will be stored on a password-protected iPhone and will be destroyed after five years. Lastly, participants were asked to sign a consent letter, giving their consent to be interviewed and audio-recorded (See Appendix A). This consent letter provides an overview of the study, addresses ethical implications, and specifies expectations of participation. Honan and Gitsaki (n.d.) mention the ethical consideration of ensuring that participants understand their involvement in the study and what is to be expected of them. This includes using clear and consistent language in the consent form that can be easily understood by all participants (Honan & Gitsaki, n.d.). Finally, my course instructor and I are the only people who will have access to the data.
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

I will begin this section by discussing several key areas that limit the study design, and will end with the methodological strengths of my research study. I have identified the scope of the research study as one of the limitations. Given the ethical parameters that have been approved for the MTRP, the interviews can only be conducted with teachers. Consequently, it is not possible for me to interview students or parents, conduct surveys, or do classroom observations. The aforementioned factors have limited what I can learn through my research. Also, I was only able to conduct interviews with 2 teachers, which can be considered a limitation of the study. Maxwell (2013) discusses the importance of adequately capturing the heterogeneity of the population, ensuring that conclusions of the study represent an entire range of the population, rather than only the ‘typical’ members. This is difficult to achieve with a small sample size of 2 participants. While the findings can inform the topic at hand, they cannot generalize the experience of teachers.

Despite the aforementioned methodological limitations, I have identified several strengths of my study design. One of the strengths involves the significance of being able to interview teachers, which will allow me to hear from them in more depth and in their own words about their experiences. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) mention that the desire to expose the human part of the story is at the heart of qualitative research.

Interviews are a way to validate teacher voice and experiences, and are an opportunity for them to make meaning from their own lived experiences. Interviews can allow the interviewer to gain insight into participants’ lived experiences, learn and understand their perspectives, and discover the nuances in stories (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Lastly, the interviews will provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own practices, including the rationale for the
pedagogical decisions that they make. Maxwell (2013) states that, in a qualitative study the researcher is interested not only in the physical events and behaviour that take place, but in how the participants make sense of these experiences, and how their understanding influences their behaviour.

### 3.7 Conclusion

To conclude, I will summarize the chapter and discuss several of the important decisions I have made regarding the methodological study and design. I am conducting a qualitative study that comprises of semi-structured interviews, the participants I recruited fulfill the following criteria: a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience, having demonstrated leadership and/or expertise in the areas of bullying, diversity/equity, and/or inclusion, and have worked for at least 2 years in an inclusive school setting. I found the participants in my study by contacting teacher associations in various schoolboards throughout Montreal and Toronto that are related to the topics of bullying, inclusion, and diversity/equity. The ethical review procedures that I followed include ensuring that participation is voluntary by notifying participants of their right to withdraw participation at any time, keeping their identities confidential by assigning a pseudonym, and making sure all participants sign a consent form that outlines the parameters of the study and what is expected of them. Lastly, I have identified several methodological limitations and strengths of the study, including the fact that I was only able to interview teachers, the small number of participants, and providing an opportunity for teachers to reflect on and make meaning of their experiences. Next, in Chapter 4, I report the research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I report and discuss my research findings from interviews I conducted with two educators, Lisa and Marilyn. Lisa was a third grade teacher at a public elementary school in Montreal, Quebec. She had been teaching for 20 years, with 16 of those years being at the school she presently teaches at. Lisa’s love of teaching was evident in her commitment to implementing anti-bullying education practices in the classroom and school. Likewise, Marilyn’s passion for educating youth around social justice issues and bullying prevention had led her to take on various roles in this work. While she had previous experience as a high school teacher in Toronto, Ontario, Marilyn’s current endeavours involved facilitating and implementing educational workshops in schools around equity, inclusion, and social justice issues for a community organization.

Through the process of coding each participants’ interview transcript and grouping similar data into categories, I have identified five common themes. Each theme is presented as a separate header, with the accompanying sub-themes as sub-headers. I will discuss each theme and sub-theme using participant quotations, while relating to academic research on the respective topic throughout the chapter. The following five themes connect to my research questions, which aimed to uncover the indicators of bullying behaviour exhibited towards students with disabilities and how a small sample of teachers instructionally respond to these indicators through their teaching practice. I will begin by discussing the following two themes: teachers’ and society’s attitudes and perceptions create barriers to recognizing and responding to bullying behaviour, and teachers encounter challenges in creating an inclusive classroom for students with disabilities because of social exclusion and stigma of disability. Next, I will delineate two themes
around the responsibility of each educator to demonstrate a commitment to social justice issues
and bullying prevention by integrating these topics throughout the curriculum, and the role of the
teacher in preventing bullying and promoting inclusion involves empowering students,
supporting their emotional needs, and having their voices heard. Lastly, I will discuss the final
theme; teachers access community supports and resources to inform their teaching practices
around bullying prevention and intervention

4.1 Teachers’ and society’s attitudes and perceptions create barriers to recognizing and
responding to bullying behaviour

The first theme I have identified involves the attitudes and perceptions of a small sample
of educators with regards to bullying. These attitudes, which range from a lack of recognition of
bullying as a serious problem in schools to active commitment to preventing and recognizing
bullying behaviour, are influenced by societal values and norms. The tendency to view bullying
as a normal part of childhood, without acknowledging the potential lifelong negative impacts to
all parties involved, can prevent educators from successfully recognizing and responding to
bullying. Likewise, the perception of bullying as a harmless aspect of typical childhood
behaviour can lead an educator to ignore, dismiss, or misinterpret bullying behaviour. The
aforementioned responses to bullying can have a serious impact on the emotional and social
wellbeing of a child who is victimized, and are examples of ineffective responses to bullying.
The four subthemes that follow will provide a greater picture of the barriers faced by teachers in
recognizing and responding to bullying.
4.1.1 Teachers identify attitudes and perceptions of bullying as barriers to recognizing and responding to bullying behaviour

While both participants expressed a commitment to bullying prevention and intervention in their roles as educators, their perceptions and attitudes of what bullying looks like varied greatly. Lisa asserted that bullying rarely happens in her classroom, aside from the odd isolated incidences to which she is alerted. She stated that, “we do not witness [bullying]. Yes, we will witness “miss, they weren’t fair at recess”, or “miss, she kicked me or punched me”. But, bullying, not so much”. It is possible that there are very few incidences of bullying in Lisa’s school as a result of the many initiatives that have been implemented both school-wide and within Lisa’s classroom.

Marilyn mentioned that bullying should be taken seriously as a type of violence and assault in which an individual’s rights are taken away from them. She highlighted the tendency of adults to perceive physical violence as the most harmful type, stating that “when someone’s feelings are being hurt because they’re being bullied, and it’s more verbal emotional, we tend to dismiss that, or not believe or think it’s as profound a deal as if it were physical”. The discrepancies in perceptions of bullying between Lisa and Marilyn are not uncommon among educators. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008) found that teachers differ in what they consider to be bullying, in addition to what they perceive as serious bullying behaviour that warrants adult intervention (Kochenderfer-Ladd, & Pelletier, 2008).

Similarly, the participants’ opinions on the prevalence and severity of cyberbullying differed greatly. Lisa noted that cyberbullying is a problem in today’s modern technological society, while Marilyn believed that cyberbullying has received more attention than it should,
adding her belief that verbal assaults and name-calling cause the most harm. Both views, while they differ, are consistent with what is reported in the literature. Tokunaga (2010) mentions that cyberbullying victimization has received a lot of attention in the media in recent years. Moreover, name-calling can be one of the most stressful bullying behaviors that children must cope with, and its negative effects are often underestimated by adults (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006).

Although the participants expressed contrasting attitudes and perceptions of bullying behaviour, I am not surprised by this finding. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008) report that there are differences in teachers’ beliefs about bullying, which influence how teachers respond to bullying in their classrooms. Lisa stated that bullying rarely happens in her classroom. She has committed herself to preventing bullying behaviour through integrating anti-bullying education across the curriculum with the use of various resources, including children’s literature. The abovementioned differences in perceptions of bullying points to the need to educate teachers about bullying behaviour, in addition to uncovering and potentially altering their attitudes and views of bullying. As stated by Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008), it is essential to consider teacher views about bullying when planning bullying prevention and intervention programs in school, since teachers’ strategies play an important role in reducing bullying.

4.1.2 Societal attitudes and influence are barriers to recognizing and responding to bullying behaviour

Both Lisa and Marilyn discussed how teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of bullying are influenced by many factors, including personal experiences, values, and beliefs. Additionally, it was evident throughout their interviews that both participants firmly believed that teachers’ attitudes and perceptions around bullying are influenced by those perpetuated in the media and
today’s society. Similarly to teacher attitudes, societal attitudes and influence related to bullying can create challenges for teachers in recognizing and responding to it. Marilyn mentioned that “we use the word [bullying] so much in the media and our society, I often hear from educators that the word has much less significance now than it used to”. While the term ‘bullying’ isn’t taken as seriously by teachers than it once was, it is still a serious problem that happens regularly in schools and can have a long lasting impact on students. Society’s influence on teachers’ attitudes towards bullying can lead one to ignore or dismiss bullying behaviour.

Marilyn recognized that we, as a society, tend to view cyberbullying as the worst thing that’s happening. However, she added that young people are telling us otherwise; that verbal and emotional harassment is more common and damaging than cyberbullying. She expressed that, “it’s a very common thing, that when we think violence, we think physical, but we are talking about physical, sexual, psychological, mental, emotional violence”. Also, Marilyn believed that school policies, protocols and procedures prioritize physical violence and minimize other forms of violence, or bullying behaviour. The recent shift towards a modern technological world of communication is a principal example of societal influence that has affected bullying behaviour. This technological shift has given rise to a more recent form of bullying, ‘cyberbullying’ (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Cyberbullying can be defined as the use of electronic communication devices to bully others (Li, 2007).

Marilyn discussed how youth are negatively influenced by what they see in the media, adding that “we in fact valorize it in our popular culture, in our TV shows, so when young people live in a society where violence and meanness and unkindness is actually considered very acceptable, and that’s something to be aspired to, how do we expect young people to do different?”. Marilyn’s perspective around media influence on bullying behaviour aligns with that
of Piotrowski and Hoot (2008), who report that youth who might not otherwise consider using violence to bully others may do so when exposed to violence being rewarded in the media. Tokunaga (2010) reports that the prevalence of cyberbullying is not surprising, given the fact that 97% of youth in North America have access to the internet. Lisa’s perspective is supported by the literature. She mentioned that there has been an increase in cyberbullying in today’s technological society, adding that the widespread use of social media introduces students to additional venues by which they can bully other students. Also, Lisa added that students are negatively influenced by the violence they see on the television and in the media, which can lead students to act aggressively towards others. Piotrowski and Hoot (2008) support Lisa’s view, noting that children are highly susceptible to media violence that promotes and condones new ways for students to act violently, or bully, others.

While Marilyn and Lisa hold differing perceptions and attitudes towards cyberbullying, they both recognized the negative influence of the media and society in promoting and rewarding violence. It is inevitable that students will be exposed to various forms of media that will condone violent behaviours. Since it would be unrealistic to expect teachers to limit and closely monitor students’ access to violence in the media, the present findings emphasize the important role of teachers in educating students about media literacy.

4.1.3 Teachers experience many barriers to recognizing bullying behaviour, which can be associated with the many ways of conceptualizing and understanding bullying

Bullying is a complex issue, ranging from the types of behaviours that could be considered ‘bullying’ to the factors that contribute to youth engaging in bullying behaviour. Both participants recognized the complexities of bullying, and conceptualized bullying behaviour in
similar ways. Marilyn believed that the common element among bullying behaviour is that it happens anywhere and everywhere. Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) agree with this perspective, adding that bullying is an international phenomenon. The complexity of bullying was recognized by Marilyn, who notes that bullying really ranges in the types of experiences and bullying behaviours exhibited by youth. This variety in bullying experiences and behaviours creates challenges for educators in defining and conceptualizing bullying. Despite the high prevalence of bullying in schools, there is still no universally accepted definition of bullying (Glumbic & Zunic-Pavlovic, 2010).

However, both Lisa and Marilyn recognized the different types of bullying behaviour. Lisa conceptualized bullying as any type of intimidation, whether it be verbal, physical, or social. Marilyn elaborated on specific types of bullying behaviour she has witnessed, such as name-calling, exclusion, and a lot of verbal bullying. While there are various forms of bullying, Marilyn emphasized the high prevalence of verbal, emotional, mental, and psychological bullying. She added that the intimidation might be more verbal, emotional, or mental. The participants’ conceptualization of bullying is reflected in the definition given by Glumbic and Zunic-Pavlovic (2010), who outline the following three types of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational. Additionally, Verbal bullying has been identified by Sweeting and West (2001) as the most common form of bullying consistently reported by researchers, specifically name-calling and teasing.

While verbal bullying can easily be overlooked or undermined by educators due to its subtle and seemingly harmless nature, Marilyn firmly believed that it has the most damaging lifelong effects on both bullies and victims. She stated that, “it’s not cyberbullying, it’s verbal assaults, and the name calling, and you know, and it’s often happening at recess, in the
playground, it’s happening where adults are not.” Lisa added that students who engage in bullying behaviour often experience challenges such as difficulty at school and a lack of family support for their academic and emotional wellbeing. This perception is supported in the literature, with evidence that bullies tend to come from families with relationship and marital difficulties, and financial and social problems (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008). While Marilyn asserted that it is very complex as to why bullying happens, she added that bullying behaviour is learned, which means that it also can be ‘unlearned’. She elaborated on this point by stating that “in 50-60% of cases, those who are doing the bullying have been bullied, they’ve experienced violence, and it’s a learned behaviour”. This reinforces the importance of understanding the underlying factors that cause bullying behaviour, which Marilyn is committed to doing through her work in bullying prevention. She believed that it is necessary to understand what is happening with that individual that is leading to the bullying behaviour, and encourages a reflection of where those ideas are coming from.

It was acknowledged by both participants that bullying is a complex issue, which makes it difficult for educators to define and conceptualize it. Furthermore, teachers are faced with additional challenges in identifying and recognizing bullying behaviour. Marilyn recognized the difficulties in acknowledging bullying and knowing how to effectively respond to it. Lisa’s contrasting perception of bullying involved almost no incidences of bullying in her classroom and school. It is possible that Lisa encountered barriers to recognizing bullying behaviour, which could be related to her attitudes and perceptions of bullying, as mentioned earlier. However, Lisa engaged in several bullying prevention efforts within her classroom and school, which most likely contributed to the lack of bullying incidences in her classroom. Lisa stated that “I’m in grade 3 and we seem to have it under control, and I really don’t believe we have many
incidences in the upper grades either”. Marilyn mentioned that educators’ response when asked about bullying usually involves denial or a lack of awareness of bullying in their school. As mentioned by Piotrowski and Hoot (2008), identifying bullying behaviour is a complex task, since research around bullying has not provided a consistent profile of what bullying looks like.

Marilyn identified the following barriers teachers encounter in recognizing bullying: being busy, having many responsibilities as a teacher, a lack of knowing what to do, and ignoring bullying behaviour because one does not want to respond to it. She stressed the tendency of adults to not notice or take bullying seriously, which is related to one’s attitudes and perceptions of bullying behaviour. Marilyn was not surprised that young people are not confiding in adults with their problems, because adults are not believing them or taking their concerns seriously.

Moreover, Lisa added that students in her classroom often gave ‘looks’ to other students, especially one girl who has Autism, but she did not consider that to be ‘bullying’. This type of bullying could be difficult for teachers to recognize, especially if they are not aware of the relationship dynamics of the students involved. Piotrowski and Hoot (2008) highlight this barrier by adding that teachers who want to understand bullying behaviours in the classroom face challenges because of the complex nature of bully-victim relationships. Marilyn stated that “they [teachers] are not aware of the dynamics because it’s so subtle, it’s a look, exclusion…it can be really really hard”.

4.1.4 Teachers respond to bullying behaviour using a variety of effective and ineffective strategies
Given the variety of attitudes and perceptions held by teachers about bullying behaviour and the challenges they face in recognizing bullying, I was not surprised by the range of strategies teachers used to respond to bullying. Marilyn’s beliefs and attitudes towards bullying as a serious issue that should not be ignored were reflected in the strategies she used to respond to bullying, with an emphasis on getting students out of trouble. Marilyn stated that students often deny bullying behaviour because they are afraid of getting into trouble. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008) report that teachers’ beliefs are strong indicators of if and how they intervene in bullying situations.

An effective strategy discussed by Marilyn involved demonstrating to students that we are not going to get them into trouble, and are more concerned about getting them out of trouble and supporting their emotional and psychological needs. She did this through building positive supportive relationships with students, having their voices and perspectives heard, and giving students the control of the situation and, ultimately, their lives. Marilyn added that teachers should “Just check-in. You know, the kids really appreciate that. Especially if they are feeling so isolated, and yet are presenting as someone who’s part of this classroom fabric.”

Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008) reflect the aforementioned strategy used by Marilyn in outlining the most effective bullying interventions, including close supervision of students, taking direct action to stop harassment immediately once it’s identified, and never ignoring a situation in which a student is possibly victimized. Moreover, students who are bullied are often told to solve the problems themselves, which can be difficult for victimized students who perceive themselves as lacking power in comparison to the student(s) who are doing the bullying (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007).
In addition to effective strategies used by teachers in response to bullying, Marilyn identified many ineffective ways of responding to bullying behaviour. Marilyn discussed the “continuum of not very helpful responses”, which ranged from undermining bullying incidences that are reported to them by students by not taking their concerns seriously, to over reacting and responding with harsh punishments such as suspensions. She added that all of these ineffective strategies fail to solve the problem and address the underlying issues that are causing the bullying behaviour in the first place. Lisa mentioned harsh punishments as responses to bullying in her school, including police intervention and suspending students involved in the bullying behaviour. Moreover, these strategies are likely a reflection of individual and societal attitudes and perceptions of bullying behaviour. Marilyn stated that:

The response can sometimes just really undercut what we want to actually have happen, and that is a repairing of the situation, a stop to the bullying. It doesn’t need to end up in an apology, it just needs to end up in stopping. It doesn’t need to be this big dramatic, heartfelt apology, as long as they stop and don’t do it again”. (Marilyn)

Marilyn believed that the tendency to isolate and punish youth as a response to bullying includes putting them in juvenile centers or expelling them, so we don’t have to think about or ‘deal’ with them. Marilyn referred to these methods of responding to violence as ‘traditional methods’, noting their ineffectiveness and the need to find a more human approach. She highlighted the unsuccessfulness of suspending students, and encouraged educators to reflect on what this response is teaching students, and the fact that it hasn’t actually repaired the harm. She noted that “what you’re communicating to, either the person being bullied or the person doing the bullying, is that adults will take over and use their power to control the situation.” While there is a range of responses to bullying behaviour, the common element among all unhelpful responses was the inability to effectively solve the underlying problems that are causing the student(s) to engage in bullying behaviour.
4.2 Teachers encounter challenges in creating an inclusive classroom for students with disabilities because of social exclusion and stigma surrounding disability

The second theme I have identified involves the challenges encountered by a small sample of educators in creating an inclusive classroom for students with disabilities. While anti-bullying education and interventions are important ways of preventing bullying behaviour, an essential aspect of bullying prevention that should not be overlooked involves creating a classroom environment where all students feel a sense of value, acceptance, and belonging. In today’s society, while the traditional way of educating students with special educational needs in a segregated setting has been replaced by inclusive practices, the need for an inclusive classroom environment is that much more important.

The purpose of special education, as expressed by Hehir (2007), is to minimize the impact of disability and maximize the opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in schooling and the community, which is difficult to achieve in a segregated school environment. It is now commonplace for teachers to have several students with some sort of disability, whether it is recognized through an Individualized Education Program (IEP), or not, in their classroom. However, teachers experience challenges in creating an environment where all students’ academic, emotional, and social needs are met. I will discuss these challenges in greater depth throughout the following three subthemes.

4.2.1 Teachers recognize the need to promote inclusion and acceptance of differences to prevent bullying towards students with disabilities

While students with disabilities are likely to be educated alongside their peers without disabilities in mainstream classrooms, teachers face challenges to successfully including these
students into the classroom. Lisa discussed how she educates students about differences in her classroom to promote inclusion:

We look at differences. In grade 3 what we do for homophobia day is really look at how boys and girls, girls can do “boy” jobs, and boys can do “girl” jobs. So we look at that and how all that’s ok. In grade 2 they look at how families come in many different forms, and it could be 2 mommies, 2 daddies, and whatnot, so we look at that. (Lisa)

Marilyn stated that teachers who are committed to having open and honest conversations around differences and disability make a conscious effort to create a certain climate, starting from the beginning of the year. This inclusive and safe classroom environment is one where students feel comfortable to voice their opinions and ideas without worrying about getting in trouble for something that may be interpreted as offensive or inappropriate. Also, Marilyn stressed the need for educators to be aware of who’s not being included and why, both individuals and collective groups of people. She added that “we’re creating what inclusion looks like and fundamentally that means everyone belongs.”

Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) found that students with special educational needs are overrepresented as victims of bullying. Moreover, poor social acceptance and unsuccessful inclusion of children with disabilities are often the result of their peers not being taught effectively to value and appreciate diversity (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Educating students about differences and discussing this openly in the classroom is supported by the literature as an essential step to promoting acceptance, empathy and inclusion. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) reinforce the need for all schools to promote learning that addresses and embraces difference, with a focus on inclusion.

Marilyn mentioned that creating a welcoming environment helps to prevent bullying. For her, inclusion meant “including everyone, absolutely everyone.” Likewise, Lisa recognized the
importance of inclusion, stating that “I am all for inclusion, and having children with any type of learning disability and including everyone in my classroom, with the proper support.” Lisa’s positive attitude towards inclusion was not surprising, given the many students with disabilities in her classroom, including two children who are diagnosed with Autism, a student who has selective mutism, a student with a developmental delay, four students who have ADHD, and one student with dyslexia.

Marilyn’s view of inclusion as creating a ‘welcoming environment’ was supported by the literature. A welcoming school environment is one where students feel like they are important, where the staff and their peers care about them, and where they feel that their personal and academic development are priorities (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). Hehir (2007) highlights the central role inclusion plays in integrating individuals with disabilities into all aspects of society. It was evident that Lisa has done a lot in her classroom around inclusion and equity, given the lack of bullying incidences and the high number of students with a disability.

4.2.2 Challenges teachers experience in including students with disabilities into the classroom can create barriers to preventing bullying

Although teachers recognize the need to create an inclusive classroom where all students’ needs and interests are met, educators face challenges in including students with disabilities into their classroom. Lisa discussed the difficulties in including students with learning disabilities into her classroom, especially when there was a lack of sufficient teaching support for these students. This required Lisa to spend a lot of her own time to make up for this deficit. She stated that “I will be getting about 3 hours a week [of teaching support in the classroom] this year. But not just specifically for them [students identified with disabilities]. It’s for anyone who I feel needs extra help.” While Lisa had many students with various special educational needs in her
class, she only received two hours of ‘attendant time’ per week, where an Educational Assistant or related support staff came into the classroom to provide these students with additional resources and support.

Moreover, Lisa spent a lot of her own ‘personal’ time, such as recess and lunch, providing extra help and academic support to students with disabilities in her class. These students struggled academically, and Lisa had to spend extra time, beyond regulatory school hours, to provide them with extra help. The limited amount of teaching support received for students with disabilities in her classroom meant that Lisa was forced to make up for this on her own time. Bell Carter and Spencer (2006) mention that students with ADHD, emotional disorders, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities often perform at a lower academic level than their peers without disabilities. In addition to the many responsibilities that come with teaching, a lack of support for students with special educational needs adds to the challenges and stress faced by teachers.

Among the challenges faced by educators in including students with disabilities into the classroom was the increasing class-sizes and reduction in additional resources and support for these students. Lisa mentioned that:

That’s one of the things that we’re fighting for this year. Why teachers are striking is because the government is looking at increasing class sizes and not putting caps on class size, and removing any resource or extra help for kids with learning disabilities. (Lisa)

This challenge and the potential consequences are reflected by Lindsay and McPherson (2012), who state that constraints in the socio-contextual environment of students with disabilities, such as teacher’s attitudes and the availability of educational resources, can lead to social exclusion. Besides the minimal resources for students who have been identified as having
a disability, Lisa talked about the difficulties in receiving additional support for students who did not have an official diagnosis, or whose disability was not recognized or ‘coded’ by the government. She had many students in her classroom whose learning disabilities were not diagnosed or formally identified by the government, which prevented her from receiving adequate resources and support for these students. Since Marilyn was not a classroom teacher, she was not as familiar with the challenges faced by teachers in including students with disabilities into the classroom.

4.2.3 Teachers identify social exclusion and stigmatization of disability as a barrier to creating an inclusive classroom

In addition to the abovementioned challenges faced by teachers in including students with disabilities, social exclusion and stigma of disability were identified by participants as barriers to inclusion. Marilyn recognized the social exclusion of students with disabilities by mentioning that “they already feel different, and are in some special needs classes, and then feel that much more outside and not accepted”. She added that “You need to de-stigmatize, any kind of different ability. We need to de-stigmatize it for the rest of the community.” Marilyn’s understanding of social exclusion was supported by Hehir (2007), who believes that the exclusion of students with disabilities is a reflection of society’s pervasive negative attitude about disability. This attitude can make the world an unwelcoming and inaccessible place for people with disabilities (Hehir, 2007).

Marilyn identified the negative experience of students with disabilities in relation to stigma around disability. She asserted that stigmatizing students, or putting a label or identity on them, can make students feel helpless and like they are unable to move out of that label. Marilyn emphasized the need to de-stigmatize any kind of different ability, stating that:
What we can do is really just build a lot more understanding, and empathy and education for others, about what learning disabilities are, about what autism is, or what, you know, mental illness looks like. So, we need to kind of do that prevention and climate piece, where we’re really activating empathy, instead of blaming the child, who’s clearly, it’s part of their condition. (Marilyn)

Lisa discussed the social exclusion experienced by students with disabilities in her classroom, stating that, “when it comes time to do group work, they’re not the first to be picked.” This aligned with research from Sweeting and West (2001), who propose that victimization is a process that begins with labelling based on factors perceived by others as being different from what society considers to be ‘the norm’. Connors and Stalker (2007) mention that many children with disabilities encounter hurtful and unfriendly reactions from others. This can create challenges for students with disabilities in making friendships and developing positive relationships with peers. These students are often excluded from friendship groups of children without disabilities (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010).

While Lisa did not perceive bullying to be a problem in her classroom, she noticed that students often laughed at or exclude one of the students with Autism because of her ‘odd’ mannerisms and lack of social skills. It has been documented in the literature that bullies often target students who are considered to be ‘different’ from the majority of students in the school environment with regards to ethnic origins, physical appearances, or special education needs (Sweeting & West, 2001).

4.3 Teachers recognize their responsibility in demonstrating a commitment to social justice issues and bullying prevention by integrating these topics throughout the curriculum

While schoolboards and individual schools have specific policies and practices around equity, inclusion, and bullying, participants felt that it is the responsibility of individual teachers to implement these practices and approaches in the classroom. With teaching comes a variety of
responsibilities, many of which can have a significant influence on a student’s personal growth and development. Aside from academic standards and expectations that must be met, a small sample of educators identified that teachers are responsible for students’ wellbeing and personal development. This included acting as positive role models for students and educating students about social justice issues, including bullying.

**4.3.1 Teachers take personal responsibility for ensuring students’ wellbeing and personal development by acting as positive role models and being reflective in their practice**

One aspect of teaching that tends to be underestimated by society and the general public is the responsibility teachers have in fostering students’ personal wellbeing and development. As Marilyn admitted, “I carry a lot of responsibility, and I’m trusted with that responsibility, and I have to keep them safe, it’s in the education act”. Teachers are trusted to act as positive role models for their students, which involves reflective and reflexive practice. Marilyn mentioned that, along with responsibility comes the expectations of teachers to be experts and know all the answers. Despite the pressure some teachers might feel to have all the answers, Marilyn encouraged teachers to be willing to be vulnerable and make mistakes in their practice. Marilyn’s engagement in reflexivity was evident in her perception of herself as a ‘teacher/learner’, because she was always learning. Furthermore, she emphasized the need for teachers to stay in that ‘learning mode’, where teachers are always learning, listening, and teaching.

While the immense responsibility teachers have toward students can seem daunting and overwhelming, Marilyn highlighted the positive impact teachers can have on students. In her workshops with educators she asked them to think of one adult who made a different in their world. She reported that, 60-70% of the time, adults mentioned a teacher. Marilyn encouraged
teachers to be positive role models for their students, and to be that one person who makes a
difference in their lives. Lindsay and McPherson (2012) add that it is the responsibility of all
educators to recognize when a student is being excluded and actively encourage others to include
them. Unfortunately, when it comes to bullying, adults often model negative behaviour that is
not effective in dealing with bullying. She noted that students witness:

Adults modeling behaviour where adults don’t speak up in a situation, where adults aren’t
supporting each other. How are young people expected to do that when they don’t see
adults themselves modeling it? (Marilyn)

Lisa highlighted teachers’ responsibility towards social justice and anti-bullying
education by adding that these issues must be addressed in order for students to function in
society and understand differences. Teaching involves many commitments and responsibilities to
student wellbeing and development. But, through acting as positive role models and ensuring the
emotional growth and development of students, teachers can have a positive lifelong impact on
students.

4.3.2 Teachers acknowledge the need to educate students about bullying as an
essential step towards preventing bullying behaviour

In addition to acting as positive role models for students, both participants in this study
identified the need to educate students about bullying. As I have mentioned earlier, bullying is a
complex issue that is often misunderstood by educators and perceived differently from one
person to the next. Both participants mentioned the need to be explicit in educating students
about bullying. Lisa stated the need to be clear with students about what ‘bullying’ is, since the
word can easily be misused and misinterpreted when talking about a single isolated incidence of
violence or bullying. She mentioned that teachers should teach students about bullying and
inclusion because:
It is so important because, in order for them to function in society and to live alongside people and to understand differences, be it a physical, intellectual, whatever the difference is, it is very important to address it. (Lisa)

A preventive approach to anti-bullying, like the one mentioned by Lisa with a focus on promoting inclusion, was recommended. Marilyn discussed the proactive approach she took to bullying prevention in her workshops with youth. She educated students about different types of assault, such as stranger assault, known adult assault, and peer assault. Moreover, Marilyn did extensive work with youth around examining the various forms of violence and ensuring that students have a clear understanding of what is considered to be ‘bullying’ or assault. Additionally, she emphasized the need for educators to recognize that ableism or any other equity issue is a form of violence and marginalization.

Lisa educated students about bullying by discussing the different types of bullying, and involving students in various role-playing activities. In doing so, her approach to bullying prevention involved many of the interventions Ferguson et al. (2007) recommend, with a focus on the cognitive and emotional dimensions of bullying, moral sensitivity, empathy, and conflict-resolution pedagogy. Moreover, a proactive approach to bullying prevention includes explicit classroom discussions about what bullying looks like, what to do if one is a victim of bullying, how to appropriately react as a bystander of bullying, and alternative ways that bullies can deal with their emotions (Ferguson et al., 2007).

4.3.3 Teachers demonstrate a personal commitment to social justice issues through their teaching strategies and practices

While teachers are expected to educate students about bullying and equity issues, not all educators may recognize the need or value in teaching through an equity and social justice lens. However, both Lisa and Marilyn were personally committed to educating students about
bullying, including bullying as a form of discrimination related to one’s race, ethnicity, disability, culture, and culture, among others. Marilyn’s personal experience with racism and sexism led her to a lifelong interest in and commitment to social justice issues. Moreover, Lisa explained what she does with her grade 3 students on ‘Homophobia Day’, a school-wide effort that happened once a year and was dedicated to creating awareness and education around homophobia prevention and LGBTQ issues.

Lisa took on an active role on ‘Homophobia Day’ in her classroom by discussing equity issues with her students related to homophobia and the LGBTQ community. This year she looked at gender norms and stereotypes with her students. They discussed jobs that are traditionally seen as ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ jobs, and where these stereotypes potentially came from, in addition to ways and examples of how they can be broken down. Since students can be bullied for being different, including sexual orientation, Lisa and Marilyn took a preventative approach to anti-bullying education by promoting acceptance of everyone as an effort to reduce the likelihood of bullying others for being ‘different’.

Lisa’s commitment to social justice and anti-bullying education was evident in the many school-wide initiatives she was involved in surrounding bullying prevention. She explained how the low prevalence of bullying incidences in her classroom was a result of hard work and dedication that she had taken towards educating her students about bullying and creating a positive classroom environment where this type of behaviour is not tolerated. Lastly, Marilyn mentioned the use of an empowerment-based approach in her bullying prevention efforts, which really asserted that children have rights and agency. She stated that, “our approach is an empowerment-based approach, which really asserts that people have agency, and first, people
have rights.” The commitment to social justice issues demonstrated by both participants is evident in their teaching practices and personal experiences with bullying and discrimination.

4.3.4 Teachers recognize the ability to easily integrate anti-bullying education and prevention throughout the curriculum

Although teachers are not required to implement anti-bullying education in their teaching practices, these topics can easily be infused throughout the curriculum. Marilyn indicated that equity issues are mentioned in the curriculum, either directly or indirectly, as a means of preventing bullying. Marilyn stated that the equity issues in the curriculum address children’s rights, human rights, and child assault prevention. Moreover, she added that the curriculum is structured in a way that gives educators a lot of latitude to incorporate issues around equity, inclusion and violence prevention. Mishna (2003) recommends adding disability awareness to the curriculum to promote acceptance and to reinforce the effects of anti-bullying programs for children and adolescents with disabilities.

Lisa discussed similar efforts that she’s implemented into her teaching practices, which included teaching students about friendships and what makes a good friend. While this might not initially seem like bullying prevention, it is important to educate students about being a good friend to promote prosocial behaviour and prevent anti-social behaviour that can lead to bullying. Lisa mentioned the various bullying prevention efforts she has integrated into her classroom, including skits, a bullying prevention contract, and posters to prevent bullying behaviour that were displayed around the school. Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) mention that teachers should teach training in social skills to help bullies, victims, and bystanders learn how to overcome bullying.
4.4 Teachers conceptualize their role in preventing bullying and promoting inclusion as involving empowering students, supporting their emotional needs, and having their voices heard.

The fourth theme I have identified involves teachers’ role in preventing bullying and promoting inclusion. In addition to the many responsibilities teachers face, they play a principal role in promoting inclusion through empowering students, supporting their emotional needs, and ensuring that students’ voices are recognized and valued. Both participants recognized the importance of supporting students and letting them know that we, as educators, care about them as individuals.

4.4.1 Teachers believe they are responsible for empowering students to be accountable for their actions and to promote personal growth and development

As mentioned earlier, teachers are trusted with many responsibilities, which includes promoting personal growth and development among students. While adults tend to unknowingly encourage and reinforce youth dependency, both Lisa and Marilyn identified the importance of making students accountable for their behaviours and empowering them to take action towards positive change in their lives. Marilyn firmly believed that, “everyone, individually and collectively, has the power to change.” She stressed the importance of letting students know that we believe in them and their ability to make a difference. Marilyn co-facilitated workshops for students and teachers that are very practical and grounded in practical ideas around skill-building and how to make changes.

Additionally, Lisa discussed the ‘Bullying Oath’, a school-wide initiative to empower students and ensure accountability of their actions. This oath outlined what students would do to prevent bullying behaviour, which students created and signed at the beginning of each school
year. These contracts were displayed throughout the school as a constant reminder and recognition of the students’ commitment to prosocial behaviour and bullying prevention efforts. Marilyn added that bullying prevention and intervention efforts should be based on change, positive change, and reflection and support. In regards to bullying intervention, Marilyn strongly believed in empowering students doing the bullying behaviour by explicitly stating that we believe in them and know that they can make this situation right. Her approach focused on putting students at the center of their own lives and problem-solving. Moreover, Marilyn’s approach to bullying intervention focused on ‘witnesses’ or ‘bystanders’, since they are the majority of people in a bullying situation. She aimed to empower students by promoting an active role in bullying intervention, in which students go from ‘witnesses’ to ‘allies’.

4.4.2 A human approach to teaching is favoured and involves reflection on how power is used in the classroom and how teachers can release some of their power

While teachers are responsible for empowering students to be accountable for their actions and making positive change, this cannot be done without releasing some of the power that teachers hold. Marilyn mentioned that:

I really want to reflect on where is it that I need to release the power. Not the responsibility, but the power. How can I do that as much as possible? And that’s social justice, because that’s a recognition of young people’s capacity. (Marilyn)

Whether or not teachers are conscious of their use of power in the classroom, the position held by teachers as an authority figure tends to be associated with one of ‘power’. Lisa and Marilyn addressed the need for teachers to embrace a more human approach to teaching, which involved reflection of how teachers are using their power in the classroom and where some of that power can be released. Marilyn stressed the importance of reflecting on how, in our societies
and schools, power is operating in a given situation or group. She encouraged teachers to ask themselves the question, “how do I decentralize myself as the holder of knowledge in a classroom?”. Lisa added that teachers are often seen by students as ‘scary’ and intimidating’, which reinforced the need to demonstrate to students that we are approachable by building a positive rapport with students.

In addition to building a positive rapport with students, both participants agreed that a ‘human’ approach to teaching involves acknowledging one’s mistakes and being vulnerable in those situations. Marilyn added that, “we’re not perfect and we’re not the experts, and sometimes probably fail, and be willing to be vulnerable to fail and make mistakes”. Likewise, Lisa agreed by mentioning the need for teachers to be ‘silly’ and show students their silly side. This vulnerability enables students to see the more human side of teachers, and can help in building rapport with students. Marilyn mentioned that when students feel safe in the classroom and have positive and supportive relationships they are more likely to discuss any problems they’re having with the teacher, including bullying incidences. Moreover, by showing students that we can be vulnerable and make mistakes, and that it is okay and encouraged, we are modeling behaviour that is promoted and expected from students. Marilyn added the need for adults to reflect on how we can use power in positive ways in the classroom to release control and prevent youth dependency on adults.

### 4.4.3 An essential factor in creating inclusion involves connecting to students’ lived experiences through having their voices heard and validated

Creating an inclusive environment, as discussed earlier, is one where students feel valued, accepted, and a sense of belonging. Inclusion is an essential aspect in bullying prevention, since students who do not feel included may be more inclined to bully others or be
bullied themselves. Also, inclusion can have many positive outcomes on student academic and emotional wellbeing. However, it is difficult for teachers to create an inclusive environment without having students’ input and voices validated and reflected throughout the classroom and curriculum. Marilyn stated the need to “let young people and people with their own lived experience guide us to what they need us to know, guide us to what support they need”.

Moreover, both participants recognized the significance of connecting to students’ experiences and having their voices heard. Marilyn stressed the need to listen to students, believe them, and see them as capable and wise human beings. Bourke and Burgman (2010) support this stance by recommending that schools focus all students’ abilities and their contribution to school life, rather than their impairments and limitations.

Furthermore, Marilyn made a conscious effort to include her students in all aspects of the school and classroom life. She started by looking at how she can co-create inclusion with her students in a way that they’re not just joining her idea of what this world or this classroom should look like. Lisa and Marilyn both mentioned including students input and voices in all bullying prevention and intervention efforts. They emphasized the need to hear students’ opinions, perspectives, and feelings around the given situation. Lisa’s approach to bullying intervention involved conferencing with students, both individually and with all parties involved. She mentioned giving students an opportunity and space to discuss their feelings and perspectives on the situation.

Additionally, Lisa often engaged students in a ‘role-play’ activity in which they discussed and acted out what can and cannot be done in a given situation. This not only allowed students to identify positive behaviours and ways to handle the situation, but it empowered students through actively involving them in the process. Lastly, Marilyn’s approach to bullying intervention
involved getting students’ input on what they’d like to see happen as an outcome of the situation, how we could support them, and letting them know that we are there for them. Both Lisa and Marilyn stressed the importance of connecting to students’ lived experiences and making sure their voices are heard, which is part of creating an inclusive classroom where all students feel like they belong.

4.4.4 A principal role of the teacher in promoting inclusion and preventing bullying involves supporting students’ emotional and academic needs

A final subtheme around the role of educators in promoting inclusion and preventing bullying involves the responsibility to support students’ emotional and academic needs. Teachers are trusted with many responsibilities, a principal role involving students’ social, academic, psychological and emotional wellbeing. The inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms presents further responsibilities for teachers, as many of these students experience academic and social challenges that require additional resources and support. Mishna (2003) reports that students with learning disabilities experience psychosocial difficulties, poor academic performance, and social skills deficits. The academic problems experienced by many students with learning disabilities can lead to poor self-esteem and frustration, which can create barriers to developing social skills (Mishna, 2003).

Even though students with disabilities are increasingly being integrated into general education classrooms, teachers have focussed primarily on their academic achievement (Bell Carter & Spencer, 2006). Marilyn and Lisa discussed the importance of supporting students’ emotional needs and wellbeing, in addition to their academic needs. They mentioned this role as part of creating an inclusive classroom environment and preventative approach to anti-bullying.
Lisa aimed to support her students’ emotional needs through getting to know them and having open and honest conversations with them. She stated:

> Just get to know your kids. You know, talk to them, sometimes you can see the one is, um, you know, you can tell, with experience, you can see the one who maybe is left out. The one at recess when you’re out on duty, and you see them walking around alone. Don’t be afraid to go over and put your arm around them and ask them how they’re feeling, and that sort of thing. (Lisa)

The need to support students’ emotional needs and wellbeing was reflected in the many challenges experienced by students with disabilities. Lisa had a few students with autism in her classroom, and they participated in a school-wide social skills program for students on the autism spectrum who needed support in demonstrating socially appropriate behaviour and skills. Students participated in this program once a week, and it allowed them to interact with other students and have opportunities to practice the skills they had been taught in a safe, supervised, and inclusive setting.

Marilyn made a conscious effort to support students’ emotional needs by frequently ‘checking-in’ with them to see how they were doing and showing students that she was there to support them. She had noticed that students really appreciated the support, especially if they were feeling particularly isolated. Students with disabilities, including Autism, often experience difficulties with social skills, which can lead to being bullied by others for their inappropriate social behaviour. Also, these students may have a hard time making friends due to their social skills challenges, which can lead to isolation and bullying. While students with Autism may have above-average intellectual abilities, they experience socio-communicative and behavioural difficulties (Cappadocia et al., 2012). This can contribute to problems in forming and maintaining friendships with peers (Cappadocia et al., 2012).
4.5 Teachers access community supports and resources to inform their teaching practices around bullying prevention and intervention

The fifth and final theme I have identified through analyzing participants’ interviews involves teachers accessing community supports and resources to use in the classroom around bullying prevention and intervention. While teachers are responsible for educating students about bullying and inclusion, it can be done more easily with the use of additional support or materials. There are many resources and materials available in the school and community that can support teachers’ work in bullying prevention and intervention.

4.5.1 Professional development workshops offered to teachers from external organizations provide ways to increase their knowledge on bullying prevention practices

One of the principal community supports mentioned by Marilyn to increase teachers’ knowledge on bullying prevention and intervention involved professional development workshops offered to teachers around these issues. It was no surprise that Marilyn identified this way of accessing community support and resources, given her role in facilitating these type of workshops with school staff, students, and families. Marilyn has facilitated workshops with school staff in a variety of cities and demographics across Ontario, ranging from big schools with 1500 students to small, rural schools with merely 50 students. She noted the cultural diversity in these schools’ demographics, including both multicultural schools and schools with minimal cultural diversity. Marilyn’s involvement with each school differed greatly; some professional development workshops were a ‘one time’ thing, while others involved multiple visits throughout the year or across several years.
The professional development workshop for school staff that Marilyn co-facilitated was called ‘The Power to Change’. This full-day workshop included opportunities for deep reflection, growth, and change around the topics of bullying, equity and inclusion. Although professional workshops can prove to be very useful for teachers in acquiring knowledge, skills, and awareness around certain topics, teachers need tangible resources and materials to support them in implementing these strategies and approaches into the classroom. The organization for which Marilyn worked acknowledged this necessity, and has developed many resources and guides for teachers, school staff, students, and parents around equity and inclusion. This included lesson plans, materials that can be used in the classroom, and guides that explain how to use the accompanying materials.

4.5.2 Teachers use a variety of resources, including children’s literature, videos and songs for classroom instruction on bullying prevention and intervention

In addition to engaging in professional development workshops around bullying prevention and inclusion, both participants identified the use of various resources for classroom instruction on these topics. Lisa discussed a book, ‘Dear Bully of Mine’, which she integrated into the Language Arts curriculum for her grade 3 students. Students read and discussed this book together as a class, which Lisa defined as part of her response to literature. Through this book students were introduced to other books around bullying and inclusion. Additionally, Lisa integrated these topics into the media literacy curriculum by introducing students to different videos and songs. She connected to students’ experiences by choosing songs they like and are familiar with, such as the song “Roar” by Katy Perry, and they analyzed the song’s meaning together. Lisa’s integrated approach to teaching was evident through her use of a variety of resources across different curriculum areas. Her approach was reflected by Goodley and
Runswick-Cole (2010), who stress the need for teachers to engage in creative pedagogies in inclusive education.

Moreover, Marilyn indicated the many resources developed by the organization for which she works regarding classroom instruction on bullying prevention and intervention. For classroom practice they have developed storybooks around empathy, kindness, and being a witness and an ally in bullying situations. Marilyn stressed the need for educators to feel confident in addressing bullying and inclusion in the classroom, which can be supported through many of the presently discussed resources. In addition to children’s literature, Marilyn pointed out the use of a documentary film about bullying prevention and intervention for students, developed by the organization she worked for. Accompanying that film was a guide for school staff around this topic. Lastly, Marilyn discussed the ‘Safe at School’ materials as a resource for school staff. This resource guide was created for staff and outlines strategies and actions that can be taken to create a safe school and prevent bullying behaviour, as part of the ‘Safe at School’ initiative. The resource guide is very broad and can be used with any age group or type of school, for both classroom and school-wide practices.

**4.5.3 Teacher involvement in school-wide initiatives and programs around social justice issues and bullying prevention can have a positive influence in reducing bullying**

While resources for classroom instruction on bullying prevention and intervention can help teachers build confidence and skills in approaching these topics with their students, both participants mentioned the importance of being involved in school-wide initiatives and programs. Lisa attributed the low incidence of bullying in her school to school-wide initiatives and policies around bullying, including the ‘Bullying Prevention Oath’ and a ‘Zero Tolerance’ policy around
violence. While it might seem difficult to believe that Lisa’s school rarely encountered bullying incidences, it is possible that the many programs in place to prevent bullying have had a significantly positive impact in reducing this type of behaviour. Raskauskas and Modell (2011) believe that a ‘whole-school’ approach is the key to success for any anti-bullying program. It is possible that a whole-school approach helps to create a supportive and inclusive environment within the entire school, which can likely reduce the incidences of bullying school-wide. This approach includes creating a supportive school environment where students feel safe to report any bullying incidences and are certain that staff care about their wellbeing and will respond to bullying appropriately (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011). Likewise, Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) recognize the necessity of school-wide initiatives by indicating that school interventions can dramatically reduce the prevalence of bullying.

A supportive school environment, according to Marilyn, involved collaboration and support among all members of the school community, including students, school staff, parents and families. Mishna (2003) reflects this practice by stating that a hallmark of anti-bullying interventions is the involvement of all elements of a school in order to create a safe environment. While it is easy for teachers to get caught up in their individual classroom responsibilities and roles, Marilyn stressed the need for teachers and school staff to communicate and support each other. The workshops she facilitates encouraged idea-sharing and communication among teachers and all school staff, to create a positive and supportive school environment.

4.5.4 Teachers identify the importance of involving family and community support in bullying prevention and intervention

The last subtheme I have identified involves teachers’ recognition of the need to include family and community support in bullying prevention and intervention. Marilyn’s advice to
beginning teachers consisted of involving community supports and always being open to learning. This whole-school approach included educating and involving everyone in the school community, including families, about bullying and their roles in preventing and eliminating bullying behaviour (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011). Lisa provided an example of accessing community supports in bullying prevention initiatives at her school through inviting guest speakers to discuss these topics:

> We have many guest speakers come into the school. We had, for instance, Chris Nilan, come in. He’s a former Montreal Canadiens hockey player, “Knuckles”. And what makes it really good, his nickname is “Knuckles”, he was basically put in there to bully and be a fighter. So he’s speaking out against it. (Lisa)

Additionally, Marilyn mentioned how she involved community support in her bullying prevention efforts through working with a variety of organizations and exchanging expertise and training. She explained that it is valuable to collaborate with organizations that specialize in learning disabilities. This involved providing them with skills and resources to address anti-bullying education and inclusion, while receiving training from them around recognizing and intervening with students who have a learning disability.

Marilyn added that educators need to remember that we have community, this included community organizations and experts, and resources in the community. The need to involve family and community support in bullying prevention and intervention was evident in the experiences, values, and practices discussed by both participants. Coppadocia et al. (2012) highlight the importance of involving family and community by stating that all adults included in the school community can support children to acquire and develop important social skills. These include emotional and behavioural regulation strategies and coping skills, ignoring peer
provocation, interacting with supportive peers, problem solving, and communicating assertively (Coppadocia et al., 2012).

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified and discussed five themes and accompanying subthemes that were revealed through analyzing the data from interviews with two educators. These themes relate to my overall topic and research question surrounding bullying behaviour towards students with disabilities, and strategies used by teachers in recognizing and responding to bullying. In addition to themes that are directly related to how teachers recognize and respond to bullying, I recognized the teacher’s role in supporting students’ varied needs as an essential part of bullying prevention and inclusion. Lastly, participants stressed the importance of integrating these topics throughout the curriculum, with the help of resources and community supports for classroom practices. These findings make a unique contribution to the literature by providing educators’ perspectives on the challenges experienced in recognizing and responding to bullying towards students with special educational needs. While extensive literature has mentioned the high prevalence of victimization among this population, limited research has explored this issue further to discover how teachers prevent, identify and respond to bullying towards students with disabilities. These findings identify strategies and approaches that have been used by educators to prevent and reduce bullying behaviour in their classroom. This includes suggestions of ways to overcome potential barriers to recognizing and responding to bullying behaviour towards students with disabilities, which can be useful for educators who are faced with similar challenges. Next, in chapter 5, I will speak to the significance of my findings as a beginning teacher and for the educational research community. This includes identifying areas for future research and recommendations, based on my findings.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to the chapter

In this chapter I begin with a summary of key findings from my research study, including an explanation of why these findings matter as a contribution to the existing educational research landscape. I then discuss the implications of the research findings for the education community, in addition to the implications for me as a beginning teacher. Additionally, I identify a few recommendations based on what I learned. This includes recommendations for school boards, professional development, teacher education, and teachers. Subsequently, I identify some important areas requiring further research attention, given what I found in the present study. This chapter will conclude with an overview of the significance of the research findings and for whom they matter in the short and long-term.

5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance

The interviews I conducted with two educators who are committed to anti-bullying education and inclusion revealed findings on the topic of bullying towards students with disabilities that will contribute to the existing research. One of the key findings was the different perceptions and ways of conceptualizing bullying behaviour among teachers. Marilyn recognized ‘bullying’ as any form of intimidation, including subtle behaviour such as excluding others, giving a judgmental ‘look’, or name-calling. On the contrary, Lisa conceptualized bullying in terms of incidences or behaviours that warrant serious adult intervention and consequences, like suspension or expulsion. She mentioned witnessing more subtle behaviours among her students such as making fun of peers or giving a judgmental look, but did not consider these behaviours to be ‘bullying’. The discrepancy between participants’ understandings and conceptualization of bullying was not surprising given the complexities of identifying and defining bullying.
behaviour, which are influenced by teachers’ attitudes towards bullying. The existing literature on bullying recognizes the complexities of bullying behaviour and the differing attitudes and perceptions on the topic. However, the present finding exemplified the inconsistency and misconceptions among teachers around behaviours that could have been considered ‘bullying’, requiring adult intervention. In order to recognize and respond to bullying behaviour, with the ultimate goal of preventing bullying, teachers must have an understanding of the different types of bullying and what that looks like among children. While my study included a small sample of merely two participants, their perceptions and attitudes of what constituted ‘bullying’ varied greatly, which demonstrated the likelihood that teachers at a given school have differing perspectives on the topic.

Moreover, another significant finding that contributes to the existing literature on bullying consisted of teachers’ essential role in creating an inclusive classroom environment as a preventative approach to anti-bullying education. While the research emphasized the need to implement school-wide initiatives and bullying prevention efforts, both participants stressed the need for teachers to take responsibility in creating an inclusive classroom and integrating social justice issues throughout the curriculum as a form of bullying prevention. Bullying prevention does not have to be a separate or ‘extra’ initiative that exists in isolation from classroom practices and activities. My findings revealed that anti-bullying education and prevention can easily be infused throughout the curriculum across many subject areas. This finding contributes to the existing research on bullying since there tends to be a focus on school-wide initiatives, without speaking to the important role teachers play in preventing bullying.

Additionally, with the many responsibilities placed on teachers to cover curriculum expectations and topics, issues such as anti-bullying education can easily be overlooked as not an
essential part of the curriculum. However, my findings revealed how this topic aligns nicely with the values and beliefs engrained in the curriculum, and can easily be integrated throughout many curricular areas and topics. In addition to integrating anti-bullying education throughout the curriculum, a final finding I will present involves teachers’ crucial role in creating an inclusive classroom where students are taught to accept others for who they are, regardless of their disability. Participants mentioned the necessity of educating students about disability to promote empathy and acceptance as a means of reducing the stigma of disability and social exclusion experienced by many student with disabilities. Since the research has shown that many students with disabilities are bullied for reasons that include being different from others in the class and having few friends, it is essential for teachers to make a conscious effort to promote empathy and acceptance of all abilities (Sweeting and West, 2001). This finding is significant because limited research has discussed specific strategies teachers can implement to prevent bullying towards students with disabilities.

5.2 Implications

In this section I discuss the implication of the research findings for both the educational research community and for my own professional identity and practice as a beginning teacher.

5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Research Community

Bullying is a topic that has received much attention in recent years, with extensive research on the subject, and various bullying prevention efforts being implemented throughout school boards and within individual schools. However, the implications of my study includes the need for schools and school boards to provide teachers with practical strategies and resources that can be used in the classroom to promote inclusion and prevent bullying. The literature on anti-bullying education has emphasized the need to implement school-wide initiatives and
efforts. While both participants recognized the importance of these initiatives and have been committed to implementing them in their classrooms, they discussed the immense responsibility they hold as teachers to promote social justice and inclusion in their classroom as a preventative approach to bullying. They also identified challenges they encounter in creating an inclusive classroom to prevent bullying towards students with disabilities. These challenges included the social exclusion experienced by many of these students, and the stigma that still exists around disability. This reflects the need for school boards to provide teachers with strategies and skills to promote inclusion in their classroom, which could include a separate disability education component of bullying prevention initiatives.

Lastly, the lack of consistency regarding perceptions and understandings of bullying between both participants, and teachers in general, implies the need to educate teachers about what behaviours constitute ‘bullying’. The existing research stressed the need to educate students about bullying, but my findings show that teachers do not have a common understanding of bullying. This demonstrates the need to include a component on bullying in teacher education programs, to decrease the discrepancies in teachers’ conceptualizations of bullying. Teachers will hopefully be able to recognize bullying behaviour more easily when they have a better understanding of what it looks like.

5.2.2 Narrow: My own Professional Identity and Practice

As a beginning teacher in today’s society, ‘inclusion’ is a concept that we are taught to embrace and promote within our classrooms. However, I noticed that this term tends to be overused without any real evidence that inclusive practices and approaches are being implemented. My research findings have demonstrated the significance of creating an inclusive classroom for students with disabilities as a preventative approach to anti-bullying education.
While I have learned several strategies to promote inclusion throughout my courses in the MT program, the findings of my study gave me a better understanding of ways to promote inclusion, with specific regards to students with disabilities, and the challenges teachers face in including these students into the classroom. This includes the importance of promoting personal growth and development among students, including emotional and social wellbeing. Also, it is important for teachers to create an inclusive classroom where all students’ needs, interests and abilities are prioritized. This might include educating students about disability and the challenges some students might experience related to their specific disability. The challenges teachers face in including students with disabilities into the classroom consists of a lack of adequate teaching support, resources, and education about how to best include all students into the classroom.

Moreover, through interviewing a teacher and educator who have extensive experience working in schools and demonstrate a commitment to anti-bullying education, I have gained a deeper understanding of both effective practices and challenges faced in preventing bullying towards students with disabilities. Effective practices include preventative approaches to anti-bullying education, such as inclusion, where each student feels valued and accepted as a contributing member of the classroom and school community. This approach involves reducing the power dynamics between teachers and students, having students’ voices heard, and letting students know that teachers care about their wellbeing and are there to support them and facilitate positive learning experiences.

I am fortunate to have been given the opportunity to learn from these committed educators and be able to apply their suggestions for best practice and recommendations in my own teaching practice. I am dedicated to anti-bullying education, and am passionate about working with students with disabilities. The findings from this study have informed my teaching
practice by raising my awareness and knowledge of what bullying looks like, to increase the likelihood of recognizing and preventing bullying. Also, I will continue to demonstrate my commitment to anti-bullying education through integrating the topic throughout the curriculum and creating an inclusive classroom environment.

5.3 Recommendations

In this section I present a range of recommendations, based on what I learned from my research findings. These recommendations are aimed at the following key stakeholders: teachers, professional development, and teacher education programs.

Teachers

- It is important for teachers to make a conscious effort to create an inclusive classroom environment. This includes making sure the classroom is an emotionally safe place where students can express themselves and their feelings. Examples of strategies that can be implemented to create an inclusive classroom include Tribes community-building activities, getting to know each student and their strengths, interests, and abilities, and ensuring students’ cultural backgrounds and ethnicities are represented throughout the classroom and curriculum. An additional way to create an emotionally safe classroom involves making curricular connections to anti-bullying education, educating students about disability and promoting acceptance of differences to reduce the stigma of disability, acting as positive role models for students, and empowering students to take control of their actions and personal development.
- It is important that teachers take responsibility in making valuable use of the various resources available to them to assist in bullying prevention practices. This includes workshops and other resources from external community organizations committed to
issues like bullying and inclusion, books for teachers with practical strategies to promote inclusion and prevent bullying, and children’s literature to address these topics. COPA, a Francophone organization located in Toronto, has many resources for students, parents/caregivers, and educators regarding inclusion, equity, and anti-bullying education. This includes children books, workshops, teacher guides, posters, and a documentary film created by students.

**Professional Development**

- I recommend that teachers and school staff be required to participate in professional development (PD) opportunities around bullying. While most PD on the topic of bullying focuses on strategies to prevent and respond to bullying, I suggest additional PD that focusses on what bullying is, what it looks like and how to identify it, common misconceptions, and some potential barriers to identifying bullying. It should include a focus on verbal bullying, such as name-calling and teasing, the most common and damaging form of bullying, which can easily be overlooked or not taken seriously by adults.

- It is important that teachers receive professional development on the topic of including students with disabilities into the classroom. This should address issues such as challenges they may face integrating into the classroom, ways to reduce the stigma of disability, how to successfully include these students into the classroom, how to promote acceptance of differences among all students, and actions that can be taken to potentially reduce the risk of bullying towards these students.
Teacher Education Programs

- It is important that teacher education programs include more attention to bullying. This can be included in one (or more) of the following courses: Fundamentals of Teaching, Special Education, and/or Health and Physical Education. This component on anti-bullying education should include what it is, what it looks like, how to identify bullying behaviour, strategies to prevent bullying, and ways to incorporate anti-bullying education throughout the curriculum. There should be a section dedicated to bullying towards students with disabilities and strategies that can be used in the classroom to prevent it. Since bullying is a complex issue and can be difficult for teachers to identify among their students, I suggest teacher candidates be given an assignment around bullying that requires a half-day or full-day observation of a classroom other than their practicum classrooms. This would allow them to recognize the complex dynamics of peer relationships, identify effective and ineffective strategies to respond to bullying, and gain insight into the challenges faced by teachers in preventing bullying and potential ways to overcome these challenges.

5.4 Areas for further research

I have identified the following three important areas requiring further research attention, given the findings from the present study.

- Factors that contribute to the social exclusion of students with disabilities and the stigma of disability. I would also like to learn more about specific actions teachers can take to reduce the stigma of disability and create an environment where students with disabilities feel included and accepted. While there is extensive research that exemplifies the social
exclusion of students with disabilities and the overrepresentation of these students as victims of bullying, further research is needed that analyzes factors related to stigma of disability.

- Teachers’ understanding of the role of equity on anti-bullying education. While the present research findings demonstrated educators’ commitment to equity and social justice issues as factors that contribute to a focus on anti-bullying education in their teaching practices, further research could help understand this relationship more clearly. This study highlighted the important connection between educators’ commitment to equity issues and inclusion and a proactive approach to anti-bullying education. However, equity and inclusion are often separate components of school boards policies and protocols. Since educators are expected to put these policies into place through their teaching practices and approaches, it would be valuable for administrators working for School Boards and the Ministry of Education to have teachers’ perspectives on the role of equity on anti-bullying education.

- Teachers’ integration of children’s literature as a way of educating students about disability. The present study showed how educators rely heavily on resources, including children’s books, to teach students about disability and normalize disability for elementary aged students. However, limited research has explored how teachers are using children’s literature in ways similar to those described by both participants in this study. Through getting a better understanding of which types of books teachers are choosing to educate students about disability, how they are integrating it with other subject areas/topics across the curriculum, and potential follow-up lessons and activities, other educators can benefit from this information in their own teaching practices.
5.5 Concluding Comments

To conclude, the current study aimed to gain a better understanding of what bullying towards primary school-aged students with disabilities looks like. Since these students are significantly overrepresented as victims of bullying in comparison to their peers without disabilities, my primary goal involved identifying strategies teachers use to prevent and respond to bullying towards students with disabilities in their classroom. The findings revealed the importance of creating an inclusive classroom, promoting acceptance and empathy of all abilities and exceptionalities, educating students about disability, and integrating anti-bullying education throughout classroom activities and practices. Bullying is a serious issue that can lead to life-long negative outcomes for students. Beaty and Alexeyev (2008) found that bullying impacts as many as 70% of students, which exemplifies the severity of this issue and how seriously bullying should be taken. Furthermore, students who are victims of bullying, including cyberbullying, are at risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010). For this reason, it is essential for teachers to take responsibility of their key role in preventing bullying behaviour. Marilyn and Lisa have demonstrated the positive impact educators can have in reducing bullying through their dedication to anti-bullying education. This includes creating an inclusive classroom and integrating anti-bullying education throughout the curriculum. I hope this research can help teachers and educators gain knowledge and awareness of ways to prevent bullying behaviour towards students with disabilities in their classrooms and schools.
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Appendix A: Letter of Consent

Date: **Sunday, August 2nd, 2015**

Dear __________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying **bullying and students with disabilities** for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is **Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic**. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a **45-60 minute interview** that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.
Sincerely,

Researcher name: Lara Munro

Phone number, email: 514-602-7756, lara.munro@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic
Phone number: _________________ Email: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Lara Munro (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: _______________________________________

Name (printed): ____________________________________

Date: ___________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions

Thank you for participating in this interview. The aim of this research is to learn how primary teachers instructionally respond to bullying behaviour involving students with disabilities in their classroom. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes, and there will be 5 parts to the interview. I will ask you a series of 31 questions focused on what bullying behaviour towards students with disabilities typically looks like, what you look for as indicators of victimization in students with disabilities, and how you instructionally respond to these indicators through your teaching practice. I want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: Background Information

1) What grade(s)/subject(s) do you currently teach?
   - Where do you teach?

2) How many years have you worked as a teacher?
   - How many years have you been teaching at this school?

3) How many years have you been working in an inclusive school setting?
   - What grades/subjects have you taught in this setting?
   - Can you tell me more about the school you currently teach in? (size, demographics, program priorities etc.)

4) Are you involved in any school-wide initiatives, clubs, projects, or extra-curricular activities?
   (If yes)
   - Can you tell me a bit about these programs and your role in them?
   - Are any of them related to issues involving bullying, inclusion of students with various disabilities, diversity, and/or equity?
   (If yes)
   - Can you tell me more about these programs and your specific roles and responsibilities?
5) Do you have any students in your class who have a disability? This includes all types of disabilities: physical, learning disabilities, cognitive, mental health issue, intellectual, etc. What types of disabilities do they have?
   - Of these students, how many are on an I.E.P?
   - Do any of these students have an aide or other educational assistant?
     (if yes)
   - How often is the aide with them in your classroom?
   - Do any of these students leave the classroom on a regular basis to attend specialized programs or to meet with a specialist? (i.e. resource teacher, special education program, psychologist, social worker, speech language pathologist)

6) What prompted you to take on a leadership role in anti-bullying and inclusion awareness in your school? What personal, professional, and educational experiences helped develop this commitment and prepare you for this practice?

Section 2: Beliefs and Experiences

7) What do the terms “bullying” and “inclusion” mean to you?

8) Why is it important for schools and teachers to teach about bullying and inclusion?

9) In your view, what are some ways that the current curriculum addresses the themes of anti-bullying and inclusion? Where do you see spaces for this work in the curriculum? (grades, subjects, strands, policies)

10) What, if anything, do you believe can be added to the curriculum to adequately address these topics?

11) In your experience, how common is bullying amongst your students? What types of bullying do you see enacted in the school, playground, and classroom?

12) How frequently do you observe bullying against students with disabilities?

13) Generally speaking, what are some challenges, based on your experience, which teachers face in recognizing and responding to bullying behaviour in the classroom?

14) More specifically, what are some challenges in recognizing and responding to bullying behaviour against students with disabilities?

15) Based on your experience, can you give some concrete examples of bullying behaviour that you have seen in your classroom? Generally first and then specific to bullying against students with disabilities.

16) What have you observed about some of the characteristics (age, gender, physical features, personality, behaviour in the classroom, academic achievement) of the students who typically exert these bullying behaviours?

17) What are some of the characteristics of the students who are typically victims of this bullying behaviour?
18) What are some ways that you have seen students who are victimized respond to this bullying behaviour?

19) What are different ways that you are aware of the bullying behaviours that happen in your classroom? (i.e. a student tells you that another student is getting made fun of, or the victim him/herself tells you, or you witness a student name-calling another student)

20) What does bullying behaviour towards students with disabilities typically look like? How does the type of bullying behaviour differ depending on the student’s disability?

21) What similarities have you observed in terms of the types of bullying behaviour towards students with disabilities?

22) How do the students with disabilities typically respond to this bullying behaviour?

Section 3: Teacher Practices

23) How do you respond to bullying behaviour when you see it? What instructional responses do you implement?
   a. How do you respond to the student who demonstrated the behaviour?
   b. How do you respond to the student who was victimized?
   c. What are some ways in which you address the issue of bullying to the whole class?

24) Generally speaking, how do your students respond to the approach that you take? What outcomes do you observe?

25) Proactively speaking, in which curriculum areas do you include lessons related to bullying and inclusion? In what ways do you incorporate these topics into your lessons?

26) More specifically, can you give me an example of a lesson that you conducted that integrated themes of anti-bullying and inclusion of students with disabilities?
   a. What grade/subject was the lesson?
   b. How did you situate the lesson into the curriculum?
   c. What were your learning goals?
   d. What opportunities for learning did you create? *what did the students do and why?
   e. How did your students respond to this lesson? What outcomes did you observe from them?

27) What resources do you use to address the topic of bullying against students with disabilities in your classroom? (e.g. books, children’s literature, internet resources, posters/visible messaging, curriculum resources etc.)

28) What resources do you use to instructionally respond to incidences of bullying that you observe in the classroom?
Section 4: Influencing Factors

29) What are some challenges that you face instructionally responding to bullying behaviour in your teaching practice? And what about specifically in terms of bullying against students with disabilities? How do you respond to these challenges? What would further support you in meeting these challenges?

30) What kind of feedback have you had from people outside the classroom regarding your addressing the topics of bullying, diversity, and inclusion in the classroom?

Section 5: Next Steps

31) What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers who are committed to teaching about anti-bullying to foster inclusion of students with disabilities?

I’d like to thank you very much for your time and participation in this interview.