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WHAT RURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN BULLIED CAN
TEACH US ABOUT BULLYING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

By

Sarah Lendt

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctorate of Education
in Counselor Education and Supervision

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, MN

(July, 2022)

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July 2022

What Rural Middle School Students Who Have Been Bullied Can Teach Us About
Bullying: A Phenomenological Study

Sarah Lendt

Date 7/6/2022

This dissertation has been examined and approved by the following members of the
student's committee

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Abstract

School bullying is a significant health concern for youth worldwide. The struggle to combat bullying in schools is an ongoing issue. There is no universally accepted definition for bullying, though there is widespread agreement. The voice and understanding of those that experience bullying the most has not been considered in defining and describing bullying in the literature. This phenomenological study aimed to understand the lived experience of rural middle school students who had been bullied. Participants were rural middle school students, in grades 6-8, who had filed a bullying report in the past two years.

Findings suggested four main themes with one subtheme that indicated rural middle school students had a deeper description of bullying than the accepted definition in the literature. Their descriptions were thick with feelings and emotions demonstrating that bullying is a very personal experience, deep seeded in challenging emotions. Themes also indicated that students had a resilient spirit that gave them great strength to cope. With the voice of students being heard, the experience of bullying for rural middle school students today can be better understood and the work done to prevent harmful long-term consequences can be more effective. Specific areas of future research and suggestions for future interventions are identified.

Keywords adolescence, bullying, rural middle school students, definition of bullying

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I shall remember forever and will never forget

Monday: my money was taken.

Tuesday: names called

Wednesday: my uniform torn.

Thursday: my body pouring with blood

Friday: it's ended

Saturday: freedom.

The final diary pages of a thirteen-year-old boy who was found hanging from the banister in his home on Sunday (Marr & Field, 2001, p.57).

School bullying is a significant health concern for youth worldwide (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Reports on bullying show that over four million school-aged students are victims of bullying each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), 22 percent of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied at school during the school year. School bullying is not a new problem. It has been around for centuries (Harper, 2020; Olweus, 1993; Smith, 1999; Smith et al., 2002; Vaillancourt et al., 2008).

The serious consequences of being involved with school bullying can be life-long and life-threatening. Students involved with school bullying can be physically, psychologically, socially, and academically harmed (Farmer et al., 2011; Nansel et al., 2003; Rabin, 2019; Swearer, Collins & Berry, 2012). The stress related to bullying can have effects that last a lifetime. Even when a child perceives an event as bullying, the hormones in their brain are altered and can lead to mental and physical health issues immediately and later in life (Rabin, 2019).

The struggle to combat bullying behavior effectively in schools is ongoing (Fair & Florell, 2019; Yeager et al., 2015). In the past couple of decades the phenomenon of bullying has been in the forefront of research and political efforts to keep students safe at school (Espelage, 2016; Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), 2022; Stockdale et al., 2002; Swearer et al., 2010; Swearer et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020a). This increased attention on various national and state levels was driven by some highly publicized school shootings and suicides in which the tragic events had been at least partly linked to bullying problems for the students involved (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019; MDE, 2022; Phillips, 2007).

Currently most U.S. states have mandated the implementation of anti-bullying policies and/or laws and most state laws, policies and regulations require school districts to implement a bullying policy with procedures to investigate and respond to bullying when it occurs (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020b). Though the federal role in education is limited, due to the Tenth Amendment, there are certain civil rights that the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR), enforces.

In October 2010, the U.S. Department of Education sent all school districts in the nation a *Dear Colleague Letter* which provided guidelines about school bullying and harassment (MDE, 2022) and stated the importance of reducing bullying in the schools and ensuring a safe learning environment for all students. The letter warns about the often mishandled bullying and harassment complaints that occur in schools and encourages schools to reevaluate the policies and practices the school uses to address bullying and harassment to ensure that they comply with the mandates of the federal civil rights laws:

When responding to incidents of misconduct, schools should keep in mind the following:

The label used to describe an incident (e.g., bullying, hazing, teasing) does not determine how a school is obligated to respond. Rather, the nature of the conduct itself must be assessed for civil rights implications (Office of Civil Rights, 2010).

In response to these letters, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights conducted investigations into bullying and harassment complaints and gave particular schools corrective actions to be sure they were in compliance with the civil rights law. A second guidance letter was sent in 2014 to be sure schools understood the protections for students with disabilities who are bullied (MDE, 2022).

From the 1990's the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) provided assistance to school districts on bullying prevention and intervention until the funding ended (MDE, 2022), but continues to offer support in the way of information of such programs as Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies. In 2014, Minnesota passed the Safe and Supportive Schools Act, described below. (MDE, 2022)

Other organizations also respond to and enforce certain criteria for individuals working with students to protect and keep them safe from bullying. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is a professional national organization that supports school counselors, school counseling students/interns, school counseling program directors/supervisors and school counselor educators. ASCA holds these professionals to certain ethical standards. Within the ethical standards it is written:

School counselors are advocates, leaders, collaborators and consultants who create systemic change by providing equitable educational access and success by connecting their school counseling programs to the district's mission and improvement plans (ASCA, 2016).

The standards continue to include expectations that all students have the right to:

Be respected, be treated with dignity and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates for and affirms all students from diverse populations including but not limited to: ethnic/racial identity, nationality, age, social class, economic status, abilities/disabilities, language, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity, emancipated minors, wards of the state, homeless youth and incarcerated youth. School counselors as social-justice advocates support students from all backgrounds and circumstances and consult when their competence level requires additional support (ASCA, 2016).

The list continues with more expectations including the final expectation that all students have the right to “a safe school environment promoting autonomy and justice and free from abuse, bullying, harassment and other forms of violence” (ASCA, 2016).

In Minnesota, the anti-bullying law, also known as the *Safe and Supportive Schools Act*, utilizes the following definition for bullying:

“Bullying” means intimidating, threatening, abusive, or harming conduct that is objectively offensive and:

(1) there is an actual or perceived imbalance of power between the student engaging in prohibited conduct and the target of the behavior and the conduct is repeated or forms a pattern; or

(2) materially and substantially interferes with a student’s educational opportunities or performance or ability to participate in school functions or activities or receive school

benefits, services, or privileges. (MN. State Legislature, 2020; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020a)

In order to be considered bullying, an action must fit the precise stipulations for inclusion, which is in line with the definition created more than 40 years ago, by Olweus, a research psychologist from Norway. At the time of his research in Norway in the 1970s, the term used in Scandinavia for bullying-like behaviors was “mobbing.” Although the word had different meanings and connotations, the English word “mob” generally relates to a large group of people involved in the bullying-like behavior (Olweus, 1993; Smith et al., 2002). The data collected in his quantitative research showed that a large portion of victimized students were bullied primarily from a single student (Olweus, 1993), thus Olweus believed that *mobbing* did not accurately explain the experiences he was researching, including examples of individuals being bullied from a single student. Olweus (1993) declared that bullying would be defined as an act that is repeated, intentional and has an imbalance of power.

There is no universally accepted definition for bullying, though there is widespread agreement (Swearer et al., 2010; Younan, 2019). Although Olweus’s definition is most commonly utilized throughout the research on bullying, there is considerable debate on how best to define bullying (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002; Haines-Saah et al., 2018; Monks & Smith, 2006; Swearer et al., 2010; Vaillancourt et al., 2008; Younan, 2019). In addition, the term bullying is often synonymous with terms such as peer harassment, peer victimization or aggression. These all vary slightly when defined:

- **Peer harassment:** often used in conjunction with bullying, though it often tends to be used for adult or adolescent behaviors, such as in sexual harassment or racial harassment (Smith et al., 2002).

- **Peer victimization** is used interchangeably with bullying, but can take various forms, including teasing, deliberate exclusion, being the target of malicious gossip and experiencing physical threats or violence (Bond et al., 2001).
- **Aggression:** of which bullying has been called a subset (Farmer et al., 2011; Monks & Smith, 2006; Olweus, 2013), is referred to as a “range of behaviors that can result in both physical and psychological harm” to self, others, or objects (Cherry, 2020, p.1). Also defined as an act that is intended to injure or irritate another (Eron, 1987; Olweus, 1973).

The term and definition for the phenomenon of bullying behavior has changed throughout history based on what was being observed or measured by the researcher (Smith et al., 2002), yet the term that is most frequently used in the understanding of bullying is still the timeworn definition developed by Olweus. The problem with utilizing a longstanding definition created by a researcher 40 years ago, in good-faith efforts to use a shared definition to conduct research and provide prevention and intervention strategies for bullying behaviors, becomes extensive. The problems include: whether the definition used adequately addresses students’ present experience; bullying behaviors continue; and students may feel adults are not intervening in matters that seem important and harmful to them even though they do not meet the Olweus definition of bullying (Hellstrom et al., 2015; Salmon et al., 2018; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). When students’ voices are not considered in determining what constitutes bullying, it creates a status hierarchy, an imbalance of power, which can be as detrimental as bullying itself (Garandean et al., 2014). The power of determining what the bullying experience is, has resided with the researchers. When school bullying is being defined in the literature and researchers are attempting to make

sense of school bullying, minimal efforts have been made to include the voice of the students, those that are actually having the experience.

The experiences students have in school changes over time. Experiences are not the same as they were 40 years ago. What was considered bullying 40 years ago may be different from what is considered bullying today. With the “growth of technology creating a world without boundaries” (Hersch, 1999, p.19), the language that is relevant to middle school students today, the means of social connection and interaction and utilization of social media, peer interactions and experiences are sure to look different from 40 years ago. Adolescents have been described as a “tribe apart” (Hersch, 1999). They are isolated, alone and are not being heard (Hersch, 1999). “Youngsters have lost more than secure families and adult interactions; they grow up in a world that lacks consistency and structure” (Hersch, 1999, p. 19). The experience of adolescence has changed. Hersch (1999) encourages that adults need to listen to adolescents to understand their experiences. Reconsidering how bullying is understood seems appropriate to keep students safe from the harmful effects of behaviors that threaten or violate them.

Although school bullying affects students of all ages from preschool to 12th grade (Olweus, 1993; Swearer et al., 2012), the greatest prevalence of bullying has been shown to occur during middle school (Nansel et al., 2001; Swearer et al., 2012). Studies have considered various factors influencing the prevalence of bullying, particularly considering the impact of the size of a school and community on prevalence (Klein & Cornell, 2010). While studies have considered the ecological risk/protective factors for bullying (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Katz et al., 2019; Swearer & Espelage, 2004), relatively few studies have specifically focused on understanding the description of bullying from the perspective of rural middle school students who have been bullied.

Utilizing this gap in the research and to better understand the phenomenon of bullying from the student's perspective, this research study will explore the general research question of "How do rural middle school students who have been bullied describe bullying?" A qualitative phenomenological research design using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions lasting approximately thirty to forty-five minutes was utilized. The goal of the interviews was to understand the lived experiences of rural middle school students who made a report of bullying during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. Requests for participation were sent to all eligible middle school students at two rural South Central Midwestern schools. Students who made a bullying report during the two year period and were in grades 6-8 when the report was made were invited to participate. Interviews were conducted with students who returned their consent and assent forms. Most phenomenological studies are conducted on small sample sizes, so the researcher is able to maintain the attention to detail of each participant and truly understand their lived experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Bullying

Despite the millions of school children affected nationwide and the increased national exposure, the problem of bullying continues. It is a core issue in the development and behavior of youth today (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). School bullying and bullying are used interchangeably throughout this study to refer to bullying that is happening in the school. Bullying in schools is a widespread problem affecting the lives of most students at one point or another.

What is known about bullying currently is it can take the form of physical aggression, verbal abuse, or control of social interactions to harm or humiliate a victim (Olweus, 1993). Similar to bullying is cyberbullying, which involves aggression or control through social media

or online platforms. Cyberbullying is considered to be a different experience from traditional bullying.

Two categories of bullying include direct and indirect bullying. Direct bullying can include any physical actions such as hitting, kicking, grabbing, pushing, shoving on purpose, and theft of money or property through force or fear or verbal actions such as name calling, threatening or teasing in a hurtful way. Indirect bullying includes actions that incorporate relational behaviors such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, racial and sexual bullying and more recently cyberbullying (Cornell & Mehta, 2011).

Middle School Students

“To successfully negotiate the developmental transition from youth to maturity, adolescents of many species must survive the risks and stressors of this disequilibrating passage while acquiring the skills necessary for independence and success in adult life” (Spear, 2000, p. 111).

Middle school students are shown to experience the greatest levels of bullying (Hoover et al., 1992; Nansel et al., 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Swearer et al., 2012). These students are generally considered to be in grades six to eight, or students of the ages of 11-14. This age marks the beginning of the period of adolescence, a period that is dedicated to the developmental task of identity development (Bauer et al., 2007; Pellegrini, 2002; Santrock, 2019).

Students at this age have a great deal to navigate. They are at a critical period of development that involves great challenges socially and emotionally (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Developing social relationships is one of the key developmental events during adolescence, meaning that peer relationships become increasingly important (Nansel et al., 2003; Vernon,

2009). Navigating social relationships and the emotions that go along with that can be challenging. Popularity, gossiping, growing apart from a good friend, trusting others, seeing friends change, embarrassing moments, receiving messages that hurt your feelings, people bragging about doing things they are not supposed to do, worrying if people like you, wishing you had a best friend, having parents not like one of your friends, not having the right clothes to wear- these are all daily discomforts that students endure socially (Pickhardt, 2017; Vernon, 2009). What students learn and how they learn to behave and interact with others during middle school can carry with them into adulthood (Teach.com, 2018).

The key developmental task during adolescence, identity development, means that adolescents are faced with the task of no longer simply living by parental dictates, but rather beginning to develop their own value system (Crothers et al., 2006). In attempting to meet the task of identity development, students begin looking to their peers and teachers for guidance. This requires adolescents to begin separating from their parents, which can be a painful distancing experience (Pickhardt, 2017).

These events are natural developmental experiences. Added to these developmental events is the impact of the transition to middle school. Some students have been found to experience an increase in psychological distress and a decrease in academic motivation and achievement during the transition to middle school (Nansel et al., 2003). Involvement with bullying during this transition adds to the risk factors for navigating this challenging developmental period (Nansel et al., 2003).

A culture of bullying is a pervasive phenomenon among middle school students and should be an important consideration in bullying prevention efforts (Unnever & Cornell, 2003).

There are many normal developmental tasks occurring at this time, as explained above, but bullying should not be considered one of them (Coloroso, 2008).

Rural Schools and Bullying Issues

Students of rural communities may be at a higher risk for bullying, victimization and ongoing emotional problems (Evans et al., 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the percentage of student's ages 12-18 who reported being bullied at school during the school year was highest for rural schools (27.7%) compared to city (22.4), suburban (20.5) and town (21.7) locales. Some small scale studies have shown that students in rural areas report higher levels of victimization ranging from 33% (Price et al., 2013) to 82.3% (Dulmus et al. 2004). Rural areas tend to expose students to greater stressors such as isolation, boredom, and limited community resources (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

Generally, a rural area is considered one with fewer than 50,000 residents (Smalley et al., 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2021) the 46 million U.S. residents living in rural areas was 14 % of the U.S. population (Dobis, Krumel, Cromartie, Conley, Sanders, & Orti, 2021). Additional information indicates that the U.S. poverty rates in 2019 were higher at 15.4 percent in non-metro (rural) areas than in metro (urban) areas at 11.9 percent (Economic Research Services, 2019). Additional characteristics of rural areas may include that people tend to be relatively homogeneous as to racial and ethnic composition, hold strong ties to cultural beliefs and have less access to mental health services. Part of the problem of inability to access mental health services is lack of availability and the issue of stigma. In smaller rural communities, it is often difficult to find mental health services. In addition, anonymity regarding personal issues decreases in smaller communities. These issues

and community characteristics create additional stressors for students in rural areas (Smalley et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

Effective intervention in the phenomenon of bullying cannot occur until a description of the experience of those who are bullied is heard. Those preparing interventions must understand the experience of bullying from those most affected. It is important to understand the lived experience of rural middle school students, those who have been noted to be experiencing it the most.

Within the literature, middle school students are reported to experience a peak in bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Hoover et al., 1992; Olweus, 1993; Swearer et al., 2012). Within this population, rural students may be at an even higher risk when it comes to bullying (Evans et al., 2017). The students that are experiencing bully-like behaviors the most are not having a voice in helping the world understand the experience. School bullying, an experience that is had by students, is understood using definitional guidelines almost 40 years old, by adults with power, and the problem continues. Preventing bullying-like behaviors is imperative for the safety and well-being of students (Coloroso, 2008; Garbarino & DeLara, 2002).

It is important to consider the culture of students today and understand the lived experience of bullying had by students, rather than providing students with prevention and intervention tools that fit a description created by adults, that may not be culturally relevant to students' current environment. The power of defining an event should reside with those that are experiencing the event (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Minichiello & Kottler, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to understand the lived experience of rural middle school students who have been bullied. The study examined the experience of bullying for rural middle school students today. The study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research approach, shaped by the paradigm of social constructivism, and guided by the use of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions related to middle school students lived experience of bullying. The theory of social constructionism framed the study by questioning the language used to understand bullying. Interview questions included:

- 1) How would you describe bullying?
 - a) Why do kids bully do you think?
- 2) What does bullying look like here at school?
 - a) Is there bullying that happens at school that adults are not aware of?
 - b) When students are bullied, where do they find the best help?
 - c) In your opinion, what should be acceptable behaviors at school?
 - d) In your opinion, what should be unacceptable behaviors at school?
- 3) When is a behavior a joke and when is it bullying?
- 4) If you were asked to define bullying, how would you define it?

It is important to understand the true lived experience of students in order to recognize, report and stop the behaviors from continuing. As our Western culture changes and becomes increasingly complex, it is important to understand how these changes influence the experience of students. Students live the experience of bullying-like behaviors day in and day out, whether directly or indirectly. This study aimed to explore the lived experience of rural middle school students who had been bullied. With the voice of students being heard, the experience of

bullying for rural middle school students today can be better understood and the work done to prevent harmful long-term consequences can be more effective.

Research Question

One broad research question was created based on a gap identified through a review of the literature on school bullying. The grand research question was used to guide this phenomenological study and determine particular interview questions that were used with participants of the study. The grand research question was: “How do rural middle school students who have been bullied describe bullying?”

Rationale for Qualitative Research and Phenomenology Approach

Some studies have considered student perceptions of the experience of bullying but have either utilized quantitative approaches (Bauer et al., 2007; Frisen et al., 2008; Harris & Petrie, 2002; Nansel et al., 2003; Ttofi & Farrington, 2008; Varjas et al., 2009) or qualitatively have conducted focus groups (Cunningham et al., 2016; Hellstrom et al., 2015). Very few researchers have interviewed students individually to assess their understanding of bullying. There seems to be a gap in the literature that considers the essence of students’ voices and their lived experience with understanding bullying. In addition, there is limited research that focuses on the experience of rural middle school students with bullying.

Utilizing a phenomenological approach for interviewing students allowed for a deeper understanding of the culture of students and their experience of bullying. Phenomenological studies focus on “describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p.76). A good start to addressing the bullying problem was to listen to the description of the phenomenon from the students having the experience. Some studies express concern that students reporting bullying via self-report measures may inflate

reports of bullying if they fail to distinguish it from other forms of peer conflict (Cornell & Mehta, 2011). If students feel violated and report being bullied, it is important to listen to what they are experiencing as opposed to worrying about validating their report based on current definitions created by researchers.

Although other qualitative approaches could have been chosen for this research study, phenomenology was deemed most appropriate. Other qualitative approaches considered for the current research study were ethnography and participatory action research. Ethnography would be an interesting approach for this kind of study to learn more about the entire culture of rural middle school students (Creswell, 2013). Because the goal of this study was to learn about one particular aspect or phenomenon of the students' culture, the experience of bullying, ethnography was not selected. Participatory action research was another approach that was considered, but at this time, just having the voice of the students being heard will be the empowering action. Participatory action researchers help participants "co-create their reality through participation, experience and action" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 376). Although it would be a great study to have students participate in creating a research study related to the phenomenon of bullying, at this time it was decided to focus on the description of bullying and to utilize the findings to support and inform future research.

With approval of the University's Institutional Review Board, as well as the administration of both the rural schools I worked with, I studied the description of bullying with five rural middle school students. Students who made formal reports of bullying were asked to participate in the study. Student assent and parental consent were obtained. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews that were held within the students' school, as to offer the most natural setting. Due to COVID-19 and the impact it has

had on schools, the participant criteria expanded from an original consideration of interviewing sixth, seventh and eighth graders in the 2020-2021 school year who made a bullying report to include students who were in sixth, seventh and eighth grade and made a bullying report anytime between the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and then analyzed for themes and meaning units to identify the essence of the description of bullying. To support the findings from the semi-structured, open-ended interviews and to achieve triangulation, a bullying report providing initial data on the students' bullying experience was also utilized, as well as notes taken throughout the study by the researcher. After preliminary analysis of the data, to establish credibility the researcher consulted with the participants and utilized peer review, to authenticate the themes. Coding categories were developed and refined on an ongoing basis. Student participation remained anonymous, and results of the study will be shared with the participants and school administration.

Researcher Perspective

My background, experiences and biases that may impact the study will be bracketed before collecting data. I am currently a doctoral student, an adjunct professor for a graduate program in the Midwest region of the United States, a middle school counselor, a wife, and a mother of two adolescents. I identify as a middle-aged, middle-class, White, cisgender female. I was born and raised in the Midwest and currently live in a rural farming community in the Midwest. My professional experiences within the counseling discipline have included a mental health counselor for youth and families, a school counselor in both suburban and rural areas of the Midwest, a parent educator for families in rural areas and a counselor educator for a university in the Midwest.

I moved to a rural area 18 years ago. I have learned and lived some unique experiences associated with rural communities. I moved from Minneapolis to marry in 2002. I had been teaching in a college setting in a diverse community in the Twin Cities. Coming to a small rural town, I wanted to carry and share my knowledge; transfer what I was doing in the Twin Cities to my new community. After some time and efforts in developing training programs for daycare providers, it appeared that the community could use information on stress. I created a program called Mastering Stress. I eagerly passed out fliers, put an ad in the paper, rented a space to present and no one came, not even my husband. With great sadness, I asked my husband about the lack of support, he said people will not talk about stress in public. This was my first realization of the challenges that could be present in a rural community.

Other experiences that are common in a rural community include legal issues published in the local paper for all to read and people being judged by their last name- a reputation that carries through the generations. Although having normal problems such as stress has become more acceptable, other things are not as acceptable, and having the town know about the problems one is dealing with seems to carry a heavy load. This is an important factor when it comes to bullying. To make a report of bullying in the first place is a challenge plagued by stigma (Stockdale et al., 2002) but to do so in a small rural town carries more of a risk. Word travels fast and many people may know that a person is having this challenge. People may be judged for their experience with bullying and consequently may be ostracized. A common concern for those reporting is whether anything will change anyway. In requesting participation for my study, small town stigma may present an issue. I will have to present my words thoughtfully in my request for participation in hopes to overcome hesitation people may have.

Finding one's place in a rural community takes some work. In a tight-knit community, inclusion can be a challenge. How must it feel for students? Bullying is a problem that occurs for many students. For middle school students, normal development includes attempting to find one's place and be included. How is the problem of bullying for those that live in rural communities? I am curious about the lived experience of bullying for rural middle school students. In the words of rural middle school students, I want to understand the experience of bullying.

Helping children and students be successful has been a purpose that I have continuously advocated for and integrated into the work I do. Inclusion has been an issue that I have been sensitive to for as long as I can recall. I did not experience bullying as a child, but I have heard many stories throughout my career. When my daughter was in the second grade, she experienced some mean behaviors from her peers, and again in the seventh grade. Working with students and collaborating with staff and parents as a school counselor, I have heard many perspectives on bullying. Parents wondering how to help their children, concerned that bullying is so prevalent and that nothing changes; students feeling concerned that nothing is done about the bullying that they endure; and staff reporting that the word *bullying* is overused. I have heard school staff discussing the stories and incidents of favored students' continued bullying behaviors at the same time promoting these students because of other skills or talents they have, particularly athletic, and therefore dismissing the bullying behaviors. And yet others, community members of our small rural town, speaking declaredly that bullying is not really a problem and that it is a 'rite of passage.'

I believe that because we are all human beings, if someone is hurting, especially in a place they should be feeling safe and developing themselves for later success, and the hurt

continues, there is injustice. I find myself asking, what are we missing? Why does bullying continue?

With regards to biases, I expect to find that students' description of bullying will differ from the set of criteria in the literature that defines bullying. I expect that students will feel that they are not heard or understood in their experiences with bullying-like experiences. I expect to find that in rural areas students feel more hopeless, with few options of what to do and where to find respite. Finally, I expect that when given the opportunity to share their thoughts openly without specific guidelines or definitions provided, students will appreciate the opportunity to share their thoughts and will have a breadth of knowledge to share about their understanding of and experience with bullying.

My personal biases include a strong dislike for bullying. This topic may be very difficult for me because I tend to feel sad when people are bullied. I wish people naturally took good care of one another. It is also something I am passionate about, and I believe I can be a strong advocate for students and an appropriate person to share their voice. Journaling and consulting will be very important for me during this process.

Theoretical Perspective

The use of social constructionism theory will offer an important theoretical perspective to explore this topic. Social constructionism has been used throughout the social sciences in consideration of culture, language, and social interactions of all kinds. Social constructionism considers the things we take for granted as potentially problematic (Burr, 2003). It also considers that the ways in which we generally understand the world are historically and culturally specific and that the forms of knowledge that develop within a culture are a product of it (Burr, 2003). Because bullying experiences have changed over time and rural middle school students'

experiences with bullying are unique to their culture at any given moment in time, social constructionism provides a strong theoretical paradigm for exploring this experience with rural middle school students.

Social constructionism is used in this study as a way of critically examining the language that is used for what has long been termed and defined as bullying. Within the scope of this study, social constructionism provides a framework to consider the culture of rural middle school students and attempt to understand their lived experience of bullying. This is in contrast to assuming the descriptions or language that has been used for decades in the explanation of bullying fits for students' current experiences.

The bullying phenomenon has been around for centuries. One tenet of social constructionism is that knowledge and social action go together, meaning that descriptions or constructions of the world maintain or exclude certain behaviors. If researchers and intervention experts are using particular criteria to explain bullying and middle school students, who appear to be at highest risk for such behaviors, are experiencing something different, it is important to listen to the voices of students and understand what they are experiencing. With knowledge of students' lived experience of bullying, the most effective support and interventions can be offered.

Social constructionism also maintains that the constructs our society creates are wrapped in power relations and allow people to treat others in particular ways (Burr, 2003). Within the research literature, power continues to be given to those who are determining the definition of bullying, with little acknowledgement for the voice of those that are experiencing the bullying. Presently, researchers determine if an action fits the current criteria of bullying; whether interventions should be considered under the term bullying using those criteria; and whether

particular students are labeled bully, victim, or bystander or if their problem does not fit under the definition of bullying using those criteria.

Summary of Introduction

In this chapter, school bullying and the ongoing implications for safety and well-being for students were described. Particular focus was given to middle school students, who are reported to experience bullying at higher levels than other students. National prevalence rates and continued occurrence of bullying behaviors over numerous decades was discussed. Additionally, the specific characteristics of rural communities and effects of bullying in such communities were considered.

Through a social constructionist perspective, the gap that emerged in the literature was accessing the voice of the students who are experiencing the phenomenon of bullying at the greatest levels. Particularly hearing the voice of rural middle school students' lived experience of bullying was discovered as a gap in the literature. The purpose of this phenomenological study was described as an exploration of the lived experience of rural middle school students who had been bullied. The grand research question was defined as, "How do rural middle school students who have been bullied describe bullying?"

Phenomenological design is a qualitative approach that will provide a framework for exploring the lived experience of rural middle school students who have been bullied. Based on the knowledge of bullying for rural middle school students, this research intends to add to the research literature and inform experts in the area of bullying research of the importance of student voice in developing an understanding of an experience primarily affecting students as well as providing direction for future research.

Phenomenology itself is a philosophy. The purpose of phenomenology is to investigate meaning of a lived experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Phenomenological assumption includes the commitment to understanding a phenomenon as it is actually experienced by the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The subjective experience of the phenomenon is considered along with the shared objective experience of others (Creswell, 2013), while the researcher brackets their own experience to better understand the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Added to the philosophical basis of phenomenology, the inclusion of a constructivist assumption will also be adopted for this study. Constructivist assumption follows the idea that people develop subjective meanings of their experiences negotiated by social and historical factors (Creswell, 2013). It is important to consider the cultural and historical norms of rural middle school students today to better understand the bullying experience.

My experiences and values impacted my decision to explore this research topic and most certainly impacted decisions throughout the research process, so an exploration of my perspective and biases was also offered.

Overview of Remaining Chapters

The following chapters will provide additional background information for this study. Chapter two provides a description of the theory of social constructionism used as a framework for this study. Furthermore, chapter two will provide a review of the literature in areas of bullying, middle school students development, bullying within this age group, and characteristics of rural students and their unique experiences with bullying. Chapter three will consist of a detailed description of the research methods and definitions of qualitative research, phenomenological design and the theory of social constructionism. Chapter three will also include data collection and analysis procedures, address issues of trustworthiness and credibility,

and provide an account of the researcher's worldview. The remaining chapters will provide detailed descriptions of what was learned through data collection and analysis. Themes will be identified and supported by the participating co-researchers and then the study will conclude with limitations as well as directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study is designed to be a qualitative inquiry using the theoretical lens of social constructionism to understand the experience of rural middle school students who have been bullied. Social constructionism is used as a foundation for this inquiry and will be described before a critical review of the existing literature. A review of the literature, for this study, will consider the areas of; bullying, middle school student's development and bullying within this age group, and characteristics of rural students and their unique experiences with bullying.

Social Constructionism as a Foundation for Research

Language provides the basis for our thoughts (Burr, 2003). In addition, language constructs the world. The ways in which we describe ourselves, others, and events in our world, determine our actions as individuals or as a society and in turn influence our actions and treatment of others (Burr, 2003). These are basic tenets of social constructionism. The language that is used and the cognition that is carried in words are intimately connected to our social structures and practices (Gergen, 2009). Youth continue to be positioned at the bottom of our social ladder, when experiences that are primarily had by them are explained and determined by adults and researchers. The language that is used has practical consequences for those involved.

Historically and throughout various areas of study, culturally and intellectually, there have been theories and claims about the truth and appropriate rules and structure. In the medieval period, the church was the sole arbitrator of truth. Since then, numerous fields have held authority on popular truth (Lock & Strong, 2010). According to social constructionists, truth and knowledge is historically and culturally specific; we need to account for how the world is at the current time (Gergen, 2009). "For the constructionist, our actions are not constrained by anything

traditionally accepted as true, rational, or right. Standing before us is a vast spectrum of possibility; an endless invitation to innovation” (Gergen, 2009, p. 5).

One aspect of social constructionism that will be considered in this study is the stance of critical perspective. This is a perspective that may reveal “the operations of the social world and the political apportioning of power that is often accomplished unawares, so as to change these operations and replace them with something that is more just” (Lock & Strong, 2010, p.8). The central feature of human activities, according to social constructionism, is meaning and understanding (Lock & Strong, 2010). The meanings given to words vary between different situations. These differences can be minor or they can have a significant impact on human experience. The social practices and sharing of language within a culture construct who a person becomes (Lock & Strong, 2010).

Social constructionism has developed its ideas from a variety of disciplines. It has drawn on work of individuals in the humanities and literary criticism, such as Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Its cultural base is postmodernism, but it has its intellectual roots in sociological writings (Lock & Strong, 2010). Social constructionist research has often focused on challenging oppressive and discriminatory practices in the “micro structures of language” as well as the “macro linguistic and social structures in framing our social and psychological life” (Burr, 2003, p.20). When power is referred to, social constructionist view this as an effect of language, an effect of being able to have a voice (Burr, 2003).

The ways in which researchers make sense of bullying and the terms *bully*, *victim*, and *bystander*, place these participating individuals in a particular position within society. If researchers determine what constitutes bullying and the voice of those experiencing bullying or bullying-like behaviors is not considered, a student’s perspective of bullying is ignored. Because

of the criteria for inclusion, the experience may be misunderstood and may keep that individual with limited support and no voice. This is problematic.

In utilizing social constructionism as a theoretical perspective for this study, I hope to consider the blend of the micro and macro structures of language and social structures to consider the lived experience rural middle school students who have been bullied. I want to give voice to and increase the level of power given to rural middle school students who are reported to experience the greatest levels of bullying, and to better understand the experience from their perspective.

Bullying

The experience of bullying is a significant issue facing our youth and school systems today. It has serious immediate and lifelong consequences for those involved (Salmon et al., 2018; Swearer et al., 2012; Ttofti & Farrington, 2008). It is an issue that has been considered and discussed for over a hundred years and continues to be a serious health concern for students worldwide (Crothers et al., 2006; Nansel et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2002; Volk et al., 2017).

The ways that the problem of school bullying has been approached in the literature, the dominant discourse, determines how people talk and think about bullying (Horton, 2016). Much of the literature has focused on measuring prevalence of bullying; pinpointing characteristics of the bully, victim or bystander; suggesting causes or reasons for the occurrence of bullying; or suggesting and measuring effectiveness of intervention strategies (Bradshaw, 2015; Cross et al., 2011). However, considering the lived experience from the students' who have had the experience has not been adequately addressed in prior research.

Impact of bullying

Exposure to bullying influences students' physical and emotional well-being in many ways. The negative outcomes that are associated with bullying include poorer psychosocial adjustment, academic challenges and mental health problems for all involved (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Fekkes et al., 2004; Golmaryami et al., 2016; Nansel et al., 2001; Farmer et al., 2011; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2003; Ttofi & Farrington, 2008; Van der Wal et al., 2003). Students who feel unsafe in school are more likely to miss school or drop out of school (Klein & Cornell, 2010).

Some studies have examined common characteristics of students who bully and those that are victims of bullying. Some studies found that students who have mental health needs are more victimized by bullying. And yet other data suggest that bullying is a pervasive problem that impacts students regardless of particular personal characteristics (Dulmus et al., 2004). Overall, research shows that both victims and perpetrators of bullying have high numbers of physical and psychological symptoms, some of which include: feeling sad most days (Glew et al., 2005); depression (Salmon et al., 2000; Van der Wal et al., 2003); anxiety (Bradshaw, 2016; Crothers et al., 2006; Fekkes et al., 2006); aggressive attitudes (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Farmer et al., 2011); alcohol use (Peleg-Oren et al., 2012) low self-esteem (Bradshaw, 2015; Crothers et al., 2006; Espelage & Swearer, 2004) and sometimes suicidal ideation (Bradshaw, 2015; Crothers et al., 2006; Fekkes et al., 2006). It has been documented that both former bullies and victims exceedingly utilize society's health and social support systems throughout their lifetimes and often students who are victimized are at a socioeconomic disadvantage into adulthood (Macmillan & Hagan, 2004).

Those who frequently bully have been found to have poor academic achievement and struggle with career performance later in life (Carney & Merrell, 2001). Among the younger children who bully, common symptoms include headaches and bed-wetting (Fekkes et al., 2004). Research examining victimization profiles suggest that youth who are victimized by peers are more sad, anxious, withdrawn and tend to have lower self-esteem than their peers (Fekkes et al., 2006). Suffering occurs for all involved.

Often popular thought has been that students who have been bullied will “get over it” or students who were victims of bullying would need to learn some social skills to help them deal with bullying (Damiani, 2011). But it is now understood that bullying is a barrier to students’ development and it can leave lasting and destructive results (Dulmus et al., 2004; Farrington, 1993). Bullying directly influences the quality of victims’ emotional lives, as well as impacting their academic development, their relationships with peers and adults and their sense of peace and well-being (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Overall, the impact and consequences of bullying is considered a serious form of violence and should not be taken lightly. The effects of school bullying negatively influence students, school systems, communities, and our entire society.

Terminology

A problem in the literature on bullying is how the word bullying is defined. There are many terms in the literature that are similar to bullying and may or may not be utilized by researchers or adults when determining bullying behavior. It is difficult for those intervening and attempting to prevent bullying behaviors to determine where teasing ends and bullying begins (Hellstrom et al., 2015), and differentiating the wide variety of similar terms in between. Bullying has been described as fitting under the umbrella of violence or being a subset of aggression (Monks & Smith, 2006; Olweus, 2013), or a form of peer victimization, but has

typically been separated from these other terms in the literature because it involves repeated aggression and because there is a power disparity between aggressor and victim.

Aggression is defined as an act that is intended to injure or irritate another (Eron, 1987; Olweus, 1973). Aggression can involve hitting, verbal attacks such as teasing, and social and relational issues like spreading rumors or excluding individuals (Klein & Cornell, 2010).

Aggressive behavior has been defined as negative acts carried out intentionally to harm another (Farmer et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2002), to injure or irritate another (Eron, 1987), and to inflict discomfort upon another individual (Olweus, 1973).

More recently the extent of bullying research has included explanations that include cyberbullying and discriminatory harassment. *Cyberbullying* includes the use of electronics to send or post negative messages (Varjas et al., 2009). Cyberbullying involves aggressive behavior inflicted through the internet or electronic devices (Kowalski et al., 2008; Salmon et al., 2018). Some describe cyberbullying as bullying that transcends the physical world and enters the technology world (McQuade et al., 2009). Others describe cyberbullying as having similar characteristics as bullying but being a very distinct experience (Kowalski et al., 2008). The power imbalance of cyberbullying can also take varied forms as traditional bullying: physical, social, relational or psychological (Kowalski et al., 2014). The distinct differences include: bullies of cyberbullying are often anonymous. This carries with it the power of deindividuation where people will say and do things anonymously with greater power than if they were in a face-to-face situation (Kowalski et al., 2014). Some bullies are more likely to bully when they are not seen or known. Another key difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying is that of accessibility to the victim. Traditional bullying occurs primarily at school. Cyberbullying can reach victims all day, every day. Examples of cyberbullying include abusive or threatening

comments, accessing or misusing personal information, impersonating someone, and circulating harassing information.

Discriminatory harassment involves aggressive behavior that targets an individual's personal characteristics (race, culture, sexual orientation or gender identity, body shape or size or appearance; Salmon et al., 2018).

Harassment is often used in conjunction with bullying. It often tends to be used for adult or adolescent behaviors, such as in sexual harassment or racial harassment (Smith et al., 2002).

Peer victimization is defined as any form of aggression in which one student intends to hurt another and can take various forms, including teasing, deliberate exclusion, being the target of malicious gossip and experiencing physical threats or violence (Bond et al., 2001). *Peer victimization* is also used interchangeably with bullying. In general, it is considered any form of aggression in which one student intends to hurt another (Card et al., 2007, as cited in Klein & Cornell, 2010).

Teasing as defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “making fun of or to disturb or annoy by persistent irritating or provoking” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Teasing is generally quite acceptable, but if it includes intimidation and results in distress, then it is more in line with bullying (Pearce & Thompson, 1998). It generally has a milder connotation of verbal and playful aggression (Smith et al., 2002).

Violence is defined as “the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage or destroy” (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Varied Views of Bullying

Although researchers traditionally operationalize bullying as a repeated pattern of aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power and that purposefully inflicts harm on

the bullying victim (Olweus, 1993; Sherer & Nickerson, 2010), there are various ways that it has been defined in the literature. Some researchers take issue with the traditionally used definition of bullying, questioning its relevance to the actual experience of individuals. These researchers note that some behaviors may not intend to cause hurt or harm to another but is taken that way by the victim (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002). Likewise, they argue that one incident of bullying without being repeated may cause long lasting fear or long-term negative effects (Monks & Smith, 2006). Other researcher's state that a broader term such as peer victimization should be utilized over the term bullying as bullying is overused and therefore loses its significance and impact (Haines-Saah et al., 2018). Another consideration that researchers have shared is the idea of incorporating cyberbullying into the definition of bullying (Varjas et al., 2009).

The first studies on the phenomenon of peer bullying started in Sweden in the late 1960s and early 1970s using the term *mobbning* or *mobbing* to mean a large group of people engaged in harassment (Olweus, 1993). It was introduced initially in the context of racial discrimination and was used to describe group efforts of harassment (Heinemann, 1969; Olweus, 2013). In 1974, when Dan Olweus, a Norwegian psychology research professor, began his studies, he felt the term mobbing did not accurately describe the experience of peer aggression occurring in schools, finding that the term bullying seemed more appropriate (Olweus, 2013). Olweus is considered one of the originators of bullying research. Due to his pioneering work in the field much knowledge about bullying has been gained.

In the traditional definition, created by Olweus, it is made clear that behavior inclusive of the term bullying does not include aggressive behavior between two students of approximately the same strength, nor does it include teasing meant to be playful (1993). In line with this, another definition used in the literature to examine prevalence rates of bullying includes:

When another student or students say or do nasty or unpleasant thing. When others take away, destroy or hide another student's stuff. When others hit or push another student. But it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength quarrel or fight (Fekkes et al., 2004, p. 18).

Originally, Olweus (1993) confirmed that the definition of bullying should not include single incidences of aggression. He later adjusted the definition to include 'usually/typically repeated pattern of behavior' due to the changes in relevant experiences of youth, such as cyberbullying (Olweus, 2013). The three main components of Olweus' definition that have been criteria of bullying throughout the literature include intentionality, repetition and an imbalance of power.

The School Climate Bullying Survey defines bullying as:

The use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten or embarrass another person on purpose. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is not bullying when two students who are about the same in strength or power have a fight or argument (Cornell, 2012, p.2).

In the same survey, but the one used for elementary students, the following description of bullying is used:

There are lots of ways to bully someone. Bullying means hurting someone who is smaller or weaker. A bully can hurt you by teasing or calling you names. A bully can hurt you by hitting you or threatening to hit you. A bully can hurt you by getting everyone to be mean to you. It is not bullying when two students have a fight or argument and are about the same in strength or power (Cornell, 2012, p. 5).

In the highly utilized Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), a questionnaire is provided to the students about the prevalence of bullying in their school. Prior to any questions, students are provided with a definition of what does and does not constitute bullying. Within the OBPP, an individual is being bullied when he or she is the target of aggressive behavior by another student(s), when a power imbalance occurs and when the bullying behavior happens more than once. All three conditions must be present for the actions to constitute bullying behavior. After reading the definition, students then are asked how often they have been bullied in the past two months (Bauer et al., 2007).

Some definitions of bullying have added that bullying often occurs without apparent provocation and that negative actions can be carried out by physical contact, by words, or in other ways, such as making faces or mean gestures or intentionally excluding others from a group (Farrington, 1993; Farmer et al., 2011). Bullying has also been defined as the systematic abuse of power (Espelage & Swearer, 2004).

Studies vary in the number of items they use for operationalizing bullying. Some use nine items to measure (physical bullying; bullying with a weapon; bullying; taunting or ridiculing; harassment about race or culture; harassment about sexual orientation or gender identity; harassment about body shape, size or appearance; bullying over the internet; being asked for personal information over the internet; and feeling unsafe when in contact with someone over the internet). Others use only five items to measure bullying (race-based; gender-based; sexual orientation-based; disability-based and weight or physical appearance-based harassment) (Salmon et al., 2018).

It is clear that determining what is included within the construct of bullying becomes complicated and is complex. It is difficult for researchers to agree as to how to best define the experience of bullying.

Student Perspectives on Bullying

Not only do researchers disagree with one another, it also has been shown that students seem to differ from researchers when it comes to defining bullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). In a study by Vaillancourt et al, (2008) responses of students in grades 3-12, to the question “a bully is” was coded for the presence/absence of references to *power imbalance*, *repetition*, and *intentionality*. It was found that the three main criteria used by researchers as being critical to the operational definition of bullying were rarely mentioned in children’s definitions. Mostly, definitions of bullying by adolescents are not in line with those of researchers in regard to the criteria of an imbalance of power (Byrne et al., 2016). Students rarely include the traditional criteria of intent, repetition, and power imbalance when they define bullying (Hellstrom et al., 2015). “I think the line should be drawn when someone stops laughing” was one suggestion by a teenage boy (Hellstrom et al., 2015, p.6).

Parents, teachers and students often differ in their definitions of bullying. Even students of varied ages have different views of bullying, with younger elementary-age students differentiating bullying on the dimension of aggressive or nonaggressive, or any mean behavior (Byrne et al., 2016). One study found that elementary-aged students tend to consider any fighting to be bullying (Monks & Smith, 2006). Older students seem to distinguish physical and nonphysical behaviors, consider the feeling of the victim, and include the idea of repetition in their definitions (Monks & Smith, 2006).

Research shows that students feel teachers minimize the seriousness of bullying incidents and when they fail to respond (Craig et al., 2000; Unnever & Cornell, 2003; Varjas et al., 2009) or delay their intervention efforts, the effectiveness is limited (Cunningham et al., 2016). Teachers have been found to consider bullying incidents less serious than students (Bradshaw & Sawyer, 2007). A challenge for school staff is that bullying can often be difficult to detect by direct observation (Unnever & Cornell, 2003). When there is a failure to intervene with bullying-like behaviors, or bullying behaviors are supported by school staff, it has been found that bullying behaviors increase (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Hanish et al., 2004), because the message is received that there is minimal risk in harassing peers (Craig et al., 2000). For any student this can be damaging, but especially for those that are looking to teachers for support, guidance and intervention at a time of critical development (Crothers et al., 2006).

Despite the knowledge that students often have a different understanding of bullying compared with those researching the problem, students' views have had little or no impact on the definition of bullying. Rather, the solution has been to adjust student's understandings of bullying to better coincide with researcher's definition (Hellstrom et al., 2015). With students, teachers, parents and researchers all on a different page when it comes to defining and interpreting bullying behavior, it is difficult to effectively tackle the problem.

Middle School Students

One thing seems to be clear throughout the literature: students during middle school years, experience the greatest levels of bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Olweus, 1993; Swearer et al., 2012). Middle school students are generally considered students in grades 6-8. Some middle school students will be transitioning to a new school building at the start of sixth or seventh grade,

which brings a change in social hierarchy. The need to reestablish social positioning in the new setting may create a risk for greater involvement in bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Middle school students have many challenges to manage and work through just by the nature of their development and position in schools. The research of Olweus (1993) suggests that there are peaks in students' vulnerability when they transition from elementary school to middle school.

There are many developmental tasks at this period of life. One of the major tasks for adolescents is the formation of one's identity (Bauer et al., 2007; Santrock, 2019). According to Erickson's psychosocial theory, middle school students begin to experience an identity crisis in which they attempt to obtain a stable sense of self (Santrock, 2019). This goal of identity development can be challenged by the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes and the implications that come with them (Santrock, 2019). Social interactions, especially with peers, take on an increased importance during adolescence (Spear, 2000). Adolescents tend to begin looking to their peers and teachers for guidance more than their parents, as they begin to establish their own values (Crothers et al., 2006; Oliver et al., 1994; Santrock, 2019).

Physiologically and psychologically, adolescents begin the experience of puberty which includes an increase in sex hormones and an emergence of secondary sexual characteristics, changing the way they feel and look (Santrock, 2019; Spear, 2000). In addition to striking physical changes, adolescents also experience substantial neurological changes. The brain of an adolescent is very different from any other age (Spear, 2000). Transformations occurring in the adolescent brain influence how they behave. Adolescents experience an increase in dopamine activity in various areas of their brain which directly affects sensation-seeking behaviors, risk-taking and impulsivity (Spear, 2000). The dopamine system plays a role in assessing the

motivational value of stimuli. The changes in the incentive value of stimuli could be connected to the importance of social reinforcement sought from peers and provoking the interest of new potentially rewarding stimuli (Spear, 2000).

Self-esteem tends to decrease during adolescence (Robins et al., 2002). It used to be considered that depression during adolescents was a common experience and was often not treated, due to the thought that children would grow out of it (Petersen et al., 1993). Although most adolescents navigate this developmental period without significant psychological problems, the incidence of depressed mood is greater during adolescence than at younger or older ages (Petersen et al., 1993).

In addition to all these natural developmental challenges, it has been found that middle school students experience a peak in bullying. The U.S. Department of Education and Justice Indicators of School Crime and Safety report documents that sixth and seventh grades were the highest risk periods for being victims of bullying behaviors (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). A survey of 6,500 students found bully victimization rates to be twice as high among middle school students (12%) as among high school students (6%; Nolin et al., 1996).

Students in Rural Settings and Bullying

There are mixed findings on whether students of rural or urban schools experience greater rates of bullying (Klein & Cornell, 2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the percentage of student's ages 12-18 who reported being bullied at school during the school year was highest for rural schools (27.7%) compared to city (22.4), suburban (20.5) and town (21.7) locales. Studies on bullying have been conducted in both rural and urban schools. Urban school settings have long been considered prime for bullying behaviors due to their large size and the ease of getting lost in the large number of students (Stockdale et

al., 2002). Studies have also shown that rural areas are not immune and may be at a higher risk for bullying behaviors. The results of Olweus' extensive study of primary and secondary students in Norway showed the percentage of bullying in urban areas to be equal to or much lower than parallel figures for more rural areas (Olweus, 1993). One study found that out of 192 students in a combination of three rural elementary and middle schools in Appalachia, U.S., 158 students (82.3%) reported experiencing some form of bullying at least once in the past three months (Dulmus et al., 2004).

In attempts to identify beliefs that support bullying in small town schools, Oliver, Hoover and Hazler (1994) found that students tended to agree that bullies enjoyed higher social status than did victims. As previously mentioned, in small rural towns, stigma or the mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person (Merriam-Webster, 2019) is high. The literature seems to demonstrate that the willingness to self-report bullying may be influenced by stigma (Frisen et al., 2008). Stigma of declaring that one has been bullied is a strong influencing factor, perhaps higher in rural areas. Targets of bullying may be reluctant to admit they were bullied for a variety of reasons, including not wanting to appear weak (Stockdale et al., 2002).

A few studies have considered the unique challenges that students in rural areas experience when it comes to bullying. One consideration is that there may be greater peer conflict in smaller schools, perhaps because there is greater competition and fewer friendship options in a smaller group of students (Klein & Cornell, 2010). Rural areas tend to expose students to greater stressors such as isolation, boredom, and limited community resources (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). The strengths of rural communities can be challenges as well. Often in rural communities, people tend to rely on one another for support in a variety of social

organizations. When people are distressed, individuals frequently try to help themselves or seek informal support from family, spouses, neighbors, friends, and religious organizations rather than mental health professionals (Blank et al., 2002)

The environment of the community that surrounds a school has a strong effect on a child's development (Duncan & Raudenbush, 1999). The support of a community has a large impact on how students fair in school. The lack of research on the description of the experience and understanding of bullying for rural middle school students is a significant gap in the literature.

Chapter Summary

It is clear from the literature that the phenomenon of bullying is complex. This chapter began with a focus on social constructionism as the foundation for this study, emphasizing the basic tenets of social constructionism being that the ways in which we describe and explain the world are based on our relationships (Gergen, 2009). Social constructionism also considers that the ways in which we generally understand the world, are historically and culturally specific and that the forms of knowledge that develop within a culture are a product of it (Burr, 2003). Both of these points provide a strong rational for utilizing such a framework for accessing the voice of rural middle school students and their description of bullying, a particular group that has not been studied or heard from in the literature.

A review of the literature in the areas of bullying, middle school students and rural settings was explored. As research in the area of bullying continues, and the challenge of determining the best operational definition of bullying continues, there remains a gap in hearing individual voices of the students that experience bullying at the greatest levels. This is a concern

for appropriate intervention. Additionally, there is limited research on the experience of bullying for rural middle school students.

Based on the gap in existing research on the experience of bullying for rural middle school students, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of rural middle school students who have been bullied. In particular, this study will explore what the experience of bullying is for rural middle school students who have reported feeling bullied, considering what the experience has been for them, how it makes them feel and what they consider to be the difference between teasing and bullying.

The following chapter will outline the methods used to research the experience of bullying for rural middle school students who have been bullied. In addition, the philosophical framework used to guide the process will be described, as well as a description of qualitative research and phenomenological approach. The purpose of the study will be explained and the research question will be described. The chapter will also explain the data collection and analysis, as well as the measures to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. To assist in situating the researcher as the primary instrument in data collection and analysis for this phenomenological study, a statement of worldview will be offered.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Method of Study

In reviewing the literature on school bullying and students' experience with bullying, one gap in the research literature is hearing the voices of rural middle school students regarding their lived experience of bullying. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of rural middle school students who have been bullied. The grand research question was "How do rural middle school students who have been bullied describe bullying?" In efforts to give voice to students and to recognize their understanding of the phenomenon of bullying more clearly, the researcher chose qualitative phenomenological methodology.

In Chapter 3, qualitative research and the rationale for choosing this methodology is explained. Additionally, the researcher will provide an explanation of the phenomenological approach that was used in this study. A description of methods for choosing participants for the study, collecting and analyzing data as well as ensuring trustworthiness throughout the research is also given. The researcher hopes to provide a clear rationale for the methodology as well as a well-defined description of the organization of the study.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research tends to consider things in their natural setting, bringing awareness to the meaning people bring to them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011). It is a method of research that fits well for studying the wholeness of a human experience and finding the meaning and essence of an experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). To better understand the experience

of bullying for rural middle school students, qualitative research is the most effective method to discover and understand the experience of the students.

Qualitative researchers describe the experience and perspective of others, while acknowledging themselves as a key instrument in data collection and interpretation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). They recognize that their own biases, assumptions, and judgments have an impact on the entire process of research and data analysis. In positioning themselves within the research process, qualitative researchers convey how their background informs the interpretation of information gathered in a study (Creswell, 2013).

Another characteristic of qualitative research is the use of both inductive and deductive logic. From the bottom-up logic, patterns, categories, and themes are built through organizing data to create increasingly abstract units of information (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, qualitative researchers work back and forth between emergent themes and the data to develop a comprehensive set of themes. The deductive logic in qualitative research occurs when emergent themes are continuously compared and checked against the data. Researchers aim to maintain focus on the meaning participants hold in regard to the problem or issue being explored.

The use of qualitative research emerges when exploration of a problem or issue is needed and rich descriptions of the social world are desired (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In addition, qualitative research is the most appropriate method when a population or group needs to be studied, or silenced voices need to be heard (Creswell, 2013). Through sharing stories and hearing voices of participants, qualitative researchers attempt to empower participants by minimizing the power differential often present between researcher and participant. In essence, qualitative researchers try to honor participants' stories and give voice to their individual experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In summary, the characteristics of qualitative research mentioned above serve as a support for choosing qualitative research methodology for this study. The rationale for choosing qualitative research for the present study was that there is gap in the literature addressing rural middle school students' experience of bullying. Often the voices of students are not heard, aside from information gathered in survey research or within focus groups. For the present study, qualitative approach was chosen so that rural middle school students' lived experience of bullying was not limited to selected responses such as in quantitative research. Conducting a qualitative study allowed for authentic feedback, information and understanding that might be missed in a quantitative study.

The qualitative approach used in this study, with the purpose of gaining a greater understanding of the description of the experience of bullying through the eyes of rural middle school students, is phenomenology.

Phenomenological Design

The word *phenomenon* comes from the Greek word *phaenesthai*, to flare up, to show itself, to appear (Moustakas, 1994). Studies of phenomenology consider a common meaning shared by several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of a phenomenological study is to determine what an experience means for the individuals experiencing it and those who are able to provide a thorough description of it (Moustakas, 1994). Stated another way, the goal of phenomenology is to understand the "being-in-the-world" of people (Keen, 1975, p. 29), understanding their unique experience of a phenomenon as if you were in their shoes (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010). Phenomenological studies allow for the participants' voices to be heard. Their descriptions of an experience are the primary evidence.

“The blind man that wishes to see cannot be made to see by means of scientific proofs.” (Husserl, 1964, p. 4) Husserl argues that physical and physiological theories about colors give no “seeing” clarity about the meaning of color such as those with eyesight have (1964). In this argument, understanding the cognition of the true essence of the experience of bullying for rural middle school students, finding actualities is going to be best possible by using a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology focuses on how things appear, attempting to disregard biases and rules of how things should be. There is a process that occurs, that Husserl refers to as *ideation*, in which an individual considers an object in their consciousness which mingles with the object in nature so that meaning is created and knowledge extended (Moustakas, 1994). There is a relationship between that which exists in consciousness and that which exists in the world. It is an approach that respects and is committed to descriptions and perceptions. Perceptions are regarded as the primary source of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology is also concerned with wholeness of a phenomenon; examining various sides and angles and perspectives until a unified essence is obtained (Moustakas, 1994). It is important in the study of bullying to examine all angles and perspectives. Moustakas believes that not one or even multiple perceptions ever limit the opportunities for understanding (1994). Husserl called these perceptions *horizons*. The need to obtain students’ open and complete description of the experience of bullying is necessary.

The first task of phenomenological research is that of locating the pure data of the inquiry (Husserl, 1964). Husserl developed the idea of *epoche*, which is a process of looking at information in a new, fresh way. It requires one to learn to see what actually is present (Moustakas, 1994). By utilizing *epoche*, a researcher will make an effort to set aside everyday

understandings, judgments and knowledge, and meet the phenomenon at hand, with fresh, curious, naive attention (Moustakas, 1994). This is the first step for researchers conducting phenomenological studies.

In phenomenological research, the researcher attempts to help a phenomenon be revealed more than it does in ordinary experiences (Keen, 1982). Within each step of research, the researcher attempts to create an environment that will:

eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41).

Addressing the grand research question of “How do rural middle school students who have been bullied describe bullying?” is well-suited for a qualitative, phenomenological design, because there is a gap in the literature for the exploration of the description of bullying for rural middle school students; particularly using individual interviews. A phenomenological methodology was chosen because I sought to hear the voices of youth, as purely as possible, as they live with the experience of bullying behaviors.

Middle school students who have been noted by researchers to experience the greatest levels of bullying, are not having their voices heard throughout the research, as to their lived experience of bullying. I want to hear how students describe bullying and contribute that much needed information to the existing research literature. The research question for this study, as Moustakas (1994) suggests, was carefully constructed, with each word intentionally chosen to capture students’ attention and guide them in the phenomenological process of seeing, reflecting

and knowing. The question again was “How do rural middle school students who have been bullied describe bullying?” Within a phenomenological approach, essences are brought back into the world and enrich our knowledge of everyday situations and events (Moustakas, 1994). In effort to bring the essence of rural middle school students’ description of bullying to light, a phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study.

Participants

In this section, I will describe the procedures and rationale for including the participants in this study. The process of obtaining informed consent, ensuring safety and privacy of participants will also be shared. Finally, confidentiality will be explained.

A criterion-based sampling strategy was utilized for this study to identify and select a sample of approximately four to six students who have had the experience of being bullied and had submitted a formal bullying report. Utilizing the criterion-based sampling was important for having only participants with similar experiences of the phenomenon under study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In order to gather information on a middle school students’ description of bullying, students who were chosen for the study were ones that felt that they had been bullied and made a bullying report.

The criteria for participation in this study included students who submitted a report of bullying while in sixth, seventh or eighth grade during the school years of 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. One of the schools involved in the research began their 2020-2021 school year in a hybrid format with some virtual learners. Half of the student body attended school on one day, and the other half on the other day, alternating throughout the weeks. Students could also choose to be virtual learners. The 2021-2022 school year, consisted of a regular in-person school year. There was no discriminating whether the report was substantiated or unsubstantiated. If a student made

a bullying report, they were contacted via a letter sent home by their school counselor that requested their participation. I wanted to gather the true essence of how students described the experience of bullying. The students were recruited from two rural schools, one in which I work as a school counselor (School one) and the other in South Central Minnesota (School two). School one is described as small in size; the Minnesota Department of Education's School Report Card in the fiscal year of 2022 lists the total number of students, preschool through twelfth grade as 595. The demographics of the school are 37.1% Hispanic/Latino, .2% American Indian/Alaska Native, .8% Asian, 1.0% Black/African American, 60.3% White, and .5% two or more races. The school also includes 6.1% English learners, 18.8% Special Education, 32.8% Free/Reduced priced meals and 1.5% homeless (Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], 2022). School two is a secondary school with students in grades 6-12. According to the Minnesota Department of Education's School Report Card in the fiscal year of 2022 the total number of students listed was 496. The demographics of the school are 4% Hispanic/Latino, .4% American Indian or Alaska Native (Federal Definition), .2% Asian, .4% Black/African American, 93.5% White, and 1.4% two or more races. The only additional enrollment criteria that was offered was 15.3% Free/Reduced priced meals (MDE, 2022).

Within both school settings, students are able to make a bullying report in a variety of ways. There is an electronic method through the schools' website, which is sent directly to the school principal. A student can talk directly to the school counselor to make a report or a student can talk to a teacher, who will then make the report to the school counselor or principal. In any case, the report is written and submitted to the school counselor or principal and together the two investigate the report. The student making the report is interviewed to share their story of the event. They are asked if there were others present that witnessed the event. After providing

information, the student is told that the event will be investigated and that the information about who made the report remains anonymous. The other students, witnesses and the accused are then interviewed. If a report is substantiated, a consequence is given to the accused and a letter sent to parents of the target and the accused stating that a report of bullying has been substantiated.

For this study, participants were recruited through letters sent home to parents of students who submitted a bullying report, requesting their participation and asking for parent consent and potential participants' assent. Between the two schools, 18 students fit the criteria to participate in the study and were invited to participate. If they wanted to participate, they were asked to send their consent and assent back to the counselor. If either consent or assent were not provided, students were not included in the study. Six students returned their assent and consent forms and agreed to participate. Upon further discovery, it was realized that one of the students actually did not fit the criteria. The year the last report was made for this student was actually during their fifth grade year. The final number of participants for the study was five.

The number of participants met saturation for a phenomenological study as the findings from the five students had consistent similarities. A larger sample size may have provided some additional information that made the data even stronger, but the consistency in information was strong as it was. The rural influence of stigma appeared to play a great role in the number of participants that made reports of bullying as well as the number of students and parents that agreed to participate. It was not known the conversations that parents and students had as to their decisions to participate. It would be curious to know if parents and students had similar concerns about participation. No questions were presented to the researcher on clarification of the study.

Research shows that in rural areas, when people are distressed or have concerns, they tend to seek support more from family, friends, and others close to them rather than seeking help

from a professional (Blank et al., 2002). The stigma of reporting bullying is high in rural areas (Frisen et al., 2008). People are more reluctant to report bullying for fear of being weak and of others finding out about their problem (Stockdale et al., 2002). Anonymity is a challenge in small communities. These issues of rural communities likely had an influence on the number of bullying reports made in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years as well as the number of eligible students and their parents that were willing to participate.

Participants had filled out a bullying report, which had their name, grade and date of bullying event as well as a brief written description of the event. The consent and assent forms outlined the expectations of participating in the study and explain that participation is voluntary and discontinuation of participation can occur at any time without penalty. In the transcriptions, participants remained anonymous and were given a pseudonym when keeping track of their information, in order to protect privacy and confidentiality.

Data Collection

The main data source for phenomenological research includes interviewing individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2013). Data was obtained by utilizing a semi-structured interview with the students who choose to participate along with a transcription of the interview and researcher notes taken during the interview and analysis.

Individual semi-structured, open-ended interviews with students were chosen because it is a method that is lacking in the literature. It also seems to be the best way to deeply understand and access the information related to the description of the experience of bullying from the individual students. Interviews elicit in-depth personal perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The interviews were held in the counseling offices of the participants' school. The counseling

office or nearby office, represents a natural setting, as it is within the school setting that students would experience bullying and it additionally represents a feeling of comfort and confidentiality. The interviews were audio recorded for later transcription in order to provide verbatim quotations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Although interviews provide the opportunity to explore a more authentic focused experience from students, hesitation to share their experience or difficulty articulating their responses did occur. Because the success of an interview depends upon both participants, the interviewer and interviewee, it was important for the researcher as the interviewer to provide a safe and comfortable place for students to share their experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). By focusing on the student, clarifying their responses and encouraging them in sharing their voice, the students were able to respond with relative comfort. To guide the interview, and in keeping with the recommendation for quality phenomenological studies, four broad general questions were asked of each participant with additional follow-up questions (Appendix C) (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis

By incorporating the method of phenomenology, the researcher followed suggestions for appropriately analyzing the interviews (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2013; Moustaka, 1994). First, the practice of epoche was practiced as presented at the end of this chapter. There a description of the researchers worldview and own experiences with bullying as a means to position themselves, understanding that they were not able to completely remove themselves from the situation while interviewing students and analyzing data. What is brought to the study as a researcher influences what is seen and understood (Charmaz, 2015). Additionally, a research journal was kept throughout the entire process, in order to maintain awareness of how the

researcher was positioned in the research experience and how thoughts, questions and actions influenced the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This journal provided useful information during the analysis and interpretation of the research findings. This experience of reflexivity allowed the researcher to maintain a constant awareness of how their personal role, subjectivity and assumptions directly related to and shaped the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Further steps for analyzing phenomenological data include phenomenological reduction and a synthesis of meaning and essences (Moustakas, 1994). In the phenomenological reduction stage, the researcher looks and describes numerous times, from various angles, every detail of how the phenomenon appears, noting the key ideas that focus on the phenomenon. This experience involves a process of concentration aimed at clarifying the essential nature of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction is a way of seeing and listening with great intention to one's own self-evidence combined with new information gathered, in efforts to gain the true essence of the participants lived experience, "things become clearer as they are considered again and again" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 93). This continuous reflection occurred throughout the data analysis (Creswell, 2009).

Synthesizing the meaning and essence of the interview transcripts was done by considering the social constructionism theoretical framework of finding the meaning of language for the experience of bullying relevant for rural middle school students today. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were read through to gain a "general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning" (Creswell, 2009, p. 185). Transcribing the interviews manually allowed the researcher to really know the data intimately and immerse in it (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Open-coding was used initially. To ensure best organizational practices, each transcription was given an identification code and was dated (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). The

initial reading through of the transcriptions allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the “big ideas” or significant statements of the interviews (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 237).

At this point two particular practices were employed. Notes were taken in the margins of the transcriptions, highlighting in various colors any significant statements in efforts to develop initial themes. Lists of these significant statements, sometimes called horizontalization (Creswell, 2013) were made. In addition, a data summary chart was utilized to organize participants’ comments to each question to help in summarizing data and to assist in determining themes. Coding and recoding was continuously done to systematically organize and understand the data. By circling, and highlighting, significant statements and quotes, manual coding was conducted. Utilizing memos on the sides of the transcripts also helped in prioritizing, integrating and organizing the data into themes (Saldana, 2013). From the themes, further analysis was done to identify patterns that emerged that allowed the researcher to develop broader meaning units and assist in developing the essence of the experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). After themes were gathered, member checking was utilized and peer review which are explained further below.

In summary, the steps taken to analyze the data for this research study were: 1) record and transcribe the interviews 2) code interviews for significant statements and themes and then on to broader meaning units 3) compare emergent themes to literature and 4) create a descriptive passage that represents the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

In conducting a qualitative phenomenological study, it was of great importance to protect the students that were interviewed. Initially, considering the purpose of the study, the researcher set out to conduct the research based on their own interest but quickly the purpose became based

on the potential benefit and well-being of students in the future. Participants were asked to share their personal thoughts during our interviews. As a researcher it was important to respect and take good care of the information that was received. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the researcher routinely reflected on the way they chose to direct the interview and derive meaning from the statements of the participants. In doing this, it was hoped that a limited perspective or bias was avoided (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Before beginning the research, the researcher first received approval to conduct the study from the administration at both schools that participated in the study as well as Minnesota State University, Mankato's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The parents of the participants were provided with an informed consent form and the participants with an assent form, so that from the outset they understood the purpose and intentions of the research. They understood that at any time they could discontinue their involvement with the study. Anonymity was explained and the researcher made sure the participants understood that the study would not include any information that would identify them in any way. Confidentiality was also explained in the forms.

Ensuring Trustworthiness & Credibility

Multiple measures were taken to establish trustworthiness and credibility in this study. One component of establishing credibility and trustworthiness is prolonged engagement with participants in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). In conducting a qualitative phenomenological study, it was of great importance that the privacy of the students interviewed was protected. As a middle school counselor in one of the settings that the researcher gathered participants from, they are daily immersed in the culture of rural middle school students. By

building trust with the participants, the researcher hoped to create a welcoming and comfortable environment for participants to share.

To ensure trustworthiness and to be clear as to the intention and purpose of the study, parents of potential participants were asked for consent and potential participants were asked to provide their assent. Member checking was used to build credibility. Member checking is a process of getting feedback on the researcher's interpretation of data from study participants. Member checking is claimed to be the most critical technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data, analyses, interpretations and conclusions (preliminary analyses) were taken back to the participants so they could determine accuracy (Creswell, 2013). The researcher hoped to gain the most accurate explanation from participants of their descriptions of bullying (Creswell, 2013). The researcher met with each student again in the same setting where the initial interview was held. The process of data analysis was explained, transcriptions were shared, and data summary charts and main themes that emerged from the data were shown to each student. They were asked if they felt the themes accurately represented the data they provided. The students agreed with the findings and mostly added additional comments that reinforced the findings. They seemed to appreciate the continued opportunity to have their voice heard. No changes were made to the themes. "Transparency is key to trustworthiness" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 47), the goal was to truly understand the student's experience of this phenomenon.

Utilizing peer review also helped to ensure trustworthiness, credibility and accuracy. As the significant statements emerged, a colleague reviewed the interview transcriptions to test that the significant statements or themes that were found accurately represent the transcriptions. This provided an external check of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer review was

used to help the researcher consider the interpretations, to be sure the interpretations were accurate and clear and to offer support and reflection (Creswell, 2013).

In order to accurately represent the experience of the students, reflexivity was continuously utilized and subjectivity and biases were examined as to how they shaped the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). As the instrument of data collection, it was important for the researcher to keep a research journal and maintain intentional reflection and awareness of the significant impact their thoughts and actions had on the research process. The researcher wrote about the challenges in the project itself; about the challenge of reading the data and how it made them feel sad, about times when a student's information struck a deeper reflection, and when the researcher consulted with another on their work and would gain insight. The journal allowed the researcher to have a clear head at various points in the collection and analysis process and return to the data with less bias.

Researchers Worldview

Growing up, I had my share of challenges and some maybe impacted me more than I was aware of. My parents divorced when I was in first grade. I cried a great deal throughout my second-grade year. I did not know at the time all the reasons this was happening. All I knew was that life had changed dramatically and I would experience a whirlwind of trying to keep track of my life and my things. We moved. My mother got remarried. My father had a significant other. Every other weekend, my mother would drive us from our hometown to a mid-point, Burger King parking lot and with my brown paper bag in tow I would jump out of my mom's car into my dad's car for the weekend. It never failed that I would forget something. I was disorganized. My older brothers had their own challenges with the adjustment.

The challenges that students face in life are generally difficult enough without additional disrespect and harm from peers at school. Life is precious. I think I grew up realizing that things are not always going to stay the same. People that you have around you are not always going to be around. People are important; every life is valuable.

When I read about young children taking their lives because life is too hard and they are made to feel they are not good enough, and it is in part due to the lack of respect from others, I feel sad. When I read, hear or see young people feeling as if they are not valued in our world, and people treat them that way, it makes me believe change must happen. I feel strongly that there is something we are missing as adults in cases of bullying-like behaviors. Losing a life to bullying is a serious issue. Growing up feeling like you are not worthy due to another child's treatment of you is a serious issue. How many lives have to be lost, harmed or injured before we realize there is more we can do? We need to listen to our youth.

I work as a school counselor and a counselor educator. In the schools, as bullying is reported and explored, it seems there is something lacking. In some cases, the bullying reports may fit the three important criteria exactly, in others, it feels a more subjective conclusion is made that the report does not meet the three criteria. In all cases the concern is explored, but the consequences for those reported to be bullying is different depending on what is concluded. It feels too subjective. I worry about what happens to the students who make a report that is unsubstantiated. Could it have been substantiated if I considered it differently? How is my decision impacting students' success?

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the phenomenological approach within qualitative methodology that was utilized to explore the experience of bullying for rural middle school students. The

purpose of the research and the grand research question was presented. Additionally a description of choosing participants for the study, collecting and analyzing data, as well as ensuring trustworthiness throughout the research was explained.

This section provided a foundation to eventually create the “what” and “how” components or the “essence” of the phenomenon of the description of the experience of bullying for rural middle school students. The chapter ended with a description of the researcher’s worldview and how life experiences have contributed to personal perspectives and may influence this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of rural middle school students who have been bullied. The main research question that guided this study was: How do rural middle school students, who have been bullied, describe the experience of bullying? The researcher believed that a better understanding of bullying, from the perspective of those that researchers note experience bullying at peak levels, would allow educators, counselors, and researchers to proceed in bully-prevention efforts with a more informed perspective. Hearing the voice of those that are experiencing the phenomenon was the goal of this research study.

In the first three chapters, the topic of bullying was introduced, significant literature that informed the study was reviewed and the methods used to research the topic of bullying in rural areas for middle school students were described. This chapter includes a brief description of the participants and details the data analysis strategy utilized for this study. Next, a description of major themes that emerged from the data will be shared. The chapter will conclude with an overall conclusion and a summary.

Participant Profiles

Students that were in the grades of 6-8, and made a bullying report while in grades 6-8 within the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, were invited to participate. Student grade level was indicated during the interview and on the bullying report form. Six consent forms were returned and 5 students were eligible to participate in the study. A brief description of the participants is described. In order to maintain confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym that was utilized throughout the remainder of the study. The students were from two rural middle schools in the Midwest, were in the grades 6-8 and had made a bullying report

sometime within the past two years. Two students were males and three students were females. Four students were Caucasian, one was African American. The inclusion criteria for the study were that students were in the grades 6-8 in the last two years when they made a bullying report, attended a rural middle school, and that they and their parents agreed to participate in the study.

Student Participants:

Kiera: This student was in 6th grade. She had experienced bullying this year and for years prior. She has been bullied based on her height, for not being good at a sport she is involved with and for being “annoying”.

Brandon: This student was in 8th grade. He had experienced bullying since he was in 1st grade. He did not realize he could make a report until a year prior to the study. He has been bullied for not being a sports guy and for being “annoying”. Additionally he expressed that he has had trouble at home and at school.

Callie: This student was in 8th grade. She had been at the school for two years and had been bullied both years as well as at her previous school. This student has been bullied about most areas of how she looks.

Paige: This student was in 7th grade. She had made a bullying report during the year the study took place and the previous year. She had been at the school for 4 years. This student experienced bullying that included comments about herself, her actions, and her family members both online and in-person.

John: This student was in 8th grade. He has been at the school for two years. He has been bullied for having to use an inhaler, for being an African-American student, for what he looks like, what he wears and for being new to the school.

Data Analysis Strategy and Analytic Technique

Following the semi-structured interviews with the five students, transcriptions were written for each interview. The researcher chose to transcribe the interviews so they could immerse themselves in the data and know it intimately (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2019). Transcriptions were written verbatim and dates were included. Student names were changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

While working with each of the participants and gaining insight into how they understood bullying, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently. Both inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis were used to allow the data to speak for itself as well as continue to retain and learn from the data. The inductive approach involved organizing and coding the data into significant patterns and themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Coding was done and redone throughout the analysis process.

Reading through the transcriptions the first time allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the “big ideas” or significant statements of the interviews (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 237). After the first reading, open coding was utilized, a coding system of highlighting key ideas. This process involved primarily the highlighting colors of pink and yellow. Pink was used for feeling words and yellow was used for other key phrases. Following this step, a list of these significant statements was made which Creswell (2013) refers to as horizontalization, to help in summarizing data and determining themes. Upon further coding and recoding, coding schemes were adjusted to the following: (Appendix B)

EXP- Experience of Bullying

RUR- Rural Related

TEACH- Teacher Related Comments

SC- School Counselor Related Comments

SS- Student Strengths

From the bottom-up themes were built through organizing data to create increasingly abstract units of information (Creswell, 2013). The researcher moved back and forth between emergent themes and the data to develop a comprehensive set of themes, continuously comparing and checking the themes to the data. This was where deductive analysis occurred.

Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher's advisor(s) provided continuous feedback and review which offered great support and reflection. In addition, a previous doctoral student of the same Counselor Education and Supervision program, agreed to be a peer reviewer to ensure trustworthiness, credibility and accuracy. She tested that the significant statements or themes that were found accurately represent the transcriptions.

To create greater credibility and trustworthiness, the researcher utilized reflexivity by maintaining a journal of reflection to ensure accuracy in representing the experience of the students, helping me examine my subjectivity and biases and explore how they may have been shaping the research process. As the instrument of data collection, it was important to keep a research journal and maintain intentional reflection and awareness of the significant impact the researcher's thoughts and actions could have on the research process. The researcher wrote about the experience of conducting the study, about their feelings throughout the analysis process and about various ideas that emerged in their mind.

Themes

Four main themes and one subtheme emerged from the analysis of the data and are described below. The four themes and one subtheme included: 1) Resilient Spirit A) Suggestions for Improving the School Environment 2) Unexplored Depth of Definition or Description of

Bullying 3) School Counselors Imperative for Visibility and Interventions 4) Teachers May Unknowingly Foster Climate That Produces Bullying.

The findings of this qualitative phenomenological study address the limitations in the body of research on bullying, which was the phenomenon that the definition and understanding of bullying has not incorporated the voice of the students that have experienced the phenomenon. The themes that emerged from the data relate to the various research questions that were asked of the student participants. Student participants are represented by their assigned pseudonym throughout the presentation of the themes.

When the students in this study were asked to describe, define and to share their thoughts about bullying, their knowledge was vast. As the researcher listened to the students share their knowledge on bullying, at times it felt like a deep lonely hole of confusion or challenge and there seemed no great answer for the ongoing criticism and trauma they suffered. They wanted the bullying to stop: the mocking, the pointing out of things that were wrong with them, the picking at them, the judging of the one quality that they felt good about, the judging whether they were a sports person or good at sports, the exclusion from an entire grade level group chat, being choked out or pushed around. If they asked for help then they were mocked and called a snitch. The mean behavior then was due to them asking for help. If they did not ask for help, the original mean behavior continued. It felt like a no-win situation. Some would practice isolation so they could avoid the risk of being judged. Some considered isolation, but had been there before and knew that was not helpful.

Trusting another is something these students did with great caution. People have often told their secrets to others. When they did get the chance to connect with a friend or trusted adult, it felt good to share their pain. The terrain these students have to navigate in a day is tough. As

one student stated, “I’m only 13, a 25 year old shouldn’t have to deal with this” (Brandon). Feeling alone, left out, feeling that nobody believes you or really understands is a tough place to be for a 6th, 7th or 8th grader. The number of students in their classes is small. The options in friendships are limited. As these students navigated the experience of bullying on a daily basis the impact of their rural setting played a big role.

The following themes that emerged from the data provide more of the description:

Theme 1: Resilient Spirit

A resilient spirit includes adaptability, flexibility, toughness, and persistence in addition to the long-standing connotation of resilience being recovering from misfortune. While there is not certainty that each student knew that they possessed these qualities, their voices reflect their possession of the cognition.

The experiences of these students were not free of great challenge, but within their challenges, the student participants possess an amazing resilient spirit. The ways in which they utilize the resources that they have within themselves or that they have access to, how they are willing to change or consider change, how they cope with the challenges and pressures and keep moving forward, how they look at things, consider multiple perspectives, how they forgive, their awareness of the world around them, and the ideas they have for making things better in relation to bullying were prevalent throughout all the interviews.

When the students were asked “when students are bullied where do they find the best help?” the data showed that some of the students utilized supports in school such as the school counselor or principal or a school police-type person, but also found within themselves tools and resources to persevere:

Kiera and Callie had found respite and encouragement in making use of a journal. Kiera shared that she would write in her journal or talk to a trusted friend. Callie shared,

I write every single day about what goes on in my life and it helps to write stuff down because you can see it as you look back like all the things you went through in school and you're like um like um you know you're lucky that you got through it, I guess.

Callie had incredible strength that it seemed she did not realize. Her intelligent and thoughtful answers were often presented with minimal confidence, demonstrated by the previous quote that ended with, "I guess".

The students possessed an objective viewpoint of the bullying that occurred. Though the bullying was hurtful and impacted their self-esteem, the students understood that there were many factors to why someone would bully another. When asked "Why do kids bully, do you think?" Paige stated that "if they bully you for something certain, then it means they are self-conscious about that so they want to take it out on someone". Most of the students believed that students that bully are trying to "be cool" or "to gain popularity" and perhaps are using the bullying behaviors to get people to laugh or to get attention. Some felt that students that bully are probably bored and likely get some good feeling for themselves by hurting others, but as Callie stated, she thought "they don't feel and sometimes they don't think about how hard it's impacting the person they are bullying".

The understanding and willingness to move on and give people second chances showed flexibility of their mindsets, as well as an act of forgiveness and therefore resilience. Brandon had a student who bullied him a lot, calling him names, making up stories about him, and pushing him. One time the student's actions caused Brandon to sprain his hand. That student got

suspended from school for the actions and then after a month or so finally stopped bullying Brandon. Here is how Brandon describes the relationship:

One kid who used to do it a lot, he doesn't have a very good home life...but we are all cool now, we've been alright with each other for like the past three years...he just stopped being mean...I think what got to him was when he sprained my hand...we are just cool with each other, like we just try to forget the past.

The students continued to impress when the questions were asked "In your opinion what should be acceptable behaviors at school?" and "In your opinion what should be unacceptable behaviors at school?" Most students felt that swearing or physical contact was not acceptable. Kiera thought that throwing things or saying mean things online should be unacceptable. This same student felt that helping teachers and other students should be acceptable behaviors. The strength of these students continued to be seen as the questions continued. When asked for a description of bullying, many of the students interviewed considered varied perspectives, such as the perspective of the bully, the bullied, or the friends of the bully. Though they had experienced the bullying, they were not only focused on their viewpoint, a number of students responded with open-minded responses such as it depends on who you ask.

Most of the students expanded on the questions asked and explained what they would do to encourage appropriate behaviors at school or to improve respect for students and overall happiness in the school environment. This is described more in the following subtheme.

Subtheme A: Suggestions for Improving the School Environment

Callie wanted to encourage the idea of helping one other. She said,

What I think would be really cool, is like, like there would be like white boards all over the school, that you could like draw on, you know, like and like there be this like this

program to be nice to other people, like send them a secret message like hey you look good today or like you know those kinds of stuff”.

Callie thought that sending these encouraging messages would be “like lifting up spirits” or “spreading love” and she commented that “If I sent something like that to a bully, they’d feel better about themselves, so I would think that would make them want to make someone else feel better”.

Other ideas for improving the school environment included thoughts to give students more respect and letting them be heard. One example was for making choices in things like what they wanted to wear. Brandon thought that the dress code might be too strict. He asked the researcher if they knew what a dictator was and then he continued to say that it seems to him that the administration sometimes act like they have the power over everything and the students can not say anything about it. He thought that students should be able to wear what they want, with some discretion and that “people should be able to feel comfortable with how they want to feel”, in relation to expressing themselves and feeling comfortable in their clothing choices. In summary Brandon thought lightening up on a few rules at school would be a positive improvement, but thought that bullying issues should be taken a lot more seriously than they usually are. If students feared the consequence, if it were strong enough, they probably wouldn’t do it again.

When John was discussing his ideas of things that would be appropriate behaviors at school, things like complimenting others and being cordial or not thinking you are better than someone else, he also thought positive behaviors around school might increase if there was more in-depth discussion on the topic of bullying during Health class.

Other ideas to improve the school environment were offered by Callie and Paige. Callie thought that a colorful environment would be nice because people like being around colorful environments. She said, “Like the little kids, they like colors and it’s because it make them happy”. She thought if the plain white walls in a school had a bit more color to them, it would be more exciting to come to school and people would be happy. Paige thought that if there were team building activities where all students would have to work together, students would be “building respect” for one another as they are working together on a task. She said,

I just thought of you put respect and you put working together and you put those two together, and then you put it into something fun...then it makes it more enjoyable than like just sitting there and telling them what they should do or shouldn’t do or can’t do

Their answers and reflections about addressing the bullying communicated a commitment to their school climate more than their own needs, which further showcases the resilient spirit of the participants. Within this rural community, the students seemed to have personal connections to the school and the students. Their strengths and considerations for improving the school environment were great, even amidst their experience of being bullied. These students seemed to answer the questions as if they felt they had some ownership in the status of the current school environment.

Theme 2: Unexplored Depth of Definition and Description of Bullying

The students seem to describe and define bullying on a deeper level than the commonly used definition of bullying. Currently the definition of bullying incorporates offensive behavior that includes intentionality, repetition and an imbalance of power (Minnesota State Legislature, 2020). The descriptions and definitions that the students shared went deeper and were packed

with strong feelings including; alone, lonely, in my own little world, hurt, frustrated, doubt myself, singled out, anxious, embarrassed and a lot worse than people think.

Callie shared that “It feels like everything is wrong with you and you feel like other people look in the perspective of the bully’s eyes”. When she felt that there was one last thing that she felt proud of herself for or felt happy about a particular asset she had, she said “they make it into a bad thing and then you get insecure about that”. Describing the experience of feeling that everyone felt what the bully felt, Callie explained that sometimes she would begin to feel that way about herself too, “...that’s what they paint as you the picture of you so you paint yourself as that in your mind”. She continued to explain that “You can’t get away from it...because once they bully you, it, it, um sticks with you I guess...you just think about it over and over and over and you can’t escape it”. In coping, Callie says that “You feel like you want to isolate yourself so nobody else thinks that of you, so they don’t make you feel worse about yourself”

In rural schools, isolation is a risk. When all students know one another and some students are able to do certain things that others are not able to do; make a joke, wear certain clothing, push or call names, or tell an adult when they need help, it is difficult to know who to trust or who will be an ally. When the numbers of students in a class are smaller, to not be in the “in group” is much more obvious. Students considered the idea of just hiding out rather than navigating the terrain to find one person who they might be able to trust.

Kiera felt this pressure of most of her class being included in making comments about her sports ability. After fifteen minutes of discussing the topic of bullying with Kiera, the final question was asked, “if you were asked to define bullying, what would you say?” Her response was, “something that the person bullying makes you feel not like mad or like said [but] in a way

that you aren't good enough or something or good enough to be living and sometimes that's scary". She started to cry. She explained that she has had feelings of not living anymore, but not at this time. Her feelings were processed and the researcher contacted her mom.

Four of the students reported feeling confused about the social rules of behaviors among students. Students who bully can get away with: saying mean things, pushing people, saying a joke whether it is funny or not and receiving no criticism, wearing certain things and not getting teased or if the bully ever experiences being bullied, it seems they always have someone to stand up for them. John was new to this school last year, he still feels like he is navigating the terrain; trying to figure out the social rules and what peers are trustworthy and a good influence. He explains a confusing challenge:

One day I supposedly, I was creasing my shoes, which I, I, I like shoes but I did like, I don't care, I don't know if that makes sense, I, I'm a boy so I'm rough, like I, um, I don't care if my shoes are creasing or whatever...but then they kept pointing it out and they were like what are those, like you're creasing your shoes, so I had my mom bring me another pair of shoes...and but it's like I was wearing a nice pair of shoes and he was wearing fricken shoes from Walmart and it's like, I know how that sounds, but like...um I'm not saying that shoes from Walmart are bad or anything, but how are you going to comment on my shoes if your shoes aren't that great either and he was creasing his shoes but no one pointed it out to him

Different rules seemed to apply to different students, so trying to navigate was challenging. The students made comments of how some students who had grown up in the rural community since preschool seemed to be able to get away with things more than students who were new. It seemed that there was an initiation period that the students who were newer to the rural

community had to go through to prove themselves. Acceptance for who you were was difficult to achieve in a smaller group of students, because conformity was high and strong within the rural setting. Sports were important in these rural schools and because Brandon wasn't a "sports guy" he "got a lot of crap for it". The options of other involvement was limited.

Brandon describes bullying and talks about how bad it is. He says that bullying is:

A lot worse than people think...I've had people who have tried to help me in the past who have never experienced bullying like at all, like they were just perfectly normal during school, like they never got bullied and they do not know how to handle it at all, like they don't know what's happening and when you try to explain to them what's happening they either don't care or don't believe you

This student had a peer suggest to him to "man up and deal with it". Instead the student made a bullying report and the bullying stopped mostly. He accessed the services provided by the school counselor.

When asked what bullying looked like at school, some of the students included issues that involved online presence or cyberbullying. Paige talked about how "people screen shot it and then send it to people or they keep it...and then they mock you for it or send it to other people". Kiera talked about different ways that students bully online. She said that people make a group chat and "invite my friends into it but they don't think they are going to tell but then they tell me what's going on". Brandon shared how there was a group chat made for the entire class and when he joined, everyone left and made a new one and didn't invite him. Cyberbullying was something that most of these students experienced.

The narratives from this theme show complexity in the definition. Certainly there are tenants of the original definition with the actions being intentional, malicious and repeated. The

student's stories and experiences show a deeper impact on their psychological and emotional well-being. Additionally, the stories showcase the challenges of navigating school climate in a rural setting during this age range, gaining support from peers, and the specific behavioral occurrences on social media. This unexplored depth is important when bridging theory into lived experiences as school stake-holders consider systemic interventions for victims of bullying.

Theme 3: School Counselor Imperative for Visibility & Interventions

All of the students interviewed had contact with the school counselor, as it is protocol at the two schools that the counselor is involved with bullying reports and investigations. All of these students made a bullying report either online or by telling a teacher or the school counselor in person. When discussing the experience of bullying and when asked where students find the best help when bullied, the school counselor was not the immediate response for most. Students seem to not always be utilizing the counselor when dealing with bullying initially. One student did not realize that making a report was even something a student could do. He said, "I don't know why I didn't make multiple (reports)...I didn't really know about it, that you could make those, but I definitely would have" (Brandon). This same student reported that "after I submitted my report, it stopped mostly". John's first response was "the counselor".

The others answered the question "where do students find the best help when bullied?" with answers that did not involve the school counselor. Paige responded, "Pretty sure it's your parents". When asked if there are people at school that help, the student said, "I don't really see a lot of people do that". She thought that students didn't because they didn't want to get bullied even more. She explained that if she tells the counselor and the counselor talks to the students without saying where the concern came from, the students still figure it out on their own and then they call the student a snitch. So, the bullying happens no matter what.

In smaller rural settings the anonymity of making a bullying report is slim. School counselors keep information confidential, as that is a requirement of their position. But as Paige explains, when a school counselor talks to the students that are bullying, even if they do not say how they learned of the situation, in a rural school, the options of reporters are fewer and the likelihood of people knowing who gave the report is greater.

Kiera did not initially talk to the school counselor about her bullying experience. She found an independent way of handling the bullying, “I would write in a journal or sometime or just tell some of my friends...someone I could trust”. Callie also confided in a friend and felt relief after doing so, “I felt more comfortable um I knew that um because once I told someone they told me about their problems, and I knew that I wasn’t alone and so it’s more easier to open up now”. The greatest support for these students seemed to come from peers or parents.

John felt that he wished he knew more about the school when he first moved there, such as who he could talk to in the school and he shared that being new to a school was very difficult. He had some thoughts about what could be helpful at school, especially for a new student. He said,

If you’re going to a new school and your meeting some, you don’t really who to trust and just like knowing that people are giving out information to people like a counselor is a safe place and they can’t say anything

Navigating support was a challenge for students. School counselors were not seen as the first resource for support. While not all the students responded that they found support from the school counselor, those that did, found it helpful. The comments of the students in this study might guide a school counselor in thoughtfully considering the best course of action for interventions.

As mentioned earlier, Paige had some thoughtful ideas that a school counselor could use as engaging interventions that build a respectful school environment. She thought that if the counselor facilitated weekly team building activities where all students would have to work together, students could be “building respect” for one another as they are working together on a task. The narratives in this theme shed light into the imperativeness of a rural school counselor to be present in their school system in a way that students can identify them as an ally and resource to combat bullying. Even when meeting with the school counselor was required, the students did not consistently report that the school counselor was *the* person to come to when they were experiencing bullying, as the school counselor would hope they would.

Theme 4: Teachers Unknowingly Fostering Climate that Produces Bullying

The final theme that emerged from the data portrayed a consistent reflection that teachers had a significant impact and role on the students’ experiences of bullying. Students unanimously agreed that there is bullying that happens at school that teachers were unaware of. There were salient circumstances that the students associated to the reason why teachers were not always aware.

Kiera quickly answered “yeah” to the question “Do you think there is a lot of bullying that happens at school that adults don’t realize? When asked to say a little more she said,

A lot of people make fun of me for my height and the teachers they don’t see it because they are teaching a lesson or they are helping someone or they are just not paying that much attention, but then sometimes when they hear it they will say something about it...it makes a difference...but then not, but then you feel like you’re the victim because you were the one that told on them and then they make you feel like you are the snitch and you are not a good person

When the teachers did see it and made a comment, Kiera did not feel that it was always helpful because she gets further picked on because something was said to the person bullying and they get more mad at her.

John agreed with this idea of Kiera's that teachers are busy in the classroom and may not see everything that happens. He said that the teachers were, "busy with other students...they pay attention to like what they are working on with a student but don't really pay attention to other people unless it gets to a certain point, like arguing". John told of a situation where he was telling his teacher about the comments about the shoes and asked if he could go to the office and get a different pair of shoes that his mom had brought him because the boys were bullying him about his other shoes. The teacher responded by saying "I don't think that's bullying". John defended himself and said, "Well it's happened repeatedly". The teacher responded with "you know how they get when they buddy up". Later this student stated that, "Teacher support is like 50-50, like she understood what I was saying but didn't at the same time". He stated that the teacher gave him a hug, because she could see he was hurting, but the support was "iffy".

Callie explained that adults do not always know that bullying is happening at school because,

Bullies obviously don't bully around other adults or teachers you know or any staff members, they do it in secret, and the people that are getting bullied don't like to talk, like speak up about it, because they are embarrassed you know that it's happening to them.

The experience of bullying in school is complex. Having it happen in a small rural setting is even more complex. The feeling of being embarrassed is intensified by everyone knowing that it is happening.

Brandon had a similar thought about whether there was bullying that happens at school that adults do not realize, “They sometimes don’t see it, they sometimes do...sometimes they care, sometimes they don’t, every teacher is like their own thing”. The students had to navigate which teachers cared, which teachers would believe them. Brandon also shared that he thought the bullying had to be at a certain level before the teacher would do something. “They don’t really see it or notice it or even care, unless it’s like brought up or something serious happens or ...like gets to sexual harassment or something like that, that’s when they really start to see it”.

The students showed some annoyance or frustration in their response to the question “Do you think there is a lot of bullying that happens at school that adults don’t realize?” They scoffed or rolled their eyes as if to say, of course there is. Though they wished the teachers and adults would notice the bullying that occurs, they also seemed understanding that it might be difficult for the teachers to notice because the bullying is done quietly, sneakily and sometimes in whispers. The students agreed that it is difficult to detect. The data from this theme add further insight into the complexity of navigating the experiences of bullying. Teachers might commonly be viewed as an ally and supporter. However, the narratives showcase that is not always consistent or true. This theme is critical as the voices are considered for future actions and programming efforts that include school-wide stakeholders.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter provided demographic information and profiles for each of the five participants, in order to offer context and background of the participants; who they were, their grade level and a brief description of some of the bullying they have experienced. Next, the data analysis strategy and analytic techniques were described and thick descriptions of the four main themes and one subtheme that emerged from the data were presented. The themes portrayed

further insight into the strengths that the students had in their resilience to navigate the turmoil. The stories depict a complexity in the psychological and emotional impacts of bullying, as well as the challenges in navigating school climate for support and allyship from teachers and staff. Albeit these challenges, students have salient ideas for bolstering a school climate that aims to eliminate bullying and support students. For these students to put other's needs before their own showcases the magnanimity of their resilience.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

From this study four main themes and one subtheme emerged from the data: 1) Resilient Spirit A) Suggestions for Improving the School Environment 2) Unexplored Depth of Definition and Description of Bullying 3) School Counselors Imperative for Visibility and Interventions 4) Teachers May Unknowingly Foster Climate That Produces Bullying. In this chapter a reminder of the purpose of this research and a description of the role as a qualitative researcher is provided. Next, a discussion of how the findings compare to the literature and a section on ideas for future research and student supports are described. Then the chapter will conclude with limitations, future research directions, intervention suggestions as well as closing comments about the study.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of rural middle school students who had been bullied. The main research question that guided this study was: “How do rural middle school students, who have been bullied, describe the experience of bullying?” The researcher believed that a better understanding of bullying, from the perspective of those, that research shows experience bullying at peak levels, would allow educators, counselors and researchers to proceed in bully-prevention efforts with a more informed perspective. Hearing the voice of those that are experiencing the phenomenon was the goal of this research study.

Determining the use of qualitative methods for the dissertation was not a difficult decision and once the topic was determined and the research question finalized, phenomenology aligned intentionally. There is so much to learn from others, especially students. As a school counselor, the researcher appreciates the role of listening to and advocating for students. The researcher acknowledges their biases; being anti-bullying and wishing people took better care of one another and practiced more kindness. To manage those biases the researcher journaled

extensively. When the stories the students shared were hurtful and deeply impacting, the researcher journaled further. Additionally, the researcher consulted with others to bracket their biases and keep in mind the purpose in sharing the voice of these rural middle school students. The purpose was to describe as clearly as possible the essence of their lived experience of bullying.

Situating Findings within Context

Each of the themes and the data that informed the themes, served to form a thick description of how bullying is defined and described by rural middle school students who have been bullied. In this section, an attempt is made to situate findings within the existing literature. Listening for the essence of the description of bullying for rural middle school students who were bullied was the goal of this study.

Within the literature, power continues to be given to those who are determining the definition of bullying, with little acknowledgement for the voice of those that are experiencing the bullying. The theoretical framework of social constructionism that framed this study, offered two key concepts to consider throughout this study: critical perspective and finding the meaning of language. The meanings given to words vary between different situations. These differences can be minor or they can have a significant impact on human experience. Social constructionism also considers that the ways in which we generally understand the world, are historically and culturally specific and that the forms of knowledge that develop within a culture are a product of it (Burr, 2003).

The bullying phenomenon has been around for centuries. If researchers and intervention experts are using particular criteria to explain bullying and middle school students, who appear to be at highest risk for such behaviors, are experiencing something different, it is important to

listen to the voices of students and understand what they are experiencing. Research shows that students and researchers do not always agree on how to define or describe bullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2008; Ybarra et al., 2019; Younan, B., 2019).

In Minnesota, the anti-bullying law, also known as the *Safe and Supportive Schools Act*, utilizes the following definition for bullying:

“Bullying” means intimidating, threatening, abusive, or harming conduct that is objectively offensive and:

(1) there is an actual or perceived imbalance of power between the student engaging in prohibited conduct and the target of the behavior and the conduct is repeated or forms a pattern; or

(2) materially and substantially interferes with a student’s educational opportunities or performance or ability to participate in school functions or activities or receive school benefits, services, or privileges. (MN. State Legislature, 2020; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020a)

The findings showed there was more to the description and definition of bullying for rural middle school students who have been bullied than is present in the literature. One tenet of social constructionism is that knowledge and social action go together, meaning that descriptions or constructions of the world maintains or exclude certain behaviors. John described bullying as something that elevates his anxiety. Students spoke of wanting to isolate to avoid continued judgment. This makes sense in all they had to endure and the many levels of complexity that bullying holds for them. These students struggled additionally due to the current awareness in their rural culture of their description and definition of bullying. This awareness informed the actions that the students take to deal with the bullying. It is critical to understand a new

description and add this understanding to the literature as the definitions of bullying continue to evolve and inform intervention practices.

As described previously, there are many levels of this experience that the victims of bullying faced. There is great depth to this experience. As viewed by the researcher, the work the students endured each day to cope, felt heavy and exhausting. Bullying is a very personal experience and complexity was compounded by their rural setting. Each student had a deeper explanation connected to some strong feelings. The students were swimming in a rough sea of developmentally appropriate middle school adjustment and dealing with some of the most difficult emotions a person experiences in life as they were the recipients of very mean behaviors.

Social constructionism also maintains that the constructs our society creates are wrapped in power relations and allow people to treat others in particular ways (Burr, 2003). The findings showed that students experienced this power dynamic. Teachers, parents and friends would dismiss the bullying behaviors students experienced because it did not qualify as bullying, based on the construct of bullying they utilized. The teacher who told John that she did not think the description of the behaviors he experienced were bullying and then continued to demonstrate power over the student when she dismissed his experience and said, “you know how they get when they buddy up”. The student had been bullied, in his eyes, and as he looked for someone to confide in, he was further disenfranchised. This is dangerous. The difference in power dynamics need to be further understood beyond peer to peer, and consider how the peer to adult dynamics affect the perpetuation of bullying and marginalize the victims.

The social practices and sharing of language within a culture construct who a person becomes (Lock & Strong, 2010). Brandon was encouraged by peers to “man up and deal with it”,

his mother did not care about his reports of bullying and “even she got a little mad at me because of that”. At one point he stated that he reached his “breaking point” and at that time sought help from the school counselor.

When the bullying got really bad, that was my breaking point...when I was just so sick of the bullying and the home life was getting a lot worse, was getting like worse and worse, and when my parents found out about all this, they didn't care, that was why the breaking point...and it even (big sigh) I don't want to talk about it...it led me to do something that I, needless to say it led me to do something that if I succeeded I wouldn't be sitting here right now

Middle school is said to be a challenging time for adolescents; one of the major tasks being that of forming one's identity (Santrock, 2019). Trying to find your place in a small community and smaller social group can be very challenging. A few studies have considered the unique challenges that students in rural areas experience when it comes to bullying. One consideration is that there may be greater peer conflict in smaller schools, perhaps because there is greater competition and fewer friendship options in a smaller group of students (Klein & Cornell, 2010). Identity development is naturally influenced by the physical, cognitive and socio-emotional changes that come with it (Santrock, 2019). Developing social relationships is one of the key developmental events during adolescence, meaning that peer relationships become increasingly important (Nansel et al., 2003; Vernon, 2009). Social interactions, especially with peers, take on an increased importance during adolescence (Spear, 2000). Adolescents tend to begin looking to their peers and teachers for guidance more than their parents, as they begin to establish their own values (Crothers et al., 2006; Oliver et al., 1994; Santrock, 2019). Navigating social relationships and the emotions that go along with that can be challenging.

Students identified such experiences, but the experience seemed to be magnified by the added bullying experiences and particularly in their rural setting. There was confusion of relationships, which may have been part of the natural development of middle school-aged students, but the confusion grew when people's bullying started unexpectedly and were socially reinforced. The students felt that social rules were different for different students. Some students could behave in a certain way and it was accepted by the students, others, including themselves, could behave in the same way and it was not accepted. Some students were viewed by the participants to have more support within the social system than they had. Finding people to trust was a challenge for these students. As is common in the development of social relationships during this developmental time, relational dynamics change day by day. This change especially needs to be considered for the how students experience bullying in smaller rural settings that provide their own unique challenges for building friendships. Because of these dynamics, it was a cautious experience to build a friendship for the participants.

In both schools, athletics were considered important by most students. In smaller schools, sometimes a variety of clubs are not available, so if a student is not interested in sports, there may not be many other options for social engagement outside of school. A consistent narrative was being bullied for not being involved in athletics. As the literature notes the dynamics that impact social development, to be further considered is how sports plays a big role in the social aspect of students in rural communities.

In small rural towns, stigma or the mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person (Merriam-Webster, 2019) is high. The literature seems to demonstrate that the willingness to self-report bullying may be influenced by stigma (Frisen et al., 2008). Stigma of declaring that one has been bullied is a strong influencing factor, perhaps

higher in rural areas. Targets of bullying may be reluctant to admit they were bullied for a variety of reasons, including not wanting to appear weak (Stockdale et al., 2002). While there were many students who were eligible for the study, a smaller number followed through with their participation. The students that agreed to be interviewed demonstrated in words or actions that the topic was a difficult one to discuss.

Research shows that students feel teachers minimize the seriousness of bullying incidents and when they fail to respond (Craig et al., 2000; Unnever & Cornell, 2003; Varjas et al., 2009) or delay their intervention efforts, the effectiveness is limited (Cunningham et al., 2016). Teachers have been found to consider bullying incidents less serious than students (Bradshaw & Sawyer, 2007). Students in this study all felt that there was bullying that happened at school that adults were not aware of. The danger in minimizing or not noticing is that bullying increases and during this critical point in development when students are looking more to their peers and teachers for developing their own values the relationships are not positively supporting their growth.

Unique to this study was the finding that school counselors need to be more visible to students so that they are sought after when students are experiencing bullying. The school counselor is fully equipped to deal with situations of bullying. However, the data portray that students need help building agency for self-advocacy and for identifying the school counselor as the safe-person when breaking the stigma of speaking up about their experiences to get help. The school counselor needs to be dutiful in being visible and encouraging students to connect with them when they are victims of bullying. From this, one can reason that the school counselor needs to be effective in dealing with the school climate factors, student relational factors, and individual needs of the victim and perpetrators in order that the perception of the school

counselor continues to reflect that they are trusting and supportive person. As was shown in the data, the students did not consistently feel that way about teachers, who might be commonly viewed as an ally and advocate.

In conclusion, that data added complexity and richness to the topic explored and will be an important contribution to the literature. With the voice of students being heard, the experience of bullying for rural middle school students can be better understood and the work done to prevent harmful long-term consequences can be more effective. Listening to those that are having the experience is imperative.

Limitations of Study

The aim of this study was to understand the description of bullying for rural middle school students who have been bullied. Individual semi-structured, open-ended interviews with students were chosen because it was a method that was lacking in the literature. It also seems to be the best way to deeply understand and access the information related to the description of the experience of bullying from the individual students. Prior to considering future directions and suggestions for interventions there are limitations that should be considered.

First, this phenomenological study included a sample size of only five participants. Though saturation for this type of study was met, additional student participants would have provided greater voice. The topic may have been a sensitive one for people to comfortably discuss, especially in a rural setting. Additionally, students had to meet the inclusion criteria which included students being in grades 6-8 and had filed a bullying report within the past two years while in those grades. This challenge of recruitment was addressed partially by utilizing the school counselor in each school to initially determine students for inclusion.

Though choosing semi-structured interviews and open-ended questioning seemed most appropriate for interviewing students and offering a flexible environment for them to describe and define and truly share the essence of their experience with bullying, it also posed some challenge in analyzing the data. It was difficult to compare answers between participants as some interviews went in different directions for a portion of the interview. It also may have hindered the research that the researcher had not had first-hand experience with bullying.

Future Research Direction

This phenomenological study shares the voice of five rural middle school students who have been bullied. Guided by the grand research question of “How do rural middle school students who have been bullied describe bullying?” several themes emerged while the students shared their own perspectives of the experience of bullying. There are several directions for future research within this topic.

One consideration for future research would be to consider the resilient spirit theme in greater depth. This could be done in various ways. One thought is to conduct a longitudinal study and interview these same students in 10 or 20 years to determine how their resilient spirit continued to support them in their lives.

Another area for future research would be to explore in greater depth the considerations that students have for improving the school environment, for making things better for all that are involved in the school. Hearing student voices is so important. It is imperative to understand what bullying means to students today and listen to the voice of those that are experiencing it at the greatest levels. Whether it be this topic of bullying or other topics of issues that students experience at school, continuing to listen to the students is critical. The power of defining an

event should reside with those that are experiencing the event (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Minichiello & Kottler, 2010).

Future Intervention Suggestions

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher continued to consider what interventions could be utilized to better support students who are bullied. The ethical standards of ASCA (2016) require counselors to be advocates, leaders, collaborators and consultants who create systemic change by providing equitable educational access and success by connecting their school counseling programs to the district's mission and improvement plans (ASCA, 2016). Additionally, it states that all students have the right to "a safe school environment promoting autonomy and justice and free from abuse, bullying, harassment and other forms of violence" (ASCA, 2016). It is important for counselors to ensure these ethics are practiced.

One way of ensuring that students feel safe at school is that school counselors can be sure that students know how to advocate for themselves and help create an environment in which students feel safe in doing so. Educating students on how to advocate and the importance of self-advocacy is critical. Also of critical importance is listening to students. This helps counselors and school stakeholders collaborate with students and determine the need within a school. Being heard and having some part in action is healing for victims. Any sort of intervention that utilizes student voice to inform change would be very valuable. Student voice has to be continued in order to make a difference in this serious public health issue.

Working with the knowledge that during the middle school years adolescents are searching for a sense of self and personal identity, the facilitation of student-informed support and involvement in ways of exploring personal values, beliefs and goals might provide a sense of confidence and calm assurance for all students. It may decrease the need for students to seek

power and bully others for recognition or social status. Additionally, after helping students explore their interests and goals, developing or finding supports or involvement opportunities for students that fit their interests would be helpful. Some interests may not be commonly accessible in rural areas. School counselors can work with staff to facilitate broader opportunities within these rural schools. Intentionally supporting students during this naturally challenging time in human development may increase a sense of security.

The students in this study had great insight for ways to improve the school environment. This needs to be heard with great consideration. Listening to the ideas students have for promoting respectful school environments would be a great start to implementing positive interventions. When students have a hand in creating something they will take pride in it and be more invested. Being a team, collaborating with the students, is the basis for creating a respectful environment for all.

Building connections is important for these students. Students yearned for a friend and were comforted when they were able to share their story of bullying with someone they felt they could trust. In rural schools, finding just one person that is not persuaded by the bully can be a challenge, when the total number of students is small to begin with. As was presented in the findings, the students were not always reaching out to the school counselor when they were having challenges at school. The school counselor needs to reach out to the students and offer support. Immersing oneself in the experience of rural middle school student's school day may provide useful information for determining which students need support in the way of peer connections. Reaching out to students and facilitating connections in ways such as offering small groups for students who are bullied or are having trouble connecting with peers would provide great support. Students would understand that they were not alone, they could gain strength by

collaborating with and supporting one another and they would have an opportunity to really talk about this experience in a safe place. In order to navigate the issue of stigma, the group could be presented as a peer group, middle school group or advocates for a positive school environment. Topics of discussion could include challenges students experience or other pertinent topics the students present.

The rural environment these students navigate in combination with the bullying is filled with stress and trauma. Currently when a student is bullied, they fill out a bullying form and the adults in the building investigate by interviewing the students that have been reported to be involved. Support is encouraged and provided regardless of whether or not bullying is substantiated, but it is almost as if the adults are determining whether what the student is saying is true. The student having the experience is feeling violated, that is the fact. This is where the focus needs to be.

Bullying is a serious issue, and when it happens in rural schools the effects cause serious psychological trauma. This needs to be understood and considered with great seriousness by all school stakeholders. Public awareness for the issue of bullying in rural schools needs to be increased. Discussions about bullying are necessary. The stigma of bullying can decrease by having conversations about the experience. Trainings that focus on building competence for handling bullying issues in rural school settings; how to listen and talk to students about bullying issues, how to effectively support students is important for all school staff as well as parents. School staff and parents need to be well-informed and willing to engage in discussions on this serious public health issue. In addition, providing education for all students on the seriousness of bullying as well as the importance of creating a positive school environment is crucial. A safe and supportive school for all students must be a priority.

Conclusions

This research attempted to describe the phenomenon of how rural middle school students who had been bullied described bullying. The findings of this qualitative phenomenological study suggest that the experience of bullying is a very personal experience that is filled with strong feeling and emotion. There is depth and layers to the experience for the rural middle school students. Results indicate that the student's description of bullying is different from the generally accepted definition utilized throughout the literature. As the environment of schools and the experiences of students change over the years it is important to continue to listen to the voice of students.

This study contributed to filling the gap in the literature by examining how rural middle school students who had been bullied described bullying from a social constructionism perspective. The themes that emerged showed that the ways in which rural middle school students describe bullying differs from that in the literature. Having an understanding of bullying, from the perspective of those, that research shows experience bullying at peak levels, will allow educators, counselors and researchers to proceed in bully-prevention efforts with a more informed perspective. With knowledge of students' descriptions of bullying, the most effective support and interventions can be offered.

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APPENDIX A: Bullying Report Form

General Statement of Policy Prohibiting Bullying

_____Public Schools maintains a firm policy prohibiting bullying conduct that interferes with a student's ability to learn and/or a teacher's ability to educate students. Bullying or cyberbullying by a student against another student is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated.

Reporter:

Home Address:

Home Phone:

Work Phone:

Cell Phone:

Name of student reporting

Grade of student reporting

Date of alleged incident(s) _____

Name of student(s) who engaged in bullying: _____

Where did the alleged incident(s) occur? _____

List any witnesses that were present:

Describe what happened as clearly as possible, including details such as what was said and who made the statements, whether anyone made a threat or demand for something and what threat or demand was made, whether physical contact happened (i.e.: hitting, punching, throwing an item, etc.), whether anyone was injured or property was damaged, the ages or grades of the students, if known, etc. (Attach additional pages if necessary).

Circle each that apply if the bullying was directed at another student due to the student's actual or perceived: race \ ethnicity \ color \ creed \ religion \ national origin \ immigration status \ sex \ marital status \ familial status \ socioeconomic status \ physical appearance \ sexual orientation \ gender identity and expression \ academic status related to student performance \ disability \ status with regard to public assistance \ age .

Was the bullying conduct in retaliation for a student's conduct and if yes, please describe.

Did the bullying occur through an electronic communication (i.e.: Facebook, Twitter, email, etc.) and if so, identify the form of communication? (If available, attach a copy of the communication. _____

This complaint is filed based on my honest belief that _____ has bullied me or another person. I certify that the information I have provided in this complaint is true, correct, and complete to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Complainant Signature

Date

Complaint Received by

Date

APPENDIX B: Coding Scheme

Initial Coding Scheme

 Feelings

 Key words

Continued Coding Scheme

EXP- Experience of Bullying

RUR- Rural Related

TEACH- Teacher Related Comments

SC- School Counselor

SS- Student Strengths

APPENDIX C: Interview Schedule

What rural middle school students who have been bullied can teach us about bullying

Sarah Lendt

Minnesota State University, Mankato

General Research Question: How do rural middle school students who have reported being bullied describe bullying?

Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe bullying?

a. Why do kids bully, do you think?

2. What does bullying look like here at school?

a. Is there bullying that happens at school that adults are not aware of?

b. When students are bullied, where do they find the best help?

c. In your opinion, what should be acceptable behaviors at school?

d. In your opinion, what should be unacceptable behaviors at school?

3. When is a behavior a joke and when is it bullying?

4. If you were asked to define bullying, how would you define it?

PARENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Parents:

Your student is being invited to participate in a research study that aims to understand how bullying is defined and described by rural middle school students who have experienced bullying.

We are requesting your consent for your student to participate in this research study. Your student has the opportunity to participate in this study by meeting the following inclusion criteria: 1) have filed a bullying report in the school years of 2020-2021 or 2021-2022; 2) were in 6th-8th grades when the report was made; and 3) attend a school that is in a rural area.

Your student's participation in this study is completely voluntary. Their decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits.

Overview of the Study

This research study consists of gathering qualitative information about how rural middle school students define and describe bullying. Previous research has considered student voice in the area of bullying, through quantitative measures such as surveys.

The purpose of this research study is to understand how bullying is defined and described by rural middle school students who have experienced the phenomenon of bullying. The research will be conducted by Sarah Lendt, a doctoral student researcher in the Department of Counseling and Student Personnel at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and supervised by Dr. Rick Auger, principal investigator and professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Personnel at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Mrs. Lendt will be conducting all of the interviews (in-person or online) and collecting the data and Dr. Auger will also have access to data collected.

If you and your student agree to participation, Mrs. Lendt will ask the student for their first name, age, grade and the year a bullying report was made. Our primary data source will be a recorded interview where Mrs. Lendt will ask students four main open-ended questions about bullying in middle school.

The interviews will occur in person or via videoconferencing technology and be recorded for future analysis and are expected to take approximately 45 minutes to complete. In order to accommodate student's schedules, the school counselor will be sure that the interviews will be conducted at a time that does not interfere with core subjects and will be in a private location at their school, either online or in person. Further, once the interviews have been transcribed and coded for themes and categories, Mrs. Lendt will ask to meet with your student again to request feedback on the accuracy of Mrs. Lendt's efforts to capture your student's thoughts of

the themes and categories. It is estimated the time commitment for this will be no greater than 15 additional minutes of participation in this research.

Potential Risks and Benefits

There may be potential risks that include possible emotional or mental stress or discomfort in being asked to share personal thoughts about the topic of bullying. Your student can choose to skip any interview questions if they feel uncomfortable answering the question. A student may also stop the interview at any time if it becomes too uncomfortable, simply by letting Mrs. Lendt know they would like to stop and there will be no consequence. It is the hope of the student researcher, that the benefit to the student participants would be that of having someone hear their thoughts and ideas about bullying. It is also a hope of the student researcher that potential benefits of this research for the communities involved to be that of gaining a greater understanding of what the experience of bullying is like for rural middle school students. It is hoped that this research study will fill a gap in existing literature by a) informing others of how bullying is described and defined by rural middle school students b) providing direction for future research.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Your student's privacy and confidentiality will be guarded to the utmost extent possible. Due to the nature of this study, the participants will not be anonymous to both Mrs. Lendt, the student researcher and Dr. Rick Auger, the Principal Investigator. Confidentiality will be protected in a number of ways. The interviews will take place in a private location where distractions and extraneous noise are less likely to occur. The location will be determined by the school counselor. Also, using a private space for the interview will insure the privacy of the participant. If the interview occurs online using videoconference technology, a HIPAA-compliant web conferencing program will be used (Zoom). If the interviews occur in person, the interview will be digitally recorded. If the interview occurs using a web conferencing program (Zoom), the session will be recorded and saved on a password-protected computer.

As soon as possible after the interview, the content stored on the digital recording device will be downloaded to a password-protected computer and all interviews will be transcribed. Participants will be de-identified through the transcription process, meaning that any mention of their names or of information that could identify them will be removed. Following the transcription of the interviews, all recordings will be deleted by the student researcher, Mrs. Lendt. The password-protected computer can only be accessed by Mrs. Lendt. Additionally, a copy of the interview transcriptions will be sent to and stored electronically on a password-protected computer of the principal investigator, Dr. Auger, in Armstrong Hall at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Your consent form for participation will be deleted after three years by the principal investigator, Dr. Auger. The interview transcriptions will be deleted after five years by the principal investigator, Dr. Auger, and student researcher, Mrs. Lendt. All identifying information discussed in the interview will be omitted or changed (using a pseudonym) in the transcript.

Your Student's Rights as a Participant

Students are free to stop participating in the study at any time without consequence by informing Mrs Lendt or the school counselor in person or by telephone, e-mail, or in writing. In addition, even if your student agrees to participate in the study they are free to not answer any question that prefer not to. Whenever one works with online technology there is always the risk of compromising privacy, confidentiality, and/or anonymity. If you would like more information about the specific privacy and anonymity risks posed by storing information electronically, please contact the Minnesota State University, Mankato Information and Technology Services Help Desk (507-389-6654) and ask to speak to the Information Security Manager.

If you have any questions prior to signing this consent form, please feel free to contact Dr. Auger (richard.auger@mnsu.edu; 507-389-2423) or Sarah Lendt (sarah.lendt@sleepyeye.mntm.org; 320-979-0687). If you have questions about participants' rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the Administrator of the Institutional Review Board at (507)389-1242.

Enclosed is a copy of letters for you and your student to keep. If you and your student agree for your student to participate in the study, please complete one copy each of the assent and informed consent and return the signed copy. Your signatures indicate that you have read and understand the information provided, that you willingly agree to have your student participate, that your student agrees to participate, that your student may withdraw at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, and that you both have received copies of these forms.

Thank you for your consideration.

Parent Name (please print) _____

Signature _____ Date _____

CHILD ASSENT FORM

My name is Sarah Lendt. I am a doctoral student at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I am doing a study to understand how rural middle school students who have been bullied describe and define bullying. I am asking you to participate in the research study because your school counselor thought you would be a good candidate.

For this research, I will ask you some questions about how you describe bullying and what it is like at your school. All your answers will be private and I will not show them to other students or any teachers at your school. Only my supervisor at Minnesota State University, Mankato and I will see them.

I do not think that any big problems will happen to you by being a part of this study, but you might feel sad, or mad when we talk about the topic of bullying. I hope being a part of the study will make you feel good by having the opportunity to share your thoughts about the topic of bullying.

You should know that:

- You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You will not get into any trouble if you decide not to participate.
- Your parent(s)/guardians were asked if it was ok for you to be in this study. If they say it is ok, it is still your choice whether you participate or not.
- You can ask any questions you have at any time. If you think of questions at any time, you or your parents can contact me at sarah.lendt@sleepyeye.mntm.org or 320-979-0687

Sign this form only if you:

- Have understood what you will be doing for this study,
- Have had all your questions answered,
- Have talked to your parent(s)/legal guardian about this project, and
- Agree to participate in the research study

Your signature

Printed Name

Date

