The Bullying Word:
Exploring how Students, Parents, Teachers and Principals Interpret ‘Bullying’

BY

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Abstract

Over the past 25 years, research, policies, programming and news reports have proactively tackled the evolving bullying problem, trying to remain ahead of the issue and provide relevant solutions for all educational community members. As of now, the majority of the literature written on the subject focuses on the changing rates of bullying, the different forms of bullying and lastly the negative impact bullying has on victims, offenders, bystanders and the larger school community. These three areas of research are all predicated on the “bullying” word being understood by different players in the educational community; however, as preliminarily research has started to demonstrate there is a growing and concerning trend of the “bullying” word not being commonly understand, which has the potential to cause problems as they relate to communication, assessment and problem solving. The intent of this study was to use a multiple case study approach to explore how students, teachers, parents and administrators understand the word bullying and how they arrived at their conceptualization. In order to accomplish this goal, individual interviews of each case study group were conducted at two southeastern Ontario elementary schools, specifically working with participants in or associated with the junior grades. The findings reveal that across and within different case study groups the definition of bullying has notable commonalities not yet documented in collective discourse, as well as problematic areas of vast subjectivity. In my study, I introduce the phrase “bullying word phenomenon” to describe the occurrence of the term “bullying” not being commonly understood by members of the school community, which has the potential to make problem solving more difficult and inhibit different research findings (i.e. the difficulties of assessing “bullying” rates if the term itself is not commonly understood). As this is an exploratory case study, my findings are based on my literature review and qualitative case study.
With that said, awareness of these trends needs to spread, and more research needs to be done on the “bullying word phenomenon,” so as to assist with school problem solving and inclusion.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Over the last eight years, as I have progressed from teacher candidate at Queen’s University to elementary teacher in a local district school board, I have paid particular attention to stories, experiences, expert advice and studies on bullying. To pinpoint when my interest in this issue began to one singular moment is impossible because such a personal moment does not exist, what is present is a strong internal drive to create an inclusive classroom learning experience that over time met with a series of external bullying-related headlines, workshops, journal articles, and school experiences.

However, I can clearly remember one moment as significant for this study. I stood in the principal’s office feeling confused, concerned and helpless. My mind was spinning with unanswered questions, and my mouth was shut with no possible explanation. Across from me sat the principal and between us, on her desk, a passionate note from a parent resting in a student’s agenda. This particular school experience started the day before when I had held tryouts for the boys’ basketball team. During the tryouts, skills were tested and scrimmage games played, and through it all I was very impressed by the level of dedication and commitment; however, upon arriving at school the next morning I was presented with a lengthy note in a student’s agenda claiming that during tryouts their son had been intentionally bullied by his classmates, that no one had passed him the ball and that I had done nothing to recognize, address, or solve the bullying problem. After I read the letter, my hands started to shake with anxiety, my mind went racing with an assortment of stressful thoughts: I didn’t see what she was describing and I now have to report this to the administration.
As the day passed, I thought about the situation in hopes of gaining clarity. I remembered my experience in teacher’s college and being told that bullying was a pressing issue that was being proactively addressed by the Ministry of Education, policymakers, boards and local schools. I also recalled the definition of bullying I was taught: a repeated act of social, emotional and/or physical aggression committed by someone(s) in a powerful, superior position (Olweus, 1993). During the previous night’s tryout, we had held a series of practice games to evaluate, as students were told, their game awareness, positioning and overall basketball aptitude. My notes showed that this particular student struggled to understand positioning, did not complete a majority of his passes and was not often passed the ball. This, I believe, was not a result of some ongoing peer struggle because he was a well-liked kid who socialized with everyone. Instead, he was not passed the ball because, as the previous day had demonstrated, basketball was not a strong sport for him and his fellow peers recognized that passing the ball to him was likely the wrong move for the team.

Later that day, I went to the administrator, showed her the letter and told her that I was willing to do anything to help remedy the situation. With a large, confidence-inducing breath in, I then told her with a slightly nervous undertone that I did not think that this was bullying and that he simply lacked the skills to be competitive. She nodded her head and told me that I was right. Any sense of accomplishment, however, was quickly whisked away into vacuity when she then went on to tell me that we still had to treat this situation as bullying—not wanting to go against the parents, nor having the support to refute such a claim.

My goal for that situation, to have the conflict properly understood, unfortunately fell flat and was never really accomplished with any personal sense of sincerity or inclusion. The goal of the school, which was an extension of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s policy “Bullying Prevention and Intervention: policy/program memorandum No. 144 (2012)” and the growing
social pressure for bullying to be addressed, was accomplished in that the idea of bullying had been officially documented, addressed, and resolved. Even with that conclusion, certain questions still remained: Was the closure given to the parents truthful and honest? Does the student have a clearer understanding of bullying? What sort of precedent has been set by the school?

Through my examination of past and present discourses, I have started with the definition of the word and then found a variety of “bullying” definitions. The variations do contain similarities, but they also contain clear differences. Interestingly enough, researchers have begun to recognize this problem and call out for a solution; however, such a solution requires research that critically explores the “bullying” word differences and how these differences developed. Schools have policies on bullying, but how are they being communicated by the administrators and interpreted by the students, teachers and parents? Exploring the possible explanations to this question will provide all those involved in the larger educational community with a clearer understanding of the bullying word problem, as well as help with the future implementation of bullying policy.

Basketball is a sport that requires players to have a key understanding of their goals and responsibility on the court, while the coach is largely responsible for making sure that these goals and strategies are effectively communicated to and interpreted by all members of the team. To improve the current situation with the “bullying” word, I found myself asking two key questions that formed the basis for this entire thesis: How is bullying defined by students, parents, teachers, and administrators? How did they learn their particular understanding? The purpose of my exploratory case study research was to examine the definition of bullying within two school communities of students, teachers, parents, and administrators, and in doing so showcase this ongoing problem in the face of inclusive education.
Research Purpose

The purpose of my exploratory multiple case study was to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents, and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy was communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. In order to achieve this purpose, the following specific research questions, each with two sub questions, guided this research:

1. How do students define bullying?
   a. How do students interpret information about bullying at school?
   b. How is bullying policy communicated to students through their school?

2. How do parents define bullying?
   a. How do parents interpret information about bullying at their child’s school?
   b. How is bullying policy communicated to parents through their child’s school?

3. How do teachers define bullying?
   a. How do teachers interpret information about bullying at their schools?
   b. How is bullying policy communicated to teachers at their school?

4. How do administrators define bullying?
   a. How do administrators define, describe and understand bullying?
   b. How do administrators communicate bullying information to students, parents and teachers?

Rationale

During the early 1990s, the word “bullying” was gaining prominence within different educational communities, and at that time the definition, provided by Olweus, was fairly clear:
bullying is a repeated act of social, emotional and/or physical aggression committed by someone(s) in a powerful, superior position (Olweus, 1993). However, as bullying has evolved in a twenty-first century context researchers, policymakers and school communities involved have struggled to keep pace while still holding on to the initial definition of bullying (Bazelon, 2013; Rigby, 2003). Through my exploration of extant literature on this topic, I have found a variety of “bullying” definitions; constituting a collection of definitions that together are confusing and concerning, thus making school inclusiveness inherently difficult. Relevant literature has started to suggest that different people have different understandings of bullying. My research further explored the particular differences in understanding of the term amongst students, parents, teachers, and administrators, and investigated how these definitions and interpretations were acquired.

As Matheson (1988) stated about research triangulation, “we [researchers] attempt to make sense of what we find, and that often requires embedding the empirical data at hand with a holistic understanding of the specific situation and general knowledge about this class of social phenomena” (p. 17). My methods and related reasoning are only justified if framed within the larger collection of relevant research. To frame the study, a literature review was conducted to explore research currently available in the bullying area, and in doing so illustrate the collective need for a more comprehensive exploration into how the “bullying” word is defined and communicated by schools, as well as how it was understood and interpreted by their associated community.

**Educational Significance**

As evident from the literature, there is a growing need to address how the word “bullying” word is understood, so that school communities can operate in a shared space of understanding in
which information, problems, and solutions are communicated rather than misconstrued. The research on this issue is limited and work available paints an educational landscape that has yet to recognize the bullying word phenomenon. Therefore, through this study I intended to take the current discussion one step further by exploring the meaning individuals ascribe to the word “bullying,” while at the same time providing a critical description of how the word is learned. In terms of the latter point, researchers, school officials, and policymakers need to understand how the “bullying” word is acquired by different groups, so that they are more advantageous in communicating a solution (e.g., a definition given to parents via a school letter home is ineffective if their main form of acquisition is related to social media). As I started this study, to my best knowledge, there existed no other studies that looked at how the “bullying” word was learned by different groups; thus, such an exploration was necessary to increase the effectiveness of present and future bullying-related programming.

School communities, for the most part, are unaware of the bullying word phenomenon, but once awareness does start to spread, individuals will hopefully begin to seek out how this problem occurred; a much-needed pursuit that my thesis helps to answer. It is also important to consider that among the current studies that reference the “bullying” word phenomenon, there was a limited amount of exploration into the actual differences between definitions. Stating that a difference exists is valuable, but attempting to describe these differences and find similarities takes the current discourse to the next level. To discuss a possible solution using only the singular phrase “differences exist” is inconsequential and limiting, and I wanted to expand the discourse, root out similarities and differences and create targeted solutions. My work compared the different definitions and explored how these definitions are learned for the sake of overall productivity, meaningful discourse, problem solving and school inclusion.
Key Definitions

The key terms that are associated with my study are bullying, educational communities, student, teacher, parent, and school administrator. Each term is defined below.

Bullying

Because this study explores how different people and demographics use the word “bullying,” it is difficult to say that a singular shared definition is available. Different researchers and policymakers have applied different understandings. With that said, during my literature review I found that a vast majority of researchers often recognize Olweus’ (1969) original definition of bullying as an occurrence of all of the following three conditions: a) verbal, physical or social aggression, b) repetition over time and c) involvement of a power differential. In my literature review, I further explore how this definition has changed with respect to time and space; however, similar to other researchers, I wanted to specifically recognize this founding understanding. If the bullying definition has become a tree with roots and branches, then Olweus’ understanding is the seed.

Educational Community

I use this phrase to refer to individuals who are directly involved in the collective entity of a school: students, parents/care givers, teachers, principals, educational assistants, and other support staff members.

Student

For the purposes of this study, student is defined as a child attending a public school between grade 4 and 6. In my literature review, I do reference studies that refer to students outside of this grade bracket, and whenever this occurs I have made sure to note the particular grade range of the that study.
Teacher

For the purposes of this study, teacher is defined as an individual who currently teaches in a grade 4 to 6 junior classroom. Some of the teachers in my study teach in a split junior classroom.

Parent

For the purposes of this study, parent is defined as an individual with a child in a grade 4 to 6 classroom. Some of the parents do have other children outside of this grade range, but parents were informed during the recruitment stage and at the start of the interview that this study specifically looks at the junior grade 4 to 6 classrooms.

School Administrator

For the purposes of this study, school administrator is defined as the individual who holds an administrative position at one of the case study schools.

Overview of the study

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Thus far, Chapter 1 has introduced my research interest, the purpose of this research, educational significance, and key terms. Chapter 2 provides the foundation of prior research and relevant literature for the context of this study. Chapter 3 details the methodology, my multiple case research approach, data collection and analysis, validity and trustworthiness, and ethical guidelines. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the two schools I worked with and the related interviews with students, teachers, parents and administrators. In Chapter 5, I discuss the results in relation to the relevant literature and offer implications, further research suggestions, and conclusions.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

The following literature review provides a critical examination of research related to the definition of bullying and situates it within an Ontario school context. It demonstrates that students, teachers, parents, members of the school community, researchers and policymakers have varying definitions of the word “bullying,” which may create ambiguity and confusion when attempting to solve the problem, limit meaningful support programs and inhibit effective policy implementation. This literature review consists of three sections. In the first section, entitled “Empirical Studies of Bullying,” I frame the current culture of bullying by looking at current rates, problems, and prominent research being done in the field. Secondly, in “Bullying Definition, Assessment and Policy,” I provide an overview of how the difficulties associated with the word “bullying” have impacted definitions from different discourse communities as well as assessment tools used by researchers and policymakers. Lastly, I examine how the bullying word phenomenon impacts people in the province of Ontario. As seen through this literature review, there seems to be a clear problem with the ambiguity of the word “bullying;” a problem that not only needs to be more proactively researched, but also solved for the betterment of clarity, effective problem solving, school inclusiveness, and student growth.

Empirical Studies on Bullying

Bullying prevention is a complex task that requires targeted interventions for the members of the educational community involved, as well as reliable application of policies against bullying at the school and community levels. Over the past 25 years, research, policies, programming and news reports have proactively tackled this evolving problem, trying to remain ahead of the problem and provide relevant solutions for community members. In a recent cross-national study of
bullying (Craig, et al., 2009) it was found that overall 26% of adolescents aged 11 to 15 in 40
different countries reported involvement in bullying. With respect to Canada, 23% of boys and
17% of girls reported involvement. A similar comparative analysis study completed in partnership
with the Public Health Agency of Canada found that, when comparing students from 2006 to 2010,
the number of students who self-identify as being a victim has increased from 20% to 22% while
interestingly enough the number of self-identified students who bully has declined from 12% to
10% (Craig & McCuaig-Edge, 2011). Subsequently, a vast amount of research has been done to
study the effects of bullying for all students involved.

**Negative effects of bullying.** Research has shown that both bullies and victims are at a
higher risk for short- and long-term difficulties such as academic problems (Fonagy, Twemlow,
Vernberg, Sacco, & Little, 2005), psychological difficulties (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen,
& Rimpela, 2000), and social-relationship problems (Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly,
found that victims and bullies both show a lower psychological well-being, poor social
adjustments, increased propensity for distress and stress, as well as different negative physical
health symptoms. There are countless other studies that further examine the negative consequence
of bullying. Cascardi et al. (2014) found that victims of bullying are at a greater risk for academic
difficulty, low self-esteem, school avoidance, depression, anxiety, and insomnia. While Due,
Holstein, Lynch, Diderichsen and Gabhain (2005) found that victimized children are 1.3 to 3.4
times more likely to report headaches, 1.3 to 3.3 times more likely to report stomach aches and 1.6
to 6.8 times more likely to report depressive symptoms than non-victimized children. The negative
consequences are not only limited to victims, as research has shown that bullies are just as likely
to encounter these aforementioned problems as well as experience other long-term difficulties.
Youth who bully are more likely to sexually harass their peers and to commit aggression toward a future dating partner (McMaster et al., 2002). In fact, the title “bully” puts a large burden on a small demographic who are already facing physical and social difficulties. Olweus’ (1993) often referenced study of Norwegian children found that students from grades 6 to 9 who self-identified as having bullied were four times more likely to appear before the courts on delinquency charges (Olweus, 1993). A UK study that examined the lasting effects of bullying found that people identified as bullies in school were more likely to have children that exhibit aggressive behaviour (Farrington, 1993). It has also been shown that people who bully are more likely to experience depression (Salmon, James & Smith, 1998) as well as suicidal tendencies (Rigby, 2003). Research has also demonstrated that the impact of bullying extends beyond the students involved and often creates an overall negative school environment.

**Negative school climate.** A wide-range of research has shown that bullying negatively damages the school climate or environment for students, staff, parents and other community members (Cascardi et al, 2014; Fonagay et al., 2005; Rawana, Norwood, & Whitley, 2011). Specifically, Rawana et al. (2005) revealed through the initialization of a strength-based bullying prevention program that a significant decrease in victimization over time led to an increase in student-reported safety within the school climate. In a similar study, Fonagay et al. (2005) found that elementary students had greater academic success when attending a school with a long-term, successful bullying prevention program rather than a matched comparison group of students in a controlled school. Furthermore, academic success decreased among students who left schools with effective prevention programs and moved to schools that did not have them (Fonagay et al., 2005). It has also been found that, when students identify different school problems as solely being acts of “bullying,” they are more likely to feel anxious and fearful (Elinoff, Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004).
The amount of negative consequences associated with bullying for students and the larger educational community is clear and well-documented; however, as demonstrated in the following subsection, an emerging phenomenon in the field revolves around the inability to accurately and reliably define “bullying.”

**Definitional issues with notion of bullying.** In 1969, Olweus, who would go on to write and study the effects of bullying for the next thirty years of his career in psychology, stated that bullying as a phenomenon occurs when all of the following three conditions are present: a) verbal, physical or social aggression, b) repetition over time and c) involvement of a power differential (Olweus, 1993). This definition, which gained common practise in the discourse of the early 1990s, has been used by a wide-range of researchers in the field, but as time has progressed the very same researchers are starting to recognize the inability to accurately and reliably use the term within educational communities, policy groups and academia. In fact, during this literature review it was difficult to find a study that did not, as a result of the inconsistent definition, express concerns or limitations (Bickmore, 2011; Cascardi, 2014; Connolly et al., 2000; Fonagay et al., 2005; Mahri, Chafouleas & Sassu, 2004). Bickmore’s (2011) qualitative study on peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding policies and programming within three urban schools highlighted this problem, as she attempted to examine how students and staff understood and responded to the problem of “bullying.” Although she did reference the standard definition by Olweus (1993) mentioned previously, she added, “in schools and the public, however, the term is understood in varying ways and often used as a blunt instrument referring to any kind of aggression” (Bickmore, 2011, p. 649). School-based interviews conducted in all three school districts pointed to considerable uncertainty and variation among schools in how to interpret the behavior policies (Bickmore, 2011). Moreover, the same interviewees also expressed concerns that the recent attention towards bullying had
concealed other student conflict concerns, as teachers talk about bullying “without really defining it as aggression with power, according to one teacher, ‘it’s a catchphrase right now’” (Bickmore, 2011, p. 672). This is not a standalone example, as other studies have pointed to a similar problem with respect to the inconsistent definition of bullying.

Mahri and colleagues’ (2004) work—on the definition of bullying across gender and school-level (i.e., primary, junior, secondary) lines—concluded that despite the assumption that the term bullying is defined similarly amongst different communities, more careful review of the literature on bullying would suggest that a single definition is not present in the literature. In a similar literature review on the methodological challenges of how bullying is defined and assessed, researchers found that there was a clear lack of consensus on how to define bullying and that problems ensue when researchers attempt to settle on a definition or metric for assessing bullying (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2010). As a result of this expanding mindset, definitions of bullying are often long, complex and applicable to a wide-range of situations, which makes assessment that much more unreliable.

Craig, Pepler, and Blais (2007), leading researchers in this field, attempted to provide a clear definition that includes explanations of repetition and power imbalance; however, as has been studied and found, there is an evident discrepancy in how researchers define bullying within their writing and how the word is defined within their very own field work. A survey study of 3,530 students in Grades 3 to 5 (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005) identified bullies, victims, and bully-victims based on responses to two questions: (a) “Students at this school make fun of, bother, or hurt me,” and (b) “How often have you yourself made fun of, bothered, or hurt another student at school?” Although the researchers reference the commonly stated definitions of bullying (Olweus, 1993; Connolly et al., 2000) there is an apparent discrepancy between the
definition and the survey questions, which creates difficulties in assessing the former based on the latter. Craig et al. (2007) work on school-yard bullying also shows the limitations in assessing bullying because it was difficult for her and her research team to get a full understanding of playground conflicts without always having access to the situation’s likelihood to repeat or the power imbalance. For most bullying studies, self-reporting is the most common measurement approach, as a recent meta-analysis concluded that roughly 80% of studies use these kinds of measures (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). Self-reporting has strong logistical and ethical rationales within the bullying field because it is an efficient, low burden and inexpensive way to quantify the problem (Cascardi et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2010; Felix, Sharkey, Green, Furlong, & Tanigawa, 2011). However, self-reporting is limited in reliability because the questions themselves do not always align with the definition of bullying and they only provide a momentary snapshot into the lived experience (Cascardi et al., 2014).

**Studies on definitions and self-reporting of bullying.** Several studies detailed below demonstrated that knowing the definition of bullying before completing a self-reporting survey reduces the rate of bullying. For instance, Vaillancourt, McDougall, Hymel, Krygsman, Miller, and Stiver (2008) examined whether the provision of a definition (or not) would yield different prevalence rates in self-reported bullying:

Given the rapid increase in studies of bullying and peer harassment among youth, it becomes important to understand just what is being researched. This study explored whether the themes that emerged from children’s definitions of bullying were consistent with theoretical and methodological operationalisations within the research literature, and whether the provision of a definition when administering bullying experience items would lead to different
prevalence rates in reported victimization and bullying. (Vaillancourt et al., 2008, p. 491)

The group found two critical results with respect to the definition of bullying.

First, the researchers asked a large group of students (893 girls, 874 boys) in a single Catholic school district in southern Ontario that services a middle-class urban population with an age range of 8–18 to provide a written response to the open-ended item, “A bully is….” The definitions collected were evaluated using a series of multi-way frequency analyses (MFA), which test associations between multiple categorical variables by comparing observed and expected trends. The results demonstrated the variations and inaccuracies with respect to a student’s personal understanding of bullying: 1.7% of students referenced the criterion of “intentionality” in their definitions; only 26% included the notion of “power imbalance” within their response; and a small 6% had included ideas related to “repetition” (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). With respect to those figures, it was found that those who had a definition with one or more of the previously quoted themes were more likely to belong to a higher grade (Grade 9 and above), and that elementary school children (Grade 3-8) were less likely to include any reference at all. Interestingly enough, 92% of the student definitions included criteria related to “negative behaviour” as it relates to physical, social, verbal or psychological aggression. These findings demonstrated that students are more than willing to associate negative behaviour with bullying; however, the actions themselves are not often framed within the general themes of bullying that are proposed and used within the research discourse.

Second, the study examined whether or not the provision of a definition of bullying would lead to differences in self-reported rates of bullying and victimization. To accomplish this task more than 1,700 students (ages 8-18) were randomly assigned to either a definition or no definition
condition and asked to report on their experiences with bullying as a victim or perpetrator. It was found that provision of a standardized definition of bullying was related to different prevalence rates in that students who were provided a definition reported being bullied less and bullying others more than students who were not given a definition. As the study goes on to state, “these findings raise methodological questions regarding the common practice of providing children with a definition of bullying when examining student reports of its prevalence…Given that accurate prevalence rates are critical for planning treatment and for prevention, further research is needed to determine whether variations in reported prevalence as a function of methodological issues such as provision of a definition of bullying are associated with differential accuracy” (Vaillancourt et al, 2008). Discussions involving “bullying,” whether in the intersecting realms of academia, education, school community or the classroom, require an openness to the idea that the term itself includes inherit variations, taken for granted assumptions and difference, and that any meaningful school solution, policy document or academic study is only achieved through a meaningful recognition of the ambiguity and an attempt to provide as well as follow clear criteria.

The work of Vaillancourt et al. (2008) is substantial and has been referenced within other academic works (Bazelon, 2013; Cascardi et al., 2014; Craig et al., 2009; Felix et al., 2011). Vaillancourt has even recognized the implications herself in all of her preceding bullying-related work, stating in one study that “a lack of consensus regarding how to define bullying continues, and problems ensue when researchers attempt to agree on a common definition and a common metric for measuring bullying” However, Vaillancourt and colleagues (2008) study does not stand alone, as there are other studies that make similar conclusions.

Land (2002) surveyed 147 high school students in the United States and found that “repetition” was mentioned in less than half of the bullying examples provided and that, when
reporting bullying, “many students recognized one-time incidents that many researchers would not qualify as bullying” (Land, 2002, p. 168) Other studies have also found a propensity for students to emphasize physical aggression while excluding repetition and power imbalances. Smith and Levan (1995) found that physical violence was a central focus in six-year-olds’ bullying definitions, with the typical response to the question, “What do you think bullying is?” being “you get hurt, they kick you and call you names” (p. 493). Boulton, Trueman, and Flemington (2002) asked students (aged 11–12 and 14–15) to indicate the extent to which they thought bullying behaviors were indeed bullying, and found that, of those surveyed, a high agreement of 80% was obtained for items such as “hitting and pushing” and “threatening people” while a low agreement of 20.6% was obtained for “leaving people out.” As these studies demonstrate, there is a systemic and systematic incongruity associated with “bullying” and more needs to be done across all discourse communities that use the term to establish meaningful development, especially if a consideration is given to the fact that studies link a lower bullying rate with increased student success as well as school inclusiveness.

According to Bazelon’s view on bullying culture, mass media, and school-based programs that overgeneralize the quantity and definition of bullying are harmful. She noted,

One of the lessons here is that it is crucial to remind kids that bullying isn’t the norm. Everyone doesn’t do it. Though bullying is a problem that cuts across lines of class, race and geography, the reality is that most kids are not often directly involved—either as perpetrators or targets. And when kids understand that concerted cruelty is the exception and not the rule, they respond and bullying drops. (Bazelon, 2013, p. 38)
Correspondingly, recall some of the previously used articles that linked generalization of the bullying term to a higher rate of student-reported anxiety and fearfulness (Elinoff et al., 2004), as well as the connection between positive feelings of inclusion and overall academic achievement (Fonagay et al., 2005). Bickmore’s (2011) qualitative examination of peacefulness in urban schools found that the recent attention to bullying had seemed to conceal other student conflict concerns and positive resolution initiatives. Teachers, meanwhile, were found to “talk about bullying without really defining it as aggression with power and that ‘it’s a catchphrase right now’” (p. 661). As a result, Bickmore observed that students were being taught to report to authorities every time there was even minor aggression or dispute. With the term “bullying” existing within a state of recognized, or even worse unrecognized, ambiguity and the academic and social benefits that are associated with effectively addressing the issue, it becomes all the more pressing to address this concern while at the same realizing that an important question needs to be answered: “Why does the word ‘bullying’ currently lack clarity? How did the “bullying” word change over time? become unclear?”

**Origins of lack of clarity on bullying.** The answer to this question is not easy, as the literature addressing this concern is limited. Of those that attempt to address this question, explanations range from media saturation, to the different discourse groups involved in the situation creating a capricious interconnectedness that is subject to interpretation differences and personal viewpoints, and to the idea that such a problem has simply rarely been understood. There are numerous articles that discuss how media reporting and coverage of bullying is often misguided, misunderstood and fear mongering (Bazelon, 2013; Bickmore, 2011; Cascarci et al., 2014). As Bickmore (2011) articulated,
What has certainly increased, in contrast to actual evidence of violence, is widespread fear and concern about youth violence. Some of this concern is fueled by sensationalized reporting of violent incidents in mass media…as with violence in general, there is little persuasive evidence that the problem of bullying is any worse today than in previous generations, but clearly it has become unacceptable in principle, and there is widespread worry and concern about it (p. 660)

Policymakers, scholars, and those involved in the larger educational community (i.e. students, parents, teachers and administrators) agree that bullying is an ongoing issue that continually evolves, and as a result everyone must remain current. However, current does not necessarily imply being correct because, as bullying has evolved, the actors involved have struggled to keep pace while still holding on to the initial definition of bullying (Bazelon, 2013; Rigby, 2003). As a result, research, policies, discourse and even communal talks amongst educators that involve the word “bullying” are slowly losing all significance and preventing everyone from creating a safe and positive learning environment. To help understand this problem and provide context for the question, “How did ‘bullying’ become undefinable?” I now turn towards research being done on bullying assessment and policy implications.

“Bullying” Definition, Assessment, and Policy

Throughout the last thirty years, “bullying” and all things related have received increased public awareness, participation, and speculation. Policy has been written, ideas researched and published, programming developed and implemented, media reports released and conversations on the topic have been held. The discourse, which range in settings from government buildings, school administrative offices, parent council meetings, teacher workrooms to the classroom and playground, varies and as a result the very topic being discussed is exposed to personal
interpretations and understandings, communal differences and a host of other variances that create an unreliable term (i.e., the bullying term phenomenon). As will be shown, a significant amount of research has been done on the definition of bullying amongst students, teachers and researchers; however, there is a clear lack of work on how this phenomenon relates to policy.

**Relevant policy concepts.** Yet, the relationship between bullying, policy and assessment is imperative and central to long-term development, and as Winton and Tuters (2015) wrote, “critical democracy demands that bullying policies be subject to on-going re-examination, dialogue, and critique by affected and interested citizens” (p. 123). Their article, which is valuable but unfortunately only one of few, provides a review of how bullying is conceptualized in research and policy, and facilitates a discussion of the dominant discourse around bullying. As the researchers explain, a critical perspective sees policy as complex, political and instilled with values and not a linear progression that follows a rational model of decision-making. Although people would rather envision the latter model of rational thought and evidentiary cause-and-effect when thinking about bullying policy, the unfortunate reality is that history paints a temporal picture of complex decisions, different political values, as well as varying degrees of pressure from the media and society at large (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992). According to Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl (2009), there are five stages to the policy cycle—agenda setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation—and at each stage there are different actors, organizational structures and ideas that create the interrelated temporal dimensions of the cycle. Policy is filled with distinctive actors, ideas and institutions “that constitutes the space where actual problems are engaged and responses get crafted” (p. 33). Behind every policy issue sits a contest over conflicting, though equally plausible, agendas of the same abstract goal or value (Stone, 2002).
Bullying is continually interpreted, discussed and studied, and as a result the problem, without having a clear understanding across discourse communities, is subject to variation and ambiguity.

The often-referenced policy analysis work of Stone (2002) provided further context in which to understand the bullying term phenomenon within the policy context. Policy is limited in that problem definitions are never simply a matter of definition goals and measuring distance from them, rather they are “the strategic representation of situations” (Stone, 2002, p. 137). With that in mind, problem definitions are “a matter of representation because every description of a situation is a portrayal from only one point of view” (p. 137). The bullying term phenomenon, thus, has the potential to become a problem definition because of the inherited differences in interpretation across time, space, actors, government officials and ideas. This distinction, however, is not a reason to dismiss the phenomenon on the grounds of irreconcilable differences. Instead, this distinction allows the phenomenon to be explored within a sound context and provide something that is often missing—recognition, insight and awareness. Stone (2002) stated that problem definitions are symbolic representations of the culture and the people that use them, and as such “they are collectively created” (p. 137). Through this creative process emerge policy concepts relevant to the bullying term phenomenon.

Prior to examining the specific research, I want to introduce these policy concepts so that the literature has context and application. First, Stone (2002) used the phrase “narrative stories” to refer to popular explanations of policy problems that are often unspoken, widely shared, and contain so much taken for granted assumptions that people are not even aware of them. Relevant to bullying discourse and policy analysis is the “story of decline,” which begins with a recitation of facts and figures purporting to show that things have gotten worse; a concern over child abuse or sexual assault, for instance, only appears to have increased because people have more public
Awareness, more legislation and more reporting (Stone, 2002). As previously mentioned articles demonstrate, either through the information they provide or the very nature of their existence, bullying has gained increased awareness from a variety of actors (Bazelon, 2013; Cascardi et al., 2014; Connolly et al., 2000; Cook et al., 2010; Felix et al., 2011; Winton & Tuters, 2015). The second policy concept, “synecdoche,” refers to when a part or a particular incident represents the whole, and these are important in political life because people “often make policies based on examples believed to be representative of a larger universe” (Stone, 2002, p. 145). Bullying is a clear and accurate manifestation of this concept, as often times singular instances, which go on to gain national reporting as well as a spot within different discourse communities, then define the entire problem and become the policy response (Bazelon, 2013; Todd, 2014; Winton & Tuters, 2015). Important to consider is that the synecdoche, according to Stone (2002), has the strong potential to “suspend our critical thinking with its powerful poetry” (p. 145). The final policy concept, “ambiguity,” has already been connected to the bullying term phenomenon, but still requires proper framing within the policy context. With a diverse assortment of actors and government organizations that are coupled to a problem that is vulnerable to narrative storytelling and synecdoche, ambiguity becomes a certainty within the policy cycle. Ambiguity allows for differences within a unified problem, and “sometimes entire policies gain their support from the ambiguity of their symbolism” (Stone, 2002, p. 157). These three policy concepts provide context and meaning when consideration is given to the literature on bullying, especially when the research concerns definition problems and assessment difficulties.

**Review of bullying definitions.** Definitions of bullying, as previously discussed, are as diverse as the actors that create them (Land, 2003; Smith et al., 1995; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Similar to those researchers, Lee (2006) explained that throughout the past 20 years, numerous
support groups and websites for children, parents, and other individuals impacted by bullying have arisen, and most of these groups as well as the support materials developed for schools offer different definitions of bullying (Lee, 2006). Present usage of the term “bullying” now applies to “a range of negative actions including social, emotional and psychological abuse, and forms of abuse that occur beyond the realms of school” (Lee, 2006, p. 62). In his research, Lee organized a detailed examination over a two-year period of primary school teachers’ attitudes and approaches to bullying, and what emerged was a depiction of a shared vocabulary and a strong personal understanding about what is meant by ‘bullying’, but little shared consensus was evident with factors such as prior knowledge and experience playing a major role. Boulton (1997) also researched teachers’ perceptions of how bullying was conceptualised and found that teachers had a broad concept of bullying that ranged from “threatening people verbally, hitting, pushing and kicking, and forcing people to do things they don’t want to do” (Boulton, 1997, p. 227). Both of these studies showed that a teachers’ definition included a wide range of physical and verbal aggression, but missing from the definitions were references to indirect social exclusion, repetition and power imbalances (Lee, 2006; Boulton, 1997). The lack of consensus within teachers’ definitions demonstrates the ambiguity inherent in the bullying word problem; an ambiguity that has also received significant attention as it relates to students.

Vallencourt and colleagues (2008) research is important and receives continual references in different academic works for the clear point that it makes – students have a wide range of bullying definitions and their statements often do not coincide with the views of government officials and researchers. Rigby (1997) provided a questionnaire to 625 middle school students and found that 57% included verbal bullying and 33% included physical bullying, while only 30% referenced repetition over time and 19% had an imbalance of power. These findings are not unique
and similar observations have been made in other research projects. Naylor et al. (2006) surveyed 1,820 high school students in 51 different UK schools and asked them to ‘say what you think bullying is?’ (Naylor et al., 2006). Their responses often included physical and verbal aggression (over 70%) and seldom included other criteria (3.9% for intentionality, 7.9% for repetition, and 40.5% for power imbalance). Similarly, in a sample of Swedish 13-year-olds, Frisén et al. (2008) found that repetition (30%) and power imbalance (19%) did not often appear in the students’ definitions. Hymel et al. (2015) examination of 4,358 adolescents aged 12–19 years also found a wide variety of definitions and concluded that “while researchers’ definitions of bullying typically emphasise power imbalance, repetition, and intention in their definitions, these concepts were not explicitly identified in the present study as adolescents’ definitions most frequently referred to the mean nature of bullying, feelings associated with bullying, and types of bullying” (Hymel et al., 2015). This statement reflects the trends in the larger body of work done on the bullying term phenomenon: definitions amongst adolescents are diverse, there is a clear emphasis on physical and verbal aggression, rarely are there reference to power imbalances and repetition, and there is a clear difference between the language used by researchers and students.

**Bullying definitions related to gender and age of students.** Amongst students’ definitions of bullying, work has also been done to examine any possible trends as they relate to gender and age. Through an examination of the current literature two patterns emerge. First, most research shows that boys are more likely, when compared to girls of the same age, to associate bullying with any kind of physical aggression such as kicking, hitting, tripping, pushing and throwing objects (Frisén et al., 2008; Naylor et al., 2006; Rigby, 1997; Vallencourt et al., 2008). Although it has not been proven, explanations for this difference rest in the idea that boys are more likely to exhibit, suffer and witness physical aggression during perceived incidents of bullying.
(Hymel et al. 2015). It should be noted that other pieces of research have found few gender differences among definitions (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002; Smith et al., 2002), so clear distinctions based on gender are not fully present.

Secondly, it has been found in different studies that younger students tend to consider actions as bullying whereas older, high school students are more selective with the criteria they use (Hymel et al., 2015; Frisén et al. 2008; Monks et al., 2006; Naylor et al., 2006; Rigby, 1997; Vallencourt et al., 2008). Monks and Smith (2006) found clear age-related differences in children’s and adolescents’(14-year-olds’) understanding of bullying and suggest cognitive development as a possible cause of the change in definition, given that more advanced cognitive processes allow adolescents to conceptualise bullying along a number of dimensions. As Rigby (1997) pointed out, “it has been suggested that one of the reasons for this decline is that younger children (from age 6 and up) have a more extensive definition of the term bullying. They tend to consider anything that other people do that is unpleasant and hurts them as bullying, without taking into consideration imbalance of power or repeated action” (p. 21). The difference amongst gender and age demonstrate the inherent ambiguity of the bullying term, and reflect how different discourse communities, even those broken down along further demographic lines, are able to develop different understandings. These differences, however, pose problems for students, parents, school administrators, educational programmers, researchers and policymakers.

**Implications of definition problem.** At the centre of the bullying term phenomenon is a problematic and ambiguous definition, which also causes other issues for different actors, government officials and researchers. Madsen (1996) pointed out that differences in how people define bullying not only affect researchers’ ability to conduct valid studies, but may also have an impact on how people answer to bullying in everyday life. For instances, it has been found that
students and teachers differ in their ways of evaluating different bullying situations (Boulton, 1997; Lee, 2006; Menesini et al., 2002). As a result, teachers may not intervene in situations which the students perceive as bullying, or they may underestimate the degree of offence the victims are experiencing (Cascardi et al., 2014). This is critical to highlight, as such discrepancies may prevent adults, teachers, administration and parents alike, from intervening in situations considered by adolescents as bullying (Frisén et al., 2008). In terms of the school implications, the ambiguity associated with the bullying definition creates more potential problems than it solves.

Cascardi et al. (2014) research on the implications of the bullying term phenomenon demonstrates the avoidable problems, costs and legal issues that schools face. In their research, the authors found that students struggled to differentiate between teasing, harassment and bullying, and as a result “broad definitions of bullying also have the potential to place undue cost and time burdens on schools, which will be required to report and investigate every aggressive transgression, from playground teasing and roughhousing to aggravated assault” (Cascardi et al., 2014, p. 261). Despite the pragmatic need for clear directions and effective problem solving, studies of existing school measures show a disregard to differentiate between teasing, bullying and harassment (Cascardi et al., 2014), as well as a lack of important features such as repetition and power imbalances (Felix et al., 2011). The significance of the school providing clear measures to respond to and regulate pupils’ bullying behaviour is clear, especially if consideration is given to the fact that overly broad definitions leave schools exposed to lawsuits by parents of victims, demanding damages based on the school’s failure to follow measures (Cascardi et al., 2014). For instance, in New Hampshire where parents are required to be notified of any bullying incident, a parent brought and won a suit against the school district for failing to notify her of a prior aggressive act her child had experienced, which the parent deemed to be bullying (Cascardi et al.,
2014). Although this is only one particular instance, there are similar occasions in which a school district’s ambiguous definition of bullying coupled with the different definitions of actors, has led to student-teacher, parent-teacher, parent-school and parent-parent problems.

The definition problem also creates difficulties for policymakers who attempt to provide guidelines and instruments to counteract the problem. Policies related to bullying in Ontario, and other policies across Canada and beyond, frame and approach bullying as an individualised phenomenon (Winton & Tuters, 2015). As a result, attempts to create a working definition that is all inclusive of the different understandings creates confusion, ambiguity and the potential for different ideas to be applied without due processing. Unclear and inconsistent distinctions about “bully, victim or bystander… oversimplify the nature of bullying and promote the conceptualisation of bullying as a problem of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ individuals” (Winton & Tuters, 2015, p. 127). The broad definitions reflect a standardisation of bullying, and as such treats all bullying incidents as though they are the same and therefore require the standardised interventions and solutions (Loutzenheiser, 2009). With that said, numerous scholars agreed that bullying prevention is a complex undertaking that requires targeted interventions for the students involved, as well as consistent application of policies against bullying at the school and community levels (Cascardi et al., 2014; Loutzenheiser 2009; Winton & Tuters, 2015). For policy agenda setting and implementation to be effective there must either be clear consensus among different groups over definitions or, in the very least, recognition of these differences and an attempt to effectively amalgamate different ideas. Yet, these two principles are not often found and as a result unification is absent, clarity is at best vague and solutions are misleading and misapplied. The definition problem also creates difficulties when assessing bullying.
Review of bullying assessment. Assessment of bullying, as previously referenced articles have stipulated, is difficult and limits the validity of otherwise reliable research and questions the ability of effectively measuring, revising and implementing policy. Writing for The Handbook of School Violence and School Safety, Cornell and Cole (2013) stated that:

Assessment is the Achilles heel of bullying research and prevention efforts.

Scientific process is not possible in any field without standardized, reliable and valid measurements of key constructs, and no intervention program can claim successful reduction in something it cannot accurately measure. Despite the tremendous increase in the studying of bullying and efforts to reduce it in schools over the past decade, there continues insufficient evidence for the validity of survey measures which are the principle means for assessing the prevalence. (p. 289)

The term bullying is ambiguous and subject to overuse, misapplication and overall ambiguity, and as a result, assessment, which is critical for meaningful research, public information and policy making, is often a difficult and arduous task.

Self-reporting is the most common assessment approach, and as a recent meta-analysis Indicated, roughly 80% of studies use self-report measures of bullying (Cook et al., 2010). Although the easiest and most cost-effective way of gathering large and continual data on bullying rates, self-reporting is limited by the bullying term phenomenon and the ability for people to unilaterally understand what is and is not bullying (Bovaird, 2010; Cook et al., 2010; Rigby, 1997). According to Hymel et al. (2015), the single largest methodological issue affecting the comparability and consistency of bullying research findings is the lack of a standard definition of bullying among researchers, educational staff, parents and teachers. In a 2014 report by the Center
for Disease Control and Prevention in conjunction with the US Department of Education, it was stated that without a uniform and clear research definition of bullying, “the public’s ability to understand the true magnitude, scope and impact of bullying is severely impeded” (Gladden et al, 2014: p. 1). With self-reporting being the most accessible form of data collection, assessment of bullying rates becomes problematic and susceptible to inaccuracies.

**Implications of assessment problems.** Hamburger et al. (2011) reviewed 33 existing self-report measures of bullying, harassment and peer aggression, and arrived at some interesting, but not surprising, conclusions. The researchers were extensive in their evaluation of measures, examining self-reporting surveys for specific behaviour being assessed, frequency, respondent roles and potential biases. In order to evaluate repetition, a self-reporting study had to provide measures to assess the respondent’s role and the frequency with which aggressive behaviour occurred. Of the 33 self-reporting measures examined not a single one provided the clear criteria for a respondent to indicate repetition (Hamburger et al., 2011). Power imbalances between the bully and the victim were only evident in eight of the 33 measures, which show that existing measures do not evaluate well the core components of repetition and power imbalance (Hamburger et al., 2011). Additionally, it has been found that the self-reporting process is not always consistent and reliable. Vaillancourt and colleagues (2008), as mentioned before, found that when participants are given an accurate definition of bullying their self-report levels are lower compared to those who were not given a definition and asked to comment on specific behaviours they experienced. Felix et al. (2011) added on to that work and found that when participants are given a definition the potential for inaccuracies still remain with students either forgetting or ignoring certain aspects of the definition or being reluctant to label themselves as a victim or bully. Others noted, “without precise measurement, knowledge is limited about the prevalence, etiology, and
consequences of bullying as well as the effectiveness of policy and interventions aimed to reduce bullying” (Furlong et al., 2010, p. 344). Assessment of bullying is difficult, and the problems associated with the process make for data that is hard to apply to or understand from a policy perspective.

The difficulties policymakers face when assessing bullying has been observed in countless research articles (Cascardi et al., 2014; Cornell & Cole, 2013; Winton & Tuters, 2015). Bullying is understood via the different and evolving discourse communities, and their “relationships can be conceptualised as existing within a web wherein the policy contexts of one cycle influence cycles at the same level as well as cycles at other levels” (Winton & Tuters, 2015, p. 123). Meaningful policy coincides with meaningful data collection, and if the latter is missing as a result of definition and assessment problems then the former is also lost. An effective policy-making process parallels the cognitive steps of the rational model of decision making (Stone, 2002), but as Stone has also pointed out such a process is unrealistic because of the very principles of uncertainty and differences present in the bullying term phenomenon. With that said, abdication of responsibilities is not the proper response to uncertainty and progress, especially when at the core of the matter is a child’s ability to learn and develop socially in an environment of inclusion, trust and effective problem solving. Bullying in Ontario, either from a student perspective or a policy perspective, has evolved over the past thirty years as a result of changing circumstances and knowledge. These changes reflect the ongoing needs and responsibilities of different discourse communities, and an examination of this change in Ontario will lead to a better understanding of the bullying term phenomenon.
Ontario Context

Bullying in Ontario schools. Although the bullying word problem puts a cloud of concern and doubt over research done about Ontario students and schools, there is still a pressing need to understand bullying in so much as the problem itself plays an important role with respect to inclusiveness, safety, and academic achievement. As mentioned before, 26% of Canadian adolescents aged 11 to 15 reported involvement in bullying (Craig et al., 2009) while in the province of Ontario a recent survey of elementary and high school students found that 22% of students self-identify as victims and 10% as bullies (Craig & McCuaig-Edge, 2011). A survey of 961 grade 6-8 students and 933 grade 9-12 in the province of Ontario revealed that the prevalence of bullying was highest for boys in Grade 8 and girls in grade 9, with almost half of all those surveyed reporting bullying others at least once (Pepler et al., 2006). As students age and enter high school, bullying was found to evolve to also include acts such as dating aggression and sexual harassment with those who bully at a younger age more likely to be the offender of such acts at an older age (Pepler et al., 2006). Furthermore, the survey found that boys were more likely to view bullying as a physical act (Pepler et al, 2006), which reflects other national and international trends (Frisén et al., 2008; Naylor et al., 2006; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Rigby, 1997). In fact, besides a couple of minimal 1-3 percent differences, the overall rates of bullying and victimization as well as the trends in gender and age, were similar to those found in other parts of the world such as the United States (Gladden, 2014; Hamburger et al., 2011), Britain (Monks & Smith, 2006; Naylor et al., 2006), Italy (Menesini et al., 2002) and Sweden (Frisén et al. 2008). Smith et al. (2002) study of bullying at schools in fourteen different countries also found a similarity across different countries. With bullying being such a widespread and important problem to solve, it comes as no
Bullying is a complex and layered problem that is made all the more difficult as a result of the word problem. The immensity of bullying and the inherit ambiguity of the problem makes meaningful and long-lasting solutions difficult to implement. Despite the vast number of bullying programs, few evaluation studies report decreases in bullying as a result of their programs (e.g. Pepler, Craig, O’Connell, Atlas, & Charach, 2004; Rahey & Craig, 2002; Rawana, Norwood, & Whitley, 2011). For example, Rahey and Craig (2002) conducted a 12-week program that sought to increase awareness about bullying while decreasing incidences of bullying among elementary school children. Results, however, revealed that the program did not significantly reduce incidences of bullying, which the researchers hypothesized was due to the program’s short duration. Similarly, Beran, Tutty and Steinrath (2004) found that of their program duration was important and that longer programs were more effective.

Effective bullying prevention programs, as studies have shown, are those that are designed for long-term implementation, use positive reinforcement and character development, and employ a schoolwide approach that includes all members of the community such as students, teachers, parents and administration (Rawana et al, 2011; Rigby, Smith & Pepler, 2004). This positive, long-term community wide approach also includes a fostering of individual strengths (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005), and a recognition of promoting mental health awareness and happiness (Norrish, 2009). Rawana et al. (2011) research involved implementing a Strength in Motion (SIM) in a Northern Ontario elementary school that served roughly 265 students from kindergarten through Grade 8. The SIM program, which involved positive character development and making students aware of creating a safe space, was effective as teachers and administration noticed that
students were more aware of bullying and were more comfortable talking about related issues. However, the long-term effectiveness was not there and at the end of the trial period bullying rates had increased; researchers hypothesized that such result was rooted in the short-term length and mindset of the program (Rawana et al., 2011). To create safe, inclusive and academically rich environments schools must work together on long-term positive school improvement plans; however, the implementation of these program is often difficult because of the resources required, the complex difficulties associated with bullying and the definition phenomenon.

Added to these difficulties is the increasing space that bullying covers, as what was once a school related problem has transformed and expanded into cyberspace. In Ontario, similar to other areas around the world, online connectedness and social networking has opened bullying to a new platform, but with this new problem comes a new set of definitions and rates that are not often fully understood. Similar to bullying, cyberbullying involves repeated aggression over time with a clear power imbalance, but what makes this form distinct is the use of electronic technology as a mean through which to threaten, harass, embarrass or socially exclude (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla & Daciuk, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Unlike bullying, however, research has found that with cyberbullying the role of victim and bully is often interchangeable (Mishna et al., 2012; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that students who were physically victimized at school were more likely to be perpetrators of Internet harassment. In contrast, Raskauskas et al. (2007) found that victims at school were more likely to remain victims electronically, but they did find students considered bullies at school were more likely to be bullied online. In terms of an Ontario context, the same principle of interchangeably applies. Mishna et al. (2012) cross-sectional survey designed to examine cyberbullying among students in grade 6, 7, 10 and 11 attending school in a large urban Ontario
city found that over 50% of the students in this study identified themselves as being involved in cyber bullying, as victims, bullies or both. Specifically, it was found that 23.8% reported being victimized, 8% reported cyberbullying others and 25.7% reported being both roles (Mishna et al. 2012). The study also found that girls were more likely to act in both roles when compared to boys of the same age (Mishna et al. 2012). Cyberbullying delivers new variants into the bullying word problem, which makes defining and implementing solutions all that more difficult and complex. With that said, as is the overarching purpose of this writing, it is far better to understand rather than assume the facts and ideas behind bullying. For assumptions lead to inaccuracies and misconceptions, which create discourse communities that are misled, solutions that are not targeted and policy that is inexact.

Another clear example of the need for accurate information is the relationship between bullying and youth suicide. In Canada, suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 24 after accidental deaths (Statistics Canada, 2009). While research has demonstrated associations between bullying and suicidal behaviour, there are other factors as well such as mental health problems, depression, substance use, violent or impulsive behaviour and being the victim of domestic abuse or violence (Fisher, Moffitt, Houts, Beisky, Arseneault, Caspi, 2012; Sinyou, Schaffer & Cheung, 2014). Despite these other factors, media reporting and public campaigns on youth suicide are often connected to bullying (Fisher et al., 2012; Sinyou et al., 2014). Sinyou et al. (2014) research examined this idea further by looking at all youth suicides in Toronto from 1998 to 2011; a period of time that saw 94 youth who died from suicide with 70.2% being male and 29.8% female. The study found that the most common factor was depression (51%), conflict with parents (27%), romantic partner difficulties (16%) and other mental health issues (15%). Bullying was present in 6 deaths (8.1%) and it was the only identified contributing factor in fewer
than 5 deaths. As mentioned, bullying is a complex problem that requires accurate facts and a clear understanding, especially if consideration is given to that fact that solving the problem leads to a more inclusive and safe environment as well as higher academic performance. Understanding the rates, types of and other ideas linked to bullying in the province of Ontario leads to more meaningful solutions. However, a culture in which bullying is personally defined, related concepts are not fully understood, and media reports are inaccurate, is destined to never provide a solid solution and likely create additional problems. Policy, meanwhile, on bullying in the province of Ontario not only reflects these issues but contributes to them as well.

**Defining bullying in Ontario.** With respect to bully-related research, policy development and defining the problem, the province of Ontario has been the setting for all of these ideas and areas of focus, and through it all the bullying word problem is ever present. A clear and consistent definition among the different actors is absent, and filling the void is a series of dissimilar conceptualizations that are difficult to connect and even harder to justify. Vaillancourt et al. (2008) established with their research that Ontario students, similar to those in all global places in which the problem is studied, have varying definitions of bullying that often focus on inconsistent understandings of physical and verbal aggression while disregarding notions of repetition and power imbalance. These findings were not unique, as a lot of researchers have found similar characteristics in how students define bullying (Craig et al., 2007; Craig et al., 2009). Researchers working in the Ontario context offer different definitions of bullying with some relying on Olweus (1993) original definition of bullying that constitutes conditions like physical aggression, repetition and power imbalances (Vaillancourt et al., 2008) while others conceptualize bullying as a relationship problem (Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yuile, McMaster & Jiang, 2006). The latter definition, which is used by noted Ontario researchers Deborah Pepler and Wendy Craig, framed
bullying as a form of aggression “that unfolds in the context of a relationship in which one child asserts interpersonal power through aggression. The power that bullies hold over others can arise from their individual characteristics, such as superior size, strength, or age and from knowledge of others’ vulnerabilities” (Pepler et al., 2006, p. 378). The lack of a unified, singular definition from the research community, and the difference between those conceptualizations and those provided by students, is a reflection of the problem associated with the bullying word.

As a result of these differences, the most recent definition of bullying provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education in “Bullying Prevention and Intervention: Policy Program” (2012) is unclear and conflicting and reflects the ambiguous understanding of the Ontario public. Under the prevention and awareness section, the policy stated, “Boards are required under subsection 170(1)7.2 of the Education Act to provide programs, interventions, and other supports for students who have been bullied, students who have witnessed incidents of bullying, and students who have engaged in bullying” (p. 2). On the surface, these are understandable social regulations that share a clear goal, but consider the definition of bullying the policy provided:

‘bullying’ means aggressive and typically repeated behaviour by a pupil where, (a) the behaviour is intended by the pupil to have the effect of, or the pupil ought to know that the behaviour would be likely to have the effect of, (i) causing harm, fear or distress to another individual, including physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to the individual’s reputation or harm to the individual’s property, or (ii) creating a negative environment at a school for another individual, and (b) the behaviour occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance between the pupil and the individual based on factors such as size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family
circumstances, gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special education; Bullying (1.0.0.1) For the purposes of the definition of “bullying” in subsection (1), behaviour includes the use of any physical, verbal, electronic, written or other means. Cyber-bullying (1.0.0.2) For the purposes of the definition of “bullying” in subsection (1), bullying includes bullying by electronic means (commonly known as cyber-bullying), including, (a) creating a web page or a blog in which the creator assumes the identity of another person; (b) impersonating another person as the author of content or messages posted on the internet; and (c) communicating material electronically to more than one individual or posting material on a website that may be accessed by one or more individuals. (p.4)

Because of its complexity and several layers of details, this definition does seem to be confusing, extensive, and lacks the clarity of Olweus’ (1993) original work. Moreover, it establishes a conceptualization that is difficult to understand and does not provide any relief for the bullying word problem in Ontario. According to the policy definition, a student that is pushed by a peer outside during a competitive recess game can be considered a victim of bullying and should receive some form of intervention or support from the administrator. Teachers, educational assistants, principals and other adults working at the school may perceive this correctly as a sports-related accident, but the students or parents may see it differently, especially if consideration is given to the definition, the existence of different discourse communities and the aforementioned legislature of early intervention.

Thames Valley District School Board (2012) in southwestern Ontario released a document entitled, “Creating Safe, Accepting and Inclusive Schools: Strengthening a Culture of Inquiry” in which they identify programming and policy to create safe schools. In the programing guide, it is
stated how the bullying word problem created difficulties for providing inclusiveness, stating that a “clear definitions used in this survey, particularly key words such as bullying, are critical to providing the necessary comfort level to students” (Thames Valley District School Board, 2012, p. 20). This statement demonstrates the cumulative result of a systematic definition problem that is caused by, and ultimately limits the effectiveness of, students, teachers, school administrators, parents, researchers, and policymakers in the province of Ontario.

**Bullying policy in Ontario.** Bullying policy in Ontario mirrors the situation in schools: ever-changing, complex and a result of numerous different actors working separately and together to understand a problem. In Canada, each province is responsible for providing and implementing education for its citizens, and linked to that is the requirement to provide policies regarding bullying (Walton, 2011). Most provinces and territories have policies, whereas some, such as Ontario, have changed their legislation to make policies law (Winton & Tuters, 2015). Similar to other provinces, territories and countries, bullying policy in Ontario began appearing in the mid-1990s with an early emphasis on zero-tolerance, which meant that bullying would not be tolerated and those who bullied would face discipline such as detention or suspension (Winton & Tuters, 2015). In 1993, the Scarborough Board of Education, was the first board to adopt a safe school policy, and in the 1999 provincial election the Progressive Conservative Party promised a zero-tolerance policy for bad behaviour in schools (Roher, 2007). With the Mike Harris PC victory, the *Education Act* was amended in 2000 with the *Safe Schools Act*; a change at the time that received mass public support and saw the introduction of a clear zero tolerance for any bullying related matters (Roher, 2007). However, as time passed, the general public and special interest groups began to see and experience the confining nature inherit in the amendments and as a result they sought a new revision that was more progressive and reflected the different definitions of bullying.
The amendments in the *Safe Schools Act* were eventually criticized for their discriminatory impact on students of colour and students with disabilities, who seemed disproportionately suspended or expelled under the banner of zero-tolerance (Roher, 2007). These patterns were noticed by students, parents and member of the public, and as a result formal investigations were launched with the *Ontario Human Rights Commission* that led to settlements with the Ministry of Education and the Toronto District School Board (Roher, 2007). In 2007, with a new Liberal government, amendments were made to the *Safe School Act* to address the problems via *Bill 212*, which replaced zero-tolerance with a mindset based on progressive discipline; an approach to behaviour that is defined by preventative measures, individual understandings of students involved, establishing a case-by-case approach rather than a one size fits all, and focusing disciplinary actions on rehabilitation, inclusion, individualism, learning and school safety (Roher, 2007). In a press release, the then Education Minister for the Liberal government, Kathleen Wynne, stated the amendments “strike a balance between more effectively combining discipline with opportunities for students to continue their education…these changes show that we are listening to the people of Ontario, and demonstrate our government’s determination to address the tougher issues and make our schools safe places for students to learn” (Roher, 2007, p. 204). These changes, although progressive, introduced a new set of problems to be considered, especially those related to the bullying word problem.

Roher (2007) noted the following changes brought about by *Bill 212*: “bullying” was added to the list of infractions for which suspension was considered, the right of discipline extended off of school property (e.g. cyberbullying) if the activity itself has an impact on school climate, and more discretion was given to teachers and administrators during the discipline process. These amendments, which as Kathleen Wynne pointed out were the result of “listening to the people of
Ontario,” reflected the evolution of bullying as a popular concern, the impact cyberbullying was having among different discourse communities, as well as the need to treat bullying on an individual level. However, with this latter statement on individualism, there arrived a policy supported idea that people were able to interpret bullying as they saw fit and, because Bill 212 did not state that all three criteria must be met for an incident to be considered bullying, all those affected by the policy were able to use different interpretations (Roher, 2007; Winton & Tuters, 2015). This created a complex problem that still exists at present—that is, administration and teachers are required to respond progressively and proactively to bullying, which is a term that has no solid definition or set criteria.

In later years, amendments were made to Bill 212 and the Safe School Act via “Bullying Prevention and Intervention: policy/program memorandum No. 144” (2012), but these new changes, brought about by public concern, only painted bullying with a broader brush. As previously quoted, the definition of bullying provided is long, arduous and applicable to almost any form of negative peer interaction or relationship (Winton & Tuters, 2015). This becomes all the more troublesome and threatening towards meaningful inclusive school environments if consideration is given to the fact that, within the policy document, teachers and administration are required to hear, address and find solutions towards any and all of these negative situations. With the power to ultimately define bullying in the school context resting in the hands of a public that are as much unsure as they are different from one another, it becomes no surprise that researchers are beginning to adamantly seek out a solution to the bullying word problem (Craig et al., 2007; Craig et al., 2009; Winton & Tuters, 2015. Vaillancourt et al., 2008). To answer this call requires recognition of the problem and an attempt to truly understand the differences that exist between students, teachers, parents, administration, researchers and policymakers. My research and
multiple case study attempts to explore and understand potential differences, and in doing so, help to create a more inclusive and safe school community where everyone is able to learn and grow to the best of their ability.
Chapter Three

Methods

This multiple case study used a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2013), “qualitative researchers typically gather multiple sources of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source. They then review all of the data and make sense of it, organizing it into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources” (p. 45). Creswell also stated that qualitative researchers use complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic. Reflecting on my role as a researcher, I find myself using a process of reasoning that takes advantage of both forms of logic. I inductively worked back and forth between the themes and the proposed case study, while deductively building interview questions that were constantly being checked against the data.

In addition to the interviews, as previously shared, I assembled an extensive literature review that used primary and secondary resources, documents and research to help better frame the research within the larger discourse community. Qualitative research triangulation, as previously mentioned, is used because my methods and related reasoning are only justifiable if framed within the larger collection of relevant research. My study further explored the different definitions of bullying, and created a new logical next step by looking at how these meanings are developed.

Research Approach: Multiple Case Study

This research was framed within a multiple case study approach. Yin (2009) suggested that the multiple case study design uses the logic of replication, in which the inquirer replicates the procedures for each case. My goal was to interview students, teachers, parents and administrators from two schools in southeastern Ontario. Creswell (2013) noted that “when a researcher
maximizes differences at the beginning of the study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives—an ideal in qualitative research” (p. 157). That approach to sample size and participants largely reflects the decisions I made for my case study because I wanted to establish, at the beginning, two clear case studies that maximize the focus on my research purpose and minimized the likelihood of inconclusive data on the grounds of site-based variation. For this reason, I decided to gather data from participants from two separate schools.

First, two schools provided my study with controlled variation, so that findings in my data analysis are compared, linked together, and separated. Choosing one site would have exposed my study to possible site-based conclusions, which is to say that a possible observation about how bullying was learned may be limited to that particular school and not reflect other communities. With that in mind, I approached possible schools that existed within clear separation, such that cross-referencing between two schools was limited. Second, the two schools I used are situated in the southeastern Ontario school area. I chose this part of the province as I have spent my life in this area.

The Study Participants

Students. At each site, I interviewed 3-4 students from the junior division (grade 4-6). I chose this age range because the majority of the bullying literature, especially the work related to the definition of bullying, focuses on this age range. At a middle or high school grade range, the definition of bullying is still problematic, but my focus so far has been within the elementary school context. Also, the junior grades were seen as being more likely to provide students who can reflect upon their knowledge and provide rich details to their responses, when compared to primary students.
Teachers and parents. Within each school community, I interviewed two parents and two teachers at each site. Based on preliminary discussions with professors and fellow peers in the Masters programme, I made sure that there was no crossover in roles (i.e., a parent is not a teacher and a teacher is not also a parent of a child in elementary school). It would be difficult for a participant to objectively separate both roles, and if these mixed participants were included, then the data analysis of each group would lack validity. Each parent interviewed had to have at least one child registered at the specific school site. I fully recognize that parent participants may have other factors that exposed them to other school sites such as a child in high school or taking care of a child at another school.

Administrators. To help better understand the bullying message given to students, parents and teachers, I interviewed administrators and discussed with them their understanding of bullying, how their school communicates information about bullying and how they learned about bullying. Administrators are central figures in a school community and serve as key participants in policy implementation. With respect to administrators, I only interviewed principals, as most schools do not have the student capacity to allow for more than one administrator (i.e., a vice-principal).

Data Collection

Data collection was in the form of individual interviews with students, teachers, parents, and administrators. As previously stated, the participants were selected to maximize focus on the research purpose and limit the influence of extraneous factors. Once I gained ethical approval from the General Research Ethics Board of Queen’s University, as well as the school board in which I conducted my research, I sent out recruitment letters (Appendix A) to different administrators. I initially sent out recruitment letters to four separate schools and all administrators were willing to host this particular research study. Based on the timing of the responses, I used the first two schools
and kept in contact with the third and fourth school as potential alternates. I then met with each principal of the first two sites, introduced my research, explained how recruitment would work and collaboratively set out dates that would be minimally invasive. It should be noted that when explaining how recruitment would work, I told each administrator that they would not know who I sent recruitment letters to, who volunteered to participate and who was ultimately interviewed.

Following the administration approval, I sent out recruitment letters to student families (Appendix B), parents (Appendix C) and teachers (Appendix D). Once I received all positive responses to participate by the set deadline, I randomly selected the number of desired names from a hat and sent out the letters of consent to administrators (Appendix E), the family of a student (Appendix F), parents (Appendix G) and teachers (Appendix H). Student and administrator interviews were held at their respective schools, while teachers and parents were either interviewed at the school or over the phone.

Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of 5-9 questions with the average duration being between 20 to 30 minutes. Although there were many similarities between the questions for each demographic group, there were slight differences in the interview questions for administrators (Appendix I), students (Appendix J), parents (Appendix K) and teachers (Appendix L). Creswell (2013), building on the work of Rubin and Rubin (2012) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), put forward nine stages to interviewing that, when assembled together, allow the research to be “embedded within a larger sequence of research” (p. 163). Yin (2009), similar to Creswell, recommended pilot tests to refine data collection plans and develop relevant lines of questions. Through my experience with test interviewing in one of my Master’s program classes, I was able to not only gain valuable experiences at all stages of the interview process, but I was also able to develop rapport and trust with my participants.
Bullying can be a difficult word to define and discuss, and even the simple mention of the word can elicit strong opinions. Although my study primarily examines the word, I recognized that such discussions could lead to emotional experiences for my interviewees. Therefore, all participants were provided with a consent form that stipulated the right of the participants to voluntarily withdraw at any time, protection of their confidence and my overall research purpose.

To further develop rapport my interviews started with gradual welcoming questions, which allowed the participant to explain their role in the school community. Questions then moved towards creating a conversation that revolved around my central research questions: What does a student, parent, teacher, or administrator mean when they use the word “bully”? And how do students, parents, teachers, and administrators arrive at their meaning?

It should be noted that there was no requirement for the participant to have been directly or indirectly involved in a singular or multiple bullying experiences, as this study does not directly look at a link between those who experience bullying and their definition. With that in mind, participants were not excluded from this study if, prior to or during the interview, it was found that they have experienced bullying. Students, parents, teachers, administrators and all other members of the school community will at some point be exposed to bullying, but the level and kind of exposure differs. This study recognized that such a difference exists and sets out to collect a sample of random individuals in each demographic group.

**Data Analysis**

First, I transcribed the audio recordings to a computer MS Word file that only I had access to throughout the duration of my research. Then I coded the raw interview data. Creswell (2013) stated that “coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a
label to the code” (p. 184). Once the interviews were coded, I elicited common themes and then amalgamated and/or eliminated certain categories based on re-reading of the transcripts. During this process, being aware of my role as a researcher, I applied my knowledge of bullying, gained from an extensive literature review, to make sure that the themes reflected informed decisions. With that said, I was also aware to not marginalize my data analysis to the current bullying discourse, and was open to the possibility of finding new themes that add to the collective conversation.

In order to achieve this goal, my research used inductive and deductive examination via etic coding and analysis. My exploratory multiple case study on the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators is at the centre of a explorative investigation that used the current literature of bullying to move forward in a meaningful direction. Etic coding uses research and literature to develop themes and patterns among participant responses, and I used the current literature on bullying to help code the data that I collected and analyzed. With that said, my research was exploratory and examined new ideas, so I also used emic coding, which is developed from data and participant words.

My case study took this process of interviewing, coding, and categorizing to a larger and more comparative scale, as I sought to find similarities and differences within and between the four case study groups I had chosen. I took my time to make sure that the interview dialogue was correctly coded, that the data was put into clear categories, and that themes were directly stated. Through the entire process, I was mindful of my role as a researcher and documented my decisions.

**Validity and Trustworthiness**

In line with the work of Matheson (1988) on research triangulation, I made a clear effort to develop a rich understanding of the bullying word phenomenon, so that the interview questions
asked and the proposed research focus reflected relevant value, resourcefulness and critical thinking. The information I gathered comes from literature that has been peer-reviewed and was often cited by fellow researchers. Over the past six years as a part-time graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University, I have taken the time to read countless studies and research papers, discuss with professors my proposed research interests, attend various workshops on bullying as a teacher and researcher, and complete a variety of assignments that relate to the bullying word phenomenon. I also recognize my role as an ethical researcher who adheres to the standards of privately discussed information from the interview participants. With that in mind, during an interview if I was made aware of a past, ongoing, or potential bullying situation I did not share this information with anyone outside of the research room, unless there was a serious threat to an individual’s well-being. I am making this statement because, as an educator, I have a predisposed bias to report and inform individuals of bullying related incidents, but as a researcher I have a predisposed obligation to create a trusting data collection session with all my participants so that they feel comfortable expressing any thoughts. However, it should be noted, that following each interview I reminded all participants that it is important to share all bullying concerns with a trusted adult in the educational community such as a teacher, parent, educational assistant, councillor, or administrator.

Ethical Guidelines

As required by Tri-Colour policy, my research case study passed through ethics review by the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) of Queen’s University. This was a case study research thesis that used interviews with students, parents, teachers and administrators to collect information, so consent, privacy, and confidentiality were administered at all stages of the research. Once the study was approved by GREB (Appendix M), it then received ethics approval
from the southeastern Ontario district school board. To increase anonymity of the interviewees, names and places were given pseudonyms, and the schools and school board are not directly referenced by name.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations within my case study. First, school communities are populated with a variety of players: students, parents, teachers, administrators, educational assistants, support workers, specialist, community partners, policymakers, and a whole host of other individuals. My research focused on the first four groups because they play a major role in community development, and they are the individuals often discussed in the research literature in relation to bullying. Second, people have a variety of different direct and indirect experiences with bullying, so I could not, nor did I want to, control the specific experience expectations of my interviewees such as whether or not they have experienced bullying. Overall, this study sought to explore the meaning of bullying for students, teachers, parents, and administrators, as well as how these meanings are learned. In line with the qualitative methodology, the findings of this research are limited to the perceptions shared by the participants in the two schools selected for the multiple case study and cannot be generalized to a broader Ontario educational context. Nevertheless, their responses offer the conversation points for school communities and researchers on how selected stakeholders in Ontario understand the bullying word phenomenon.
Chapter Four

Research Findings

The purpose of my exploratory multiple case study was to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents, and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. In this chapter, I present the research findings. To help facilitate a multiple case approach, I present and examine the data collected from each school separately. For each site, I briefly describe the school and the participants, and then present the findings according to the different groups of students, teachers, parents, and administrators. For all four demographics, I organized their responses according to sections in line with the research questions: a) definition of bullying, and b) communication and interpretation of bullying policy by respective groups. At the end, I provide a brief collective comparison of and between each site.

The School Sites

In accordance with the ethical guidelines for anonymity and confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to each school: Payton Hill School (PHS) and Halas Field School (HFS). Each school is located in one southeastern Ontario school district.

Payton Hill School (PHS)

Payton Hill School (PHS) is a rural K – 8 school in southeastern Ontario that services an area consisting of small communities and townships. The school has a population of roughly 225 students, and the majority of the kids get to school via bus. During the three days I spent at the school (November, 2018), I was subject to a very welcoming and enriching school environment: the sound of before-school volleyball practise, the sight of an upcoming food drive, and the
continual anticipation of a recess bell to play outside. I overheard students discussing hockey ratios in math class, intricate plans for an upcoming drama assignment, as well as peer advice on how to use the new Google classroom.

**Participants.** Like school sites, in accordance with the ethical guidelines for anonymity and confidentiality, all participants at PHS were given pseudonyms. After receiving approval from the school administrator, recruitment letters were sent out to all junior students, as well as their parents and teachers. All interviews were conducted at the school, except for the parent interviews, which took place over the phone. The following table provides the pseudonym of each individual and any relevant demographic information with respect to this case study.

Table 1.

**PHS Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>History at School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Student (Grade 4)</td>
<td>At PHS since Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Student (Grade 5)</td>
<td>At PHS since Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Student (Grade 6)</td>
<td>At PHS since Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Student (Grade 6)</td>
<td>At PHS since Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>At PHS over 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>At PHS over 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melony</td>
<td>Parent (of Grade 5 Student)</td>
<td>At PHS over 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>Parent (of Grade 6 Student)</td>
<td>At PHS over 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>At PHS for first year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings at Payton Hill School (PHS)

Defining bullying (students). The students at PHS provided their own definitions of bullying as shown below:

I think bullying means being mean to other people and making fun of other people. (Matt)

Bullying means people take power over other people and say mean things. (Claire)

I would say being mean like over and over again in a certain way. But, I mean, to get into detail it’s more one person or a group of people are being constantly mean or doing something to hurt someone mentally, physically or like cyber online. And it’s not just once, they keep doing everyday throughout the week and they get told not to do it and they keep doing it. (Jacob)

When someone picks on someone non-stop. I don’t know. I have the word, but I can’t think of it. There are types of bullying like physical and verbal. Physical is when you kick and punch. Verbal is when you talk behind someone’s back. (Eric)

In the above definitions, the students provided an understanding of bullying that used the word “mean” often. As our interviews continued, there emerged a common theme of bullying including verbal and/or physical aggression. However, with respect to physical aggression, students were more diligent about the bullying connection and often asked questions or provided clarifying remarks. For example, when asked to comment on whether a student getting hit while playing soccer reflects bullying, Matt stated “no, because they might not have tried to hit them” and Jacob
explained “I would say no because you don’t go into further detail about that so you don’t know if they have done it before that or if they keep doing that.” Yet, when it came to the situation in which another student is called “stupid” after having lost a friend’s pencil Matt said, “I think it is bullying because they are being mean to other people” and Jacob claimed “I know that it didn’t happen over and over again that I know of, but it was like verbally, but I consider verbal to be more bullying because that can hurt people and affect them forever.” When comparing those two situations, all of the students interviewed did not use the word “bully” to describe the soccer situation, but all, except Eric, saw being called “stupid” as being an act of bullying.

As the students and I went through different possible bullying situations, themes relevant to the criteria of Olweus’ (1993) definition of bullying—a repeated act of social, emotional and/or physical aggression committed by someone(s) in a powerful, superior position—began to emerge. As previously mentioned, in terms of aggression, students saw bullying as primarily being verbal and then physically based. Eric and Jacob did mention that bullying also exists in a cyber context: Jacob stated, “like cyber, sending texts like you suck or like something mean overall.” Near the end of my interview with Claire, she did mention that she had done a health assignment in which students could choose to research physical, verbal, cyber, or social bullying, yet she did not recognize the latter two forms until that point in the interview.

The students used the word “mean” on a variety of occasions and applied it to different situations. For example, Matt used “mean” in his definition as well as a prerequisite to confirm bullying (“I think it is bullying because they are being mean to other people”) and deny bullying (“I don’t think that’s bullying because they were not mean to each other”). During his interview, Jacob was the only participant who attempted to separate the two words:
I think there is a difference between being mean and bullying. Being mean is you call somebody something or use a bad word or you like get in a fight or you throw a punch, that’s like mean kind of. There is a big difference. Bullying is … over and over again, it can be more than one way and it hurts them a lot more. The person that is getting bullied like has nothing they can do back. They try to stand up for themselves or say something back, but that doesn’t hurt the bully. (Jacob)

Repetition is often associated with bullying, but only Jacob and Eric referred to the idea in their interviews. In the passage above, Jacob demonstrated a connection between bullying and repeated actions; an idea that he referenced throughout his interview. When going through the different examples, Eric mentioned that one to three times does not constitute repetition, and that it required “a week or maybe two.” In terms of power imbalance, Eric and Claire made explicit reference to it in their definitions and at moments during their interviews. Jacob, meanwhile, seemed to show some recognition of power imbalance in one of his responses, saying “if it was the one group of ten ignoring the other group of two, I might consider that bullying, but just like that [two equal size groups] I don’t think so.”

When given the situation in which a student sends an online message to a peer saying, “Your sweater was ugly today,” all of the students were quick to say that it was an example of bullying; a reaction that did not occur with the other situations. In his response Jacob said, “cyber stuff like that is always worse to me” because “you can tell your parents that somebody said that, but you can’t tell them, like people at your school, you can’t get them in any trouble for that.” Claire claimed that it was offensive bullying, while Eric stated, “it is cyberbullying and I think that is the most common.”
Learning about bullying (students). When asked how they learned about bullying, Matt said “I see people on the yard being mean to other people,” while Claire, Eric and Jacob all said their definition came from school, specifically class projects and lessons that focused on the different forms of bullying. It should be noted that all students indicated that at school, throughout the course of their learning, they have been taught how to define bullying. Claire shared that, in the previous month, her class had done a research project on the different forms of bullying and when asked to recall ideas she had learned she said “one-third of teens get bullied and don’t report it” and that you should tell “teachers and people you trust.” Even though PHS has held, for several years, assemblies on bullying as well as other events such as Pink Shirt Day and Anti-Bullying Weeks, only Jacob mentioned those events occurring at the school.

If they wanted to find out information about bullying, Matt claimed “I would talk to other people about it,” but was unsure of the exact individuals. Claire, Eric and Jacob all said they would use technology, online videos, and Google: Claire stated, “because Google is easy to talk to.” Jacob was the only participant who mentioned that he would talk with his parents. As for the best way to communicate bullying information to students, all of the participants preferred direct teaching methods such as “going class to class’ (Eric), “talking to them about real life bullying” (Jacob), or emailing a teacher and “they would tell their class about it” (Claire). The students also mentioned posting online resources via Instagram, YouTube, and other websites to help them learn about bullying.

Defining bullying (teachers). The bullying criteria of aggression, repetition and power imbalance were all themes evident in Alice and Sylvia’s bullying definition. Evident in the two interviews was also a theme of the definition being different for students and parents, and how this difference has led to different problems in terms of understanding the term. Alice stated, “I think
that for a lot of people the word bullying is misunderstood, misinterpreted and misused. In the context that, someone picks on me today I’ve been bullied, someone doesn’t want to play with me so they are bullying me, someone takes my toys so they are bullying me.” Sylvia described a tumult situation in which students and parents incorrectly used the word “bullying” to describe a peer relationship that lacked a power imbalance (i.e., each student was showing aggression towards the other). To help with that situation, Sylvia worked with her administrator, the parents and their children to slowly “get a clear idea of what is happening and what is not. And it is not really bullying in this case.” When working with students, both teachers experienced moments in which they had to discuss with a student the definition of bullying and deconstruct the situation so as to provide a clearer solution.

With respect to working with parents, Alice explained that “some parents use the word more often than they should, and again it is a miscommunication,” but when it comes to establishing a common understanding “parents for the most part that I’ve dealt with have been responsive.” Sylvia described a similar situation and again mentioned that parents were responsive to the gradual introduction of a shared bullying understanding.

The idea of “zero tolerance” is also a difficult policy to understand in the educational community as it relates to bullying. During our interview Sylvia stated:

There is kind of that no tolerance to bullying, so some people think that if someone does one mean thing or says one mean thing it is bullying, and they are going to be suspended. That’s not the way it works. And that might be more media: it wouldn’t come from the school, but you hear about that sort of thing in the news or the newspaper, this no tolerance policy kind of thing. That is not very affective because of what it entails.
Alice and Sylvia have both observed that students at their school do overuse the word bullying when referring to different situations. Alice stated “I don’t know if that’s the word they hear, so when someone is bothering or pestering them or picking on them that bullying is automatically what they use because that is the word that has been out there so much. It is hard to figure out why they are using it so often.” With that in mind, both teachers are also proactive about addressing their students’ misunderstandings and often use a case-by-case approach that relies on talking with particular students, asking them questions and observing their social relationships.

**Learning about bullying (teachers).** In terms of how they arrived at their understanding of bullying, both teachers have had different experiences. Alice stated that she has “been to a lot of bullying workshops and presentations,” while Sylvia said that her definition was the product of reading different books. The two teachers both stressed that professional development (PD) days were important in helping them to develop their understanding of ongoing bullying issues at the school, as well as learning new information in the field of school inclusion. However, both teachers shared that this new information often does not focus on bullying or the word itself. Alice explained, “as far as PD goes this year, we’ve talked about it a little bit, but it has not been as much in the past when we talked about using your WITS [Walk away, ignore, Talk, Seek help]. We still do bullying prevention week, we still do pink shirt day, but I think the focus has gone away more from the bullying piece. I don’t think we are focused as much on the bullying word.” As shown previously, the students interviewed at PHS have different understandings of bullying, and both teachers recounted experiences in which they found that not having a similar definition amongst students and parents had led to occasional problems.

Sylvia explained that at one PD session, earlier in the year, the staff reflected on a student survey that had been done in the spring. She stated, “this year there was a particular grade in which
they seemed to be reporting a lot of bullying, even though the group seems to get along really well. The questions in the survey, maybe kids do not understand correctly.” Sylvia found this interesting and noted the apparent dichotomy between class discussions in which “a lot of them seemed to have the right definition” and then the inaccurate understanding that students apply in real-world social interactions. In response to the school survey data, teachers noted that the administrator, Andrew, had gone around to the classes and worked with students to develop their understanding of bullying. As Alice summarized, school staff and parents must make sure that “the message that the students are getting is clear and not grey because if not that makes the problem harder to solve.”

**Defining bullying (parents).** When discussing their understanding of bullying, Melony and Nora recognized the different forms of aggression (i.e. verbal, physical and social), Melony referenced repetition and neither parent made direct or indirect mention of power imbalance. During the interviews, two common themes emerged: bullying was related to social exclusion, and bullying was evident when victims did not feel good about themselves (i.e., personal well-being). When asked whether they thought their understanding of bullying was shared amongst fellow parents of Payton Hill School, Melony said “I think a lot of them will probably say no. I don’t think that they share my same view,” while Nichole responded with “I think so.”

Melony and Nora both felt that their understandings would resemble how their children, defined bullying too, but made concessions to that point and stated that each have experienced moments in which their child has come home from school, described a social situation they either experienced or witnessed and then, according to their parents, inaccurately used the word “bullying.” In response, both parents felt comfortable having conversations with their children about bullying.
Learning about bullying (parents). As it relates to how each parent developed their understanding of bullying, Melony shared that it just came along with raising her children and encountering different situations, while Nora said that it came from talking with others, especially people in her workplace. Nora spoke often about how her workplace—a government service building—recognizes, discusses and addresses bullying. Although both parents were unsure of the school’s official definition of bullying or whether it had one at all, Nora stated that her workplace defined bullying as “something or somebody that creates a negative environment. For example, talking about somebody behind their back, making comments about somebody, negative comments when they are around that make them feel not good about themselves. Exclusion is a big one.” Nora added that her workplace has been very adamant about proactively addressing bullying and, in that regard, establishing a common understanding of the word has been a focus of their initiative.

According to both parents, Payton Hill School does a good job communicating information about bullying; a majority of which is focused on assembly summaries, information about mental health and other inclusion-related events such as Pink Shirt Day. The parents also said that class newsletters and emails are a good source of communication. When asked to comment on the PHS community and a shared understanding of bullying, Nora responded with a statement that reflected the themes of a misunderstood word and the related consequences on school inclusion:

I think that there is a general idea—idea amongst parents. A very basic idea of what it is, the depths of it, what it entails and the consequences of it. Like I said I think there is a lot more discussion that needs to be had to fully understand the extent of the bullying. I’m not sure how the school identifies a bully, I know that it is political. I think it so critical that we get a handle
on this and a really good understanding in which the parents are on board, so that when the kids are really young they will not see it as acceptable in any form.

**Defining bullying (administrator).** Different forms of aggression, repetition and power imbalance were all themes evident in the discussion with Andrew, the principal of PHS for the current school year and someone who has over 10 years of administrator experience. The latter criteria emerged as a very important theme for Andrew, as he stated “for me, the key is that it is not just conflict, but there is an attempt to gain power. For one person to exercise personal, inappropriate influence over another.” Andrew posits that conflict “is arguably, in my mind, part of the natural social interaction of people because students spend a lot of time together in a school community as they develop, grow and take risks.”

Similar to Alice and Sylvia, Andrew has experienced difficulties as it relates to students, parents and the different understandings of bullying, and like the teachers interviewed he finds it helpful to take his time, talk with the particular individuals, ask questions, gather information and observe their social relationships. As for the reasoning behind this definition variation, Andrew stated that it has a lot to do with various social media commentary online and the lack of time spent addressing the phenomenon:

I think that a lot of it has to do with the presences of the word in social media. Even in the ways we approach things from ministry documents, there’s lots of focus on the word bullying without a lot of time spent on what the word is. People don’t delve into that part of it, they see conflict, they see something that happens more than once and the word that comes to their brain is bullying.
To address the definition problem, besides different case-by-case scenarios, Andrew has spent time visiting different classrooms, as well as introducing his students to alternative words such as “conflict” and “social conflict.” In his experience as an administrator, Andrew stated that he can only recall “a handful of times in which what I would consider true bullying to exist, and the other ones are conflict. Is there inappropriate behaviour there? Absolutely. But there is a big difference between inappropriate behaviour and bullying.”

In addition to sharing different instances in which the bullying word was not used effectively, Andrew also shared how damaging and permanent a situation can become when the bullying word is used:

Once bullying is set in a person’s mind, and that is the way they feel, about the interaction they are having with another person, I think that they colour every experience they have with that person through that lens—suspicious of every action that the person takes. This is a very emotional thing and it is difficult to have someone step-back and look at it objectively—it takes a very long time to work through with parents and students.

As for the Student Survey that Sylvia had also mentioned, Andrew shared that he had gone around to classrooms in September (2018) to discuss the bullying definition. During this time and throughout his career, Andrew noted that students want more supervision for snack time, recess and to “ref outdoor soccer games.” Although there is more than enough supervision at PHS, Andrew believes these requests are evident of a changing social dynamic, “I don’t think they have nearly as much skill in resolving those unstructured social pieces like children used to, and I think that is what leads to social difficulties and the accusations of bullying.”
Learning about bullying (administrator). Andrew stated that his definition of bullying comes from reading different information pieces, looking over the Ontario Health curriculum document and attending various professional development workshops. On a school level, Andrew values staff meetings and PD days as they provide an opportunity for his staff to reflect on student surveys and discuss ongoing bullying issues. He has talked with students about the definition and he is very comfortable working with parents and their children during different “bullying” situations, although he does understand that issues of this magnitude can be very emotional and require time. When it comes to problems associated with the bullying word phenomena, Andrew summarized his approach by stating, “it is a very complex problem and the solution is often very complex and multi-faceted that comes from as many directions as possible. If you can get students, parents and teachers to work on it together, you stand the best chance.

Summary of Payton Hill School. The students, parents, teachers, and administrator that were interviewed for this case study revealed an assortment of valuable commentary on the bullying word. In terms of the definition, all of the participants described bullying as involving some form of aggression, 66% included references to repetition, and 66% mentioned the idea of power imbalance. In comparing the different groups, different themes emerged: students use the word “mean” often and liberally, parents emphasised social exclusion and personal well-being, teachers relied on the three criteria and the administrator—referenced aggression and repetition—emphasized power imbalance. Only the students and Alice made mention of cyberbullying.

With respect to the definition of bullying, three other themes emerged when looking at the adult participants. Firstly, most felt that there understanding of bullying was common, yet most participants provided different definitions. Most felt that students had a similar basic understanding, but that this uniformity was subject to deviation in real-world practise; a theme that
Sylvia noticed in the everyday workings of the school environment. Secondly, every adult has experienced moments, either with students/children or with fellow school community members, in which the bullying word was misused during the framing of a social interaction. The solution to these situations often included talking with the particular individuals, asking questions, gathering information and observing their social relationships; a series of efficacious strategies that all participants agreed required time and patience. Third, all participants affirmed that the bullying word was overused, and as Alice, Nora and Andrew all stated, once the label is applied to a student it can be detrimental to short- and long-term problem solving and can lead to parents and students having inaccurate conceptualizations of pupil relationships.

At Payton Hill School, a majority of the participants, except the parents interviewed, learned about bullying through direct instruction (i.e. being taught, workshops) or reading different information pieces. These two methods are also the preferred strategies for learning additional information about bullying, while the parents specifically elected for notices being sent home. Through the different discussions emerged a common theme that the bullying word is highly subjective and depends on to ongoing experiences and social interactions, which leads to an understanding that is individualized, changing and variable.

Halas Field School (HFS)

Halas Field School (HFS) is an urban K-8 school in southeastern Ontario that services a suburban area within a city. The school has a population of roughly 225 students and the majority of the kids walk to school, while only a few rely on busing and public transportation. Throughout the two days I spent at the school (February, 2019) I was able to witness and hear a variety of rich learning opportunities: student-directed inquiry projects, guest speakers from the community,
hands-on building projects, and a collection of previous educational moments that were showcased on bulletin boards and during the morning announcements.

**Participants.** In accordance with the ethical guidelines for anonymity and confidentiality, all participants at HFS were given pseudonyms. After receiving approval from the school administrator, recruitment letters were sent out to all junior students, as well as their parents and teachers. All interviews were conducted at the school, except for the parent and teacher interviews, which took place over the phone. The following table provides the pseudonyms of each individual and any relevant information with respect to this case study.

Table 2.

**HFS Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>History at School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>Student (Grade 4)</td>
<td>At HFS for first year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bree</td>
<td>Student (Grade 4)</td>
<td>At HFS since Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Student (Grade 6)</td>
<td>At HFS since Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>At HFS over 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>At HFS over 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Parent (of Grade 6 Student)</td>
<td>At HFS over 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>Parent (of Grade 6 Student)</td>
<td>At HFS over 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>At PHS for first year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings at Halas Field School (HFS)**

**Defining bullying (students).** The students at HFS provided their own definitions of bullying as shown below:

There are many different types of bullying, so someone could be pushing you around or bullying you online by saying mean comments, or they could be making fun of you. (Tammy)
It is basically someone being mean to you every single day and not stopping, trying to get you sad or mad (Bree)

It is when a kid, or not just a kid but an adult as well, is making fun of someone based on how they look to make themselves feel better. They are being mean and trying to make themselves feel better. (Alan)

In the above definitions, similar to the students from PHS, the students at HFS used the word “mean” as a key requirement when describing bullying. During the interviews, “mean” was used by the HFS students on different occasions to designate various events; a word that was often used in connection with verbal—rather than the other forms of—aggression.

For example, when given the four different social situations, Alan identified only the acts of verbal aggression as being bullying (i.e., the lost pencil and ugly sweater), and in both cases said that the perpetrator was being “mean.” Bree, who was the only student who defined what “mean” represented to her, stated “like saying mean words, like you are a weirdo that kind of stuff.” Tammy used “mean” in connection with verbal aggression and also used it as an identifier to distinguish between regular social interactions and bullying. When asked to comment on whether two groups of students refusing to play with each other was an example of bullying, Tammy responded, “not if the people are not being mean, but if they are mean and fighting then yes.”

Repetition was a theme that all three students linked to bullying throughout the interviews, yet when asked to quantify the term Alan and Bree were unsure and Tammy stated, “more than three times.” Aggression, as previously stated, was shared by all students as a criterion for bullying; however, students were more likely to talk about verbal aggression and emotional harm (i.e., making victims feel bad). Power imbalance was not evident in any of the discussions, although all
three students, at some point, did say that people who bully do it to feel better about their own self. Alan and Bree both provided comments that demonstrated an awareness to and knowledge of cyberbullying.

**Learning about bullying (students).** The students interviewed at Halas Field School developed their conceptualization of bullying from a variety of sources: Tammy, health class and her parents; Bree, health class and “everyday life;” and Alan, witnessing it at school. With respect to the health class learning of the former two students, Tammy explained that it involved a lot of different video watching while Bree stated, “in health class we learn types of bullying and how it makes you feel. It says it makes you feel defeated like you can’t do anything about it—sad and mad because you cannot do anything about it.” Bree and Alan both shared how witnessing bullying helped them to develop their understanding, and later on in the interview both shared that these experiences were often on the school yard, as Bree explained “if I see bullying, it is on the school yard. Playing a game and being mean.”

The three students all mentioned that their school held specific bullying-related events such as Pink Shirt Day and assemblies, but they were unable to recall what these moments were specifically about. In the same regard, all of the students stated that, were they to receive a new message or strategy about bullying, assemblies and announcements are the best approach. When asked where they would turn to find out more information about bullying, Bree mentioned her health teacher and Alan stated that he would talk to any teacher at the school because “the teachers are pretty good at knowing when bullying is happening and stopping it.” Tammy was more likely to use web-related resources: “I would look it up online, maybe like Wikipedia. I have done projects, but I don’t remember what I learned.”
Defining bullying (teachers). Similar to students at Halas Field School, teachers Hope and Kim explained during their interviews that bullying is a social relation that causes the victims to feel uncomfortable, upset, and marginalized. Kim said that bullying is “an action or words that are repeated towards the same person with intent to cause them to be unhappy or hurt,” while Hope stated that it is “any time someone makes you feel uncomfortable—not a nervous uncomfortable like in an academic situation. You think you are going to be hurt either physically, emotionally, mentally, let a teacher know.” As Hope goes on to explain, bullying can include “hurtful actions, both physical and emotional, exclusion, intentional inclusion, meaning intentionally including kids you would not otherwise include so as to make others feel excluded.”

Following that line of thought, both teachers at HFS, throughout their interviews, shared that bullying exists as a state of feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable, as a result of repeated perceived or actuated aggression. Repetition was mentioned by Hope at different times during the discussion, and Kim expanded upon her own understanding stating that “it would have to happen repeatedly over a few weeks to more time than that. It is not something that happens one or two times in the same week, it is kind of persistent.” The criterion of power imbalance was never directly mentioned by either teacher, nor was there any reference to bullying occurring online. Hope and Kim both thought that their understanding of bullying was shared by fellow teachers at their school.

During the interviews, Hope and Kim both shared their observation that students’ understanding of bullying develops with age. Hope explained that primary (grade 1 -3) students are more likely to use the word incorrectly and that, as children advance through the junior grades, their understanding of bullying becomes more relatable and clear. As for how this clarity with age occurs, Hope did not specifically explain, but Kim made a similar statement:
I would say, in my experience, that a lot of younger students, like primary students, will throw it around, they maybe don’t quite have [an idea] or will jump to so-and-so is bullying me, even though it might just be outside, playing soccer and someone got a goal and they may just call that bullying. As kids get older, they have a better sense of what it, more aligned with how I think it is.

With respect to parents, Hope and Kim shared that they have had few instances in which a misunderstanding of the bullying word was the core problem; however, both expressed a lack of confidence in a common understanding existing within the conversational realms of teachers and parents, and both had experienced moments in which a different understanding of the word had led to problems as well as cumbersome conflict resolution. Hope shared that “there have been situations in which parents, over the years, have thought their kids were being bullied when it was actually their child doing the bullying.” As Kim detailed, “I definitely would say that sometimes that parents perceive any disagreement between students, even if it only happens once or twice, they can perceive that as bullying.”

**Learning about bullying (teachers).** Hope and Kim both developed their understanding of bullying through reading different articles/books and attending a variety of professional development workshops. When asked to comment on what have been some effective and ineffective, if any, ways that bullying information has been communicated to them, Kim shared that she found it helpful learning about the “WITS program” a couple of years ago, but since then there has not been much professional development. Hope mentioned the WITS program as well and said that she has used it with students at her school. During her interview, Hope went on to explain bullying training and school inclusion:
It [bullying] almost is not [at professional development], anymore. Only because so many years ago we spent time talking about it and working with the kids about it: workshops, doing assemblies on bullying, etc. Now that we talk about gender and race it has taken on a whole new meaning because it is including so many more things, more aspects. I would say that our school, most schools as well, are pretty good at making students feel included.

As the above quote demonstrates, and as Kim also made reference to in her interview, the ongoing conversation at Halas Field School is focused on school inclusion, with an emphasis on student empowerment and recognition of different demographic groups. Moving forward, both teachers said that professional development sessions—during PA days and staff meetings—are the best way for them to learn about new bullying information.

**Defining bullying (parents).** The definitions of bullying provided by Lucy and Willow focused on different elements. Lucy spent her time explaining how bullying is linked to verbal and physical aggression, as well as “subtle non-verbal forms of picking on somebody—that could be smearing, eye-rolling, or ignoring that kind of behaviour.” Willow’s understanding relied more on power imbalance and stated that “I find that anyone who bullies another person is there way of overpowering and controlling someone, maybe they are smaller than them or whatever the case may be.” Similar to the students and staff at HFS, throughout her interview, Lucy talked about how bullying makes the victim feel continually marginalized and uncomfortable. Willow touched on this idea of victim well-being as well, but she also frequently referenced the state of the individual doing the bullying and explained that “bullying is reflective of the person doing the bullying, maybe they have an insecurity within themselves, they are expressing onto other people
to make themselves feel better.” In the same regard, Lucy stated that “the bully label for a student is detrimental.” This recognition of the well-being of the individual who bullies was an idea that was not often expressed in interviews at either case study location.

When asked to explain what the word “ongoing” meant for Lucy, who had used the word as well as “repetition” in her initial definition, she said:

I haven’t thought much about it. I think it would be over a period of time, over a period of weeks and months. Not necessarily every day, but occurring every week for a period of several weeks or months.

Willow talked about the bullying social situation lasting for a period of time and including different forms of aggression, but she did not quantify or expand upon the word “repetition.” Power imbalance was referenced directly by Willow on multiple occasions during the interview, while Lucy did not reference it during the course of our discussion. The concept of cyberbullying was only alluded to during Lucy’s interview when she mentioned where she would like to expand her own understanding.

With respect to the relationship between their definition and the wider school community, both parents felt that their understanding was shared amongst fellow families. As Willow claimed, “we have bullies in our workplace and bullies in our schools and bullies of our age as well. I think that the definition of bullying is pretty much the same in 99% of families.” Lucy felt the same about their being a common understanding in her school community, but she did recognize that “the definition can be vague.” Both parents were confident that their understanding was the same as their child and fellow family members.

**Learning about bullying (parents).** When exploring how they arrived at their individual definitions, both parents shared different factors and resources. Lucy, who mentioned that her and
her family have not had personal experience with bullying, stated that her definition was largely a result of shared stories amongst her peers and different media programming:

> It has obviously been in the media a lot and, you know, coming across it in the news. I certainly have heard anecdotally through others. Again, I have been fortunate that I don’t know anyone who has been the recipient of it. So, I think that is more just anecdotal stories and somebody-knows-somebody who has a kid who has been bullied. Obviously, as well in television shows, movies and other forms of media, which I am sure subtle I have a bias based on what I have seen on television.

Willow, conversely, shared that she had various experiences with bullying, both on the receiving end as a child and her child being a former victim of bullying. Her understanding of bullying was rooted in these prior experiences because “through personal experience myself, being bullied when I was in school and watching one of my children be bullied in the school. Just the personal feeling you get from it.”

Lucy and Willow both recognized that they received paper and electronic newsletters from the school that occasionally talked about school inclusion, as well as updates on events such as bullying assemblies and Pink Shirt Day. They were unable to recall the exact messages of the newsletters or the assemblies, and neither could recall a definition of bullying from the school or if one had ever been provided. Lucy explained that “the school makes it obvious that it has a zero tolerance policy” and, when asked to explain that concept, she claimed “I don’t really know what that means. My understanding is that it is a proven thing because sometimes kids can say things that are not accurate.”
Although both parents would appreciate more education from HPS on understanding bullying, they also shared that it was ultimately their responsibility to acquire this information. As Lucy said, “it comes down to me educating myself. But I guess, seeing as it is an issue, especially with social media and everything that the school would play a little bit of a role.” Likewise, at the end of her interview, Willow stated, “I think if parents were on the same level of knowledge that their kids were on it would make it a lot easier for their kids to be able to talk to their parents and for parents to rationalize it.”

**Defining bullying (administrator).** Repetition, power imbalance and aggression—including verbal, physical, social, emotional and cyber types—were all evident in Scott’s definition of bullying, who emphasized that “it happens over time repeatedly with a student that has a power imbalance in the relationship.” During his interview, Scott shared that he valued “working with kids around what an inclusive community feels like and who has a role in building that community, so although bullying is not targeted in the discussion, we really talk lots about how our school feels.” School inclusion and community building through student empowerment were ideas that were repeatedly expressed during the interview. As he remarked, “our approach is really around, if we have a community that values each other, then instances of bullying will decrease.”

To help achieve this goal of school inclusion, in addition to empowering students, Scott shared that he relies on three key strategies: regular communication between school and home, inviting different community members and services to the school, and working with teachers to deliver the health curriculum. Through these activities, as Scott explained, different topics arise such as safety, inclusion, mental health, race, gender, sexual orientation and bullying. When asked about how “bullying” is discussed between school and home, Scott responded with an answer that
reflected a developing understanding of the word amongst parents, as well as an opportunity to help further promote student empowerment:

I would say that there is a developing understanding of what bullying really is because I think that anytime, from a parents’ perspective, that a child’s feelings are hurt either verbal or physical and/or they feel excluded that is automatically the label that gets placed onto that—they were bullied. So, I think that working with families and trying to get them to understand that that is the start of bullying behaviour you are absolutely right, but that is a power imbalance or conflict that has occurred that your child needs to learn to manage, right? And the other child needs to understand what impact they had. It is a learning opportunity at the first onset that can turn into something quite persistent if unaddressed.

In the same regard, Scott expressed that for students at HPS “mislabelling of bullying experience is not really an issue. The staff here have done a really, really great job and we continue to do a great job at helping students label the experience.” At different points during the interview, Scott shared that he tries to exercise and model caution when approaching the bullying word, so that situations are properly addressed.

**Learning about bullying (administrator).** Scott stated that his understanding of bullying comes from three different things: working with students and parents during different bullying and non-bullying situations; his own attendance at professional development workshops; and “work that we have done as a system around the idea of inclusion and safe schools.” The workshops he had attended have been about “whole school approaches, that will reduce the incidents of bullying” and other, more recent sessions, “have been targeting marginalized communities and experiences...
around bullying, so how to support students with racialized backgrounds, special education needs and landed immigrants.” He also mentioned that some of the professional development occurs through staff collaboration and discussions.

With that said, Scott did recognize that over recent years the sensationalizing of bullying outcomes (e.g., “someone committing suicide”) in the media has run against efforts to develop a common understanding amongst schools and their families. As Scott elaborated, although bullying may have been a factor and that should not be dismissed, the focus on it promotes a misconstrued understanding within the general public:

Bullying may have been one part of their experience, but there may have been all kinds of other things that played around them feeling welcomed and included in their school community, or feeling safe on a daily basis for other reasons and so I think that people like to have easy answers to things in the world, but also in the education system. We like to say we will address this one thing, but we forget that there all kinds of aspects that impact that one thing.

According to Scott, the path to a shared understanding of bullying is also the path towards a safe and inclusive school community: “it is very effective to communicate bullying in the greater context of inclusion, acceptance and safe spaces because you want to exist within an environment that you feel included.”

**Summary of Halas Field School.** The people interviewed from HFS demonstrated a collection of previously held, as well as new, themes relevant to the discussion of the bullying word. As it relates to the definition, all participants mentioned repetition and aggression, while only two individuals referred to power imbalance. Repetition, although mentioned, was not often
expanded upon beyond the use of words “repeated,” “constant” and “continual.” For those that did provide additional explanation, the descriptions varied: “more than three times” (Tammy), “over a few weeks to more time than that” (Kim), “a period of weeks and months” (Lucy). Bullying-related aggression was often seen as verbal or social/emotional, and it was noted that all participant groups emphasized the victims feeling marginalized and uncomfortable. The word “mean” was used as a qualifier for bullying by all of the students interviewed; however, actions and relationships classified as “mean” were difficult to discern. Scott, Lucy and two students all mentioned cyberbullying at some point during their interviews.

Teachers, administrator and one of the parents had experienced moments in which the definition of bullying was unclear and as a result had led to problems when looking to solve different social situations. Although these difficulties exist, all of the adults interviewed were confident that their definition of bullying was shared by people within their case study grouping.

When it comes to learning about bullying, different groups had different responses: students from health class and personal experiences; teachers from resources and professional development; parents through the media and personal involvements; and the administrator from his experiences, professional development and board policy. Personal experiences were a common theme throughout all groups for how their understanding of bullying developed. Some adults expressed awareness, as well as caution, of the role the media has in shaping the “bullying” word.

Students and parents both mentioned that HFS held different bully-related events such as assemblies and Pink Shirt Days, yet they were unable to explain any of the point specific messages of these activities. Hope and Kim both felt that the definition of bullying changed as students advance through school and, once they reach the junior grades, their understanding is more aligned with teaching staff. The teachers and Scott valued reading and professional development
workshops when it comes to learning more about bullying and school inclusion. More present at Halas Field School, as directly mentioned by Scott on different occasions, was a strong sense of school inclusion and student empowerment being very important, and bullying discussions/learning occurring within this larger umbrella theme.

**Summary: Comparison of PHS and HFS**

Both schools used for this case study were very welcoming, while Andrew and Scott (administrators) were both accommodating facilitators who valued the research being done on school inclusion and bullying. At each site, various amounts of information were shared, organized, and then detailed in the preceding pages, and through this process several similarities and differences emerged.

**Defining bullying (both PHS and HFS).** As was seen, whether it was within particular interview groups, at each individual site, or found when comparing the different sites, the definition of bullying is qualitatively vast. Aggression was included in every definition, but there was a tendency for that act to be more verbal compared to physical, social, or emotional. Only one student did not discuss cyberbullying in their interview, while only 3 of the 10 adults made mention of the topic during our discussions. Students at both sites used the word “mean” to explain, justify and differentiate bullying, yet there was no other discernable pattern as to when the word was used. At HPS, there was a correlation between “mean,” “bullying” and verbal aggression, but this same observation was not as clear at the other site. Participants at both schools often linked bullying to victims feeling unsafe, marginalized, and uncomfortable. Power imbalance was mentioned by both teachers at PHS, a parent a HFS and both administrators. The latter group, in fact, emphasized power imbalance in their definition and referenced the concept frequently during our discussions. Parents who commented on “zero tolerance” admitted to being unsure of the policy implications.
and administrators both thought that the phrase, although intended to help create a positive space, was misunderstood by the larger public.

Repetition was mentioned by a majority—66% at PHS and all at HFS—of the participants; however, at both sites, the word was often used synonymously with terms such as “again and again” and “a lot,” and it was rarely expanded upon to include any quantifiable measurements. On the rare occasions in which the word was given with greater detail, there emerged an overall picture of “repetition” having very diverse understandings: “I’m not really sure” (Bree, student HFS), “like five” (Jacob, student PHS) and “a period of weeks and months” (Lucy, parent HFS).

The case studies given to the students for analysis proved to be an excellent way to engage them in critical thinking about the “bullying” word, as many students asked inquiry questions and provided detailed responses. Bree even remarked, “I’ve never really thought of these questions.” The table below lists each scenario and then the number of students who thought the situation demonstrated bullying.

Table 3.
Student Scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Payton Hill School (4 Students)</th>
<th>Halas Field School (3 Students)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A student is playing a game of soccer at recess and gets hit</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student calls another student “stupid” because the student lost a pencil</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two groups of students refuse to play with each other</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student sends an online message to another student saying, “Your sweater was ugly today.”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It should be noted that all of the students provided reasoning for their decisions and most described potential “what if” alternatives that allowed me to explore with them the difference between a relationship problem and bullying. For example, Jacob, a student at PHS, in response to the first situation explained, “I would say no because you don’t go into further detail about that so you don’t know if they have done it before that or if they keep doing that. But if it is just like one time its fine.” Following this statement, he went into more detail about his understanding of bullying, we discussed what he meant by the number of times, and then he shared that based on his experience bullying requires roughly five times.

As the previous table demonstrates, there are some preliminary patterns to be observed when considering both schools together. First, bullying responses for the soccer situation were for the most part split, and those that answered in the negative often said it would be difficult to determine whether or not the act was intentional. Interestingly enough, intentionality was frequently connected with repetition. Second, the second and fourth situation, which both included some form of verbal name calling, were more likely than the other two scenarios to be identified as bullying; a pattern that makes sense when consideration is given to a previous observation that verbal aggression, regardless of case study group, was often associated with bullying and, with students specifically, being “mean.” Lastly, the third situation involving groups refusing to play together was not often seen as an act of bullying because of the lack of aggression; however, most students explained that, had the “refusal” come with some form of verbal or physical harm, then they would change their response.

In terms of the adults interviewed, most felt that their definition of bullying was common, especially within their demographic group, yet most participants provided different definitions. As
was mentioned often by teachers and administrators at both schools, there was a belief that students had a similar basic understanding, but that this uniformity was subject to deviation in real-world practise. Next, most participants affirmed that the bullying word was overused; a problem that is further compounded by the recognition among all adults that the label is troublesome and potentially prejudicial for short- as well as long-term problem solving and school inclusion.

Finally, most adults have experienced moments, either with students/children or with fellow school community members, in which the bullying word was misused during the framing of a social interaction. At Payton Hill School, it was mentioned frequently that, to deal with these situations, the staff and administrator often talked with the particular individuals, asked questions, gathered information and observed their social relationships. While at Halas Field School, the school staff was more likely to speak of preventative measures to address the problem, specifically the idea of creating a strong school community that values individual identities, promotes student empowerment, and in the process helps students to identify and address bullying. This is not to say that PHS is purely reactionary and HFS is solely preventive, as both themes were evident at either school. What it does suggest is that schools recognize the complications surrounding the bullying word, and in each location the efforts reflect a willingness to invest time, patience and professional development.

**Learning about bullying (both PHS and HFS).** The majority of participants interviewed at both locations learned about bullying through direct instruction (i.e., being taught in health class for students, workshops for adults) or reading different information pieces. There were also a number of individuals, at both schools and throughout all case study groupings, who mentioned that their understanding was a result of conversations and stories exchanged amongst peers.
Assemblies, Pink Shirt Days and notices home were referenced frequently by most participants; however, little was ever remembered about the specific messages of these events and resources.

Media exposure, either through fictional television programmes, real-world news coverage or online social platforms, was referenced at both sites as being detrimental to the overall communal understanding of bullying: “I am sure subtle, I have a bias based on what I have seen on television” (Lucy, parent HFS); “I think that a lot of it has to do with the presences of the word in social media…lots of focus on the word bullying without a lot of time spent on what the word is” (Andrew, administrator PHS); and “it is ineffective for the topic of bullying to be sensationalized or to be very specific around one situation via media” (Scott, administrator HFS).

Students did not believe their definition was rooted in media exposure, yet when asked how they would find out about additional bullying information, the majority of the students said that they would use online tools such as Google, Wikipedia and videos. Some students also said talking to a teacher and two students mentioned their parents as a resource.

When learning new bullying information in the future, teachers and administrators preferred professional development workshops, with all members of the former group mentioning staff meetings and PA days as being an optimal time. Parents had no common learning method with some electing for more of a self-taught, autodidactic approach, or an occasional newsletter home, or a combination of the two. Most of the adults interviewed made it clear that online messaging, especially for important manners, is not always efficacious because of the sheer oversaturation of continual content, emails, tweets, videos, posts and other forms of digital connection.
Chapter Five

Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

In this chapter, I start by restating the research problem and specific questions that guided this research, and then I will summarize the results and make connections to the relevant literature, so as to expand the discussion and highlight resulting implications and conclusions.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of my exploratory multiple case study was to examine the perceived definitions of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. In order to achieve this purpose, the specific research questions, each with two sub questions, will guide this research:

1. How do students define bullying?
   a. How do students interpret information about bullying at school?
   b. How is bullying policy communicated to students through their school?

2. How do parents define bullying?
   a. How do parents interpret information about bullying at their child’s school?
   b. How is bullying policy communicated to parents through their child’s school?

3. How do teachers define bullying?
   a. How do teachers interpret information about bullying at their schools?
   b. How is bullying policy communicated to teachers at their school?

4. How do administrators define bullying?
   a. How do administrators define, describe and understand bullying?
b. How do administrators communicate bullying information to students, parents and teachers?

Through the exploration of previous and ongoing literature, I have presented a variety of “bullying” definitions that together are confusing and concerning, which in turn makes school inclusiveness inherently arduous and difficult. Recognizing that a variance exists, this research further explored the particular differences in understanding of the word amongst students, parents, teachers and administrators, as well as how these individuals arrived at their understanding. These two points of explorations—the different definitions and how these understandings were acquired—were the focus of this thesis and formed the central building blocks of the research questions.

The forthcoming discussion sections reflect a triangulation of my literature review and my multiple case qualitative study. A quantitative study that surveys hundreds of students, teachers, parents and administrators in the province of Ontario would evidently lead to more statistical results and reflect a larger sample size. However, as is the case with exploratory qualitative research, the purpose of my research was to examine perceptions about the bullying word phenomenon. With that said, I was recently asked, “if you had the chance to speak directly to the Minister of Education about your study, what would you say?” After careful thought and consideration, my response is clear: This study offers a glimpse into the selected participants experiences and perceptions. Overall, the completed multiple case qualitative study, taken together with my literature review, strongly suggests a need for school community members, researchers and the province of Ontario to show greater awareness of the bullying word phenomenon.
Discussion on the “Bullying” Definition

Wide variety of bullying definitions. There were some common themes that emerged when comparing all of the definitions such as the prevalence of verbal aggression amongst students and the mostly exclusive mention of power imbalance by administrators. However, taken together, the interviews demonstrate a wide variety of bullying understandings. If every definition given was placed down on a visual mind map, with the word “bullying” in the centre, then the result would be a confusing series of interconnected lines, stand-alone and aberrant outliers, as well as a collection of broad overused terms such as “mean” and “repetition” that only served to increase the abstruse and ambiguous complexity. This finding supports the idea that during the literature review it was difficult to find a study that did not, as a result of the erratic definition, express concerns or limitations in their end result (Bickmore, 2011; Cascardi, 2014; Connolly et al., 2000; Fonagay et al., 2005; Mahri et al., 2004). If you recall, Bickmore (2011) found through her study on school inclusion that “the term is understood in varying ways and often used as a blunt instrument referring to any kind of aggression” (p. 649). While I was completing my case study research, work by Slattery, George and Kern (2019) was published that spoke to the inconsistencies in the bullying definitions among students and how this made it difficult to determine the true extent of the social problem. In the same regard, a new study by Hellstrom, Persson and Hagquist (2015) found that adolescents consider the victim’s experience of hurt and harm as a criterion for defining bullying and not necessarily the intent of the individual who is bullying.

In my research, as the differences within the participant definitions of bullying began to emerge, the associated problems with respect to interpreting everyday school events became evident. Imagine a conflict occurring at a school such as someone refusing to allow a student to
play tag with them at recess. According to Matt (PHS, student), bullying meant “being mean to other people and making fun of other people,” while Sylvia (PHS, teacher) understood the term as a repeated act of aggression in which “there is a displacement of power with one person having more power than the other.” Viewing a conflict through these two understandings, which reflects just one example of the myriad of extensive differences, becomes arduous and makes any discussion held on the situation inherently discrepant and difficult.

This observation is reflected in the literature, as different researchers have found that there is a clear lack of consensus on how to define bullying and that problems ensue when researchers attempt to settle on a definition or metric for assessing bullying (Swearer et al., 2010). For most studies of bullying, self-reporting is the most common measurement approach, which is limited in reliability because the questions themselves do not always align with the definition of bullying (Cook et al., 2010). My case study research, which I completed under the awareness of the definition issue, not only further suggests the existence of such a problem, but also took the next step in attempting to explore the differences, find commonalities and recognize individual understandings.

The main significance of this suggested finding emerges when conceptualization is brought back to the field of policy studies, specifically the policy analysis work of Stone (2002). If you recall, Stone wrote that policy is limited in that problem definitions are never simply a matter of definition goals and measuring distance from them, rather they are “the strategic representation of situations” (Stone, 2002, p. 137). With that in mind, problem definitions are “a matter of representation because every description of a situation is a portrayal from only one point of view” (p. 137). In the literature review, I proposed that the bullying term phenomenon, thus, had the potential to become a problem definition because of the innate differences in interpretation across
time, space, actors, government officials and ideas. As found in this case study research, there is clearly a multitude of different and diverging understandings of bullying.

**Verbal aggression and “meanness” (students).** Aggression was included in every definition given by students at PHS and HFS, but there was a tendency for that act to be more verbal compared to physical, social, or emotional. This finding, of the importance of verbal aggression for most participants, coincides with arguments of Rigby (1997) who provided a questionnaire to 625 middle school students and found that 57% included verbal bullying and 33% included physical bullying. With that said, my findings add new insight about the relevance of verbal aggression to the discussion around Boulton et al. (2002) work on bullying understandings, which found that students (aged 11–12 and 14–15) had a high agreement of 80% for items such as “hitting and pushing” and “threatening people” and a low agreement of 20.6% for “leaving people out.”

My study’s findings also point to the observation made previously in other pieces of literature that as students get older their understanding of bullying becomes more selective and defined rather than broad and far-reaching (Hymel et al., 2015; Frisén et al., 2008; Monks et al., 2006; Naylor et al., 2006; Rigby, 1997). This point is based on the interview data from different teachers and administrators, who shared, on multiple occasions, that they found younger, primary students to be more liberal with the word “bullying,” especially when it comes to physical altercations. At the junior grade level this problem is not as evident, which is supported both by school staff statements as well as the observations that students in my case study were more likely to associate bullying with verbal rather than physical aggression. This suggests that an understanding of bullying is age-related and developmental, and as students progress through school, their definition becomes more refined and discriminatory.
Lastly, students at both sites used the word “mean” to explain, justify, and differentiate bullying, yet there was no other disenable pattern as to when the word was used. At HFS, there was a correlation between “mean,” “bullying” and verbal aggression, but this same observation was not as clear at the other site. The literature related to this theme is scarce, although one study, which examined 4,358 adolescents aged 12–19 years, found that adolescents’ definitions most frequently referred to the mean nature of bullying (Hymel et al., 2015). Recognizing this association among students between “bullying” and “mean” is auspicious for present and future discourse because it alerts educational staff, policymakers and the general public of the connection. This connection also further supports the previously introduced theme that an individual’s understanding of the “bullying” word is progressive and reflects different stages of development a junior student is using the word “mean” as a developmental substitute for the word “aggression.” Although there is a strong likelihood of these two words being linked, it cannot be assumed that “meanness” also reflects the other criteria of bullying. Awareness of a developmental connection is helpful, but when that recognition points to the same shared misunderstandings, then the current dialectical trajectory is precarious and problematic.

**Mapping out uncharted adult definitions.** The literature on how students and teachers understand bullying is limited yet present, but when looking through a parent or administrator viewpoint the relevant studies become scarce and nearly non-existent. Although there are a growing number of studies that explore teachers’ bullying definition, the literature on parental and administrational understanding is difficult to find; a gap that becomes all the more significant when reference is given to the idea that effective bullying prevention programs are long-term and employ a schoolwide approach that includes all members of the educational community (Rawana et al., 2011; Rigby et al., 2004). My work took the next step by expanding the discussion to include
bullying understandings from parents, teachers and administrators, and in doing so I was able to make certain observations.

The teachers at Payton Hill School both focused on aggression, repetition, and power imbalance in their bullying definitions, while the teachers at Halas Field School shared that bullying exists as a state of feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable as a result of repeated perceived or actuated aggression. This finding suggests that there is a general sense of bullying amongst teachers, but that this understanding is broad and includes a wide range of applicable criteria and scenarios. This strongly aligns with the work done by Lee (2006), which found that teachers had a strong personal understanding about what was meant by “bullying,” but there was a limited consensus in terms of actual phrasing and terminology.

When attention is given to parents, a group that has yet to be extensively studied in the literature, a similar theme that was found amongst some of the teachers emerges: a shared, but broad, understanding. Rather than providing consistent specific criteria, each parent offered definitions that were, for the most part, open to individual interpretation and application. This finding reflects the Ontario policy’s definition, which is also applicable to almost any form of negative peer interaction or relationship (Winton & Tuters, 2015). These broad definitions reflect a prodigious and all-encompassing understanding of bullying, which is counterintuitive to concise bullying prevention as well as targeted intervention (Cascardi et al., 2014; Loutzenheiser, 2009; Winton & Tuters, 2015). With all of that said, there were some commonalities found in the interviews: students and parents both focused on verbal aggression; and parents, unlike students, often linked social exclusion to bullying.

Power imbalance important for administrators. Administrators, on the other hand, made their definition of bullying more specific, as each individual emphasised repeatedly the
importance of power imbalance. Through our discussions, power imbalance emerged as a
definitive measure to confirm or deny bullying; a finding which goes against earlier work that
found power imbalance was not often present in a teachers’ understanding (Hamburger et al.,
2011). Although administrators have a different role than a teacher, it stands to reason that my
study suggests an alternative observation in that two of the four teachers interviewed, as well as
both administrators, saw power imbalance as being an important criterion of bullying. Yet, this
message does not spread out among the larger educational community, as only one parent and one
student mentioned this particular criterion in their understanding.

**Various understandings of “repetition”**. Prior to my research, repetition stood as a
criterion of bullying that was not often mentioned by students and teachers. Land (2002) surveyed
147 high school students in the United States and found that “repetition” was mentioned in less
than half of the bullying examples provided and that, when reporting bullying, “many students
recognized one-time incidents that many researchers would not qualify as bullying” (Land, 2002,
p. 168). Similarly, a study done in Ontario found that only 6% had included ideas related to
“repetition” in their definition of bullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). My research suggests that
more people are aware of repetition; however, with that said, another problem is beginning to
emerge – understandings of repetition are not always consistent.

Repetition was mentioned by a majority—66% at PHS and all at HFS— of the participants,
but at both sites the word was often used synonymously with terms such as “again and again” and
“a lot,” and it was rarely expanded upon to include any quantifiable measurements. On the rare
occasions in which the word was given with greater detail, there emerged an overall picture of a
term with no communal understanding: “I’m not really sure” (Bree, student HFS), “like five”
(Jacob, student PHS), “more than three times” (Tammy, student HFS), “a period of weeks and
months” (Lucy, parent HFS) and “over a few weeks to more time than that” (Kim, teacher HFS), The earlier conclusion that Land (2002) hints at, that repetition has no quantifiable understanding, is clearly evident in the vast array of statements given by interview participants. Thus, although the word repetition may appear in definitions, there is clearly a lack of consensus, which has the potential to become problematic when policymakers, researchers, school staff, parents and students look to discuss bullying.

**False sense of shared understanding (parents).** As previously mentioned, there are some common trends among adults: bullying being seen as a sense of continual anxiety and worry for the victims; repetition being present, but not often clarified; and power imbalance being a clear focus for administrators. However, for every similarity there were an exponential number of differences: some definitions were very general and could conceivably cover an array of actions; and some definitions referenced distinctive ideas and vocabulary. Parents have a variety of definitions, but despite this finding all of those interviewed were confident that their use of the word bullying was shared among fellow parents. This false sense of a shared understanding is potentially problematic, as it makes communal discourse precarious and it restricts the process of arriving at a shared solution.

The research on this particular phenomenon is limited because, as mentioned in previous sections, literature on understanding bullying is primarily focused on students. In one particular meta-analysis on the methodological challenges of how bullying is defined and assessed, researchers found that there was a clear lack of consensus on how to define bullying and that problems ensue when researchers attempt to settle on a definition or metric for assessing bullying (Swearer et al., 2010). Although that literature review speaks to the research community and not parental forums, the point is evident that discussions on difficulties associated with understanding
bullying among adults has already started and that further research is required to explore this suggested theme of their being a false sense of a shared understanding.

**Shared understanding among school staff (site specific).** It should be noted that the same theme of a false sense of a shared understanding was not evident among teachers or administrators; their belief in a shared definition was valid so far as it concerned the fellow educational staff at their school. Teachers and the administrator at Payton Hill School relied on the three criteria of bullying when discussing their understanding, while the staff at Halas Field School, although they did mention some of the criteria, were more likely to talk about the overall emotional state of the victim. This observation—of their being a shared understanding at each school among teachers and administrators—is positive because previous studies have shown that there is a range of benefits when an understanding of bullying is shared within school staff such as less anxiety among students (Elinoff et al., 2004), as well as decreased rates of bullying (Bazelon, 2013). With that said, these understandings of bullying were site specific, suggesting that the definition of “bullying” is more fluid and is subject to individual school interpretation. Also, this shared understanding starts among teachers and administrators, but stops when consideration is given to interviews done with students and parents at the select sites. In fact, this latter observation was recognized by the school staff as a potentially problematic situation.

**“Bullying” word is overused and problematic.** Despite there being a shared understanding of bullying among teachers and administrators at each site, a common theme emerged in all interviews with educational staff members: the bullying word is overused and problematic when trying to solve negative social interactions (e.g., a student or family claiming that bullying is occurring, despite other students and educational staff members having a different opinion). This statement carries significant implications when consideration is given to previously
published literature, and I want to deconstruct the statement so as to accurately reflect the importance of this idea on school inclusion as well as student safety and education.

First, as all of the teachers and administrators stated, the bullying word is overused at their schools. This is not a surprising finding, as this particular theme has also been observed in the work of Bickmore (2011), Flemington (2002), and Land (2002). As to the reasoning behind this theme, the staff interviewed in my case study often shared that the word “bullying” was commonly used because it was a powerful word that drew attention to a negative social interaction and/or there was a lack of other words to describe negative peer relationships. Bazelon (2013) saw the latter reason often in her work with different educational staff members and argued, on multiple occasions, for an expanded student-friendly lexicon that included words such as “conflict” or “drama.” With respect to the power of the bullying word, Bickmore (2011) examination of students and teachers in urban schools identified that the recent attention to bullying had seemed to conceal other student conflict concerns, while at the same time students were being taught to report to authorities every time there was even minor aggression or dispute. My findings give the work of Bazelon (2013) and Bickmore (2011) an apt verisimilitude, and in doing so demonstrate that educational staff members do believe that the bullying word is being overused and that this theme is impeding the development of overall school inclusion.

Second, as every teacher and administrator interviewed detailed, there have been moments in which misunderstandings over the bullying word have led to problems between students, families, and educational staff members. Problems such as contested labelling and accusations, complaints over not receiving adequate intervention for perceived acts of bullying, as well as long-term negative conceptualizations of a particular relationship or student (e.g., parents not wanting their child to be in a certain class with a particular student because of an alleged bullying incident
that occurred years in the past). With that said, all of the teachers and administrators expressed a vested interest in solving such problems and felt comfortable, confident, and mutually supported during the resolution process. The solution to these situations often included talking with the particular individuals, asking questions, gathering information, maintaining a positive rapport and observing their social relationships, which taken together require time, ongoing communication and patience. As great as it is to arrive at a solution, it stands to reason that there is a better overall answer when approaching this issue: eliminating the problem all together by establishing a more collective understanding of bullying and in doing so make conversations more effective, constructive, prudent and time-saving.

This finding, of the bullying word creating contested dialogue within a particular situation, is not new, but it does add first-hand testimonials to a theme that is still in the early stages of public and research recognition. Previously, Bickmore (2011), in her work on peacekeeping at school, found that the bullying word is often used “as a blunt instrument referring to any kind of aggression,” while other work (Vaillancourt et al, 2008) suggested that when a clear definition of bullying exists among a school community, the reports of bullying decrease. According to studies done in Ontario schools, effective bullying prevention programs are those that are designed for long-term implementation, use positive reinforcement and character development, and employ a schoolwide approach that includes all members of the community such as students, teachers, parents and administration (Rawana et al, 2011; Rigby et al., 2004). As findings of my study suggest, there are discourse problems that occur between educational staff members and the larger community that they serve, and as a result time, patience and consideration is spent on a reoccurring issue that ought to be addressed.
Wanting to address potential bullying situations with a degree of constructive and shared dialogue becomes all the more apparent when consideration is given to the fact that it has been found that, when students identify different school problems as solely being acts of “bullying,” they are more likely to feel anxious and fearful (Elinoff et al., 2004). Lastly, we must consider the research that shows that both bullies and victims are at a risk for a host of short- and long-term difficulties: academic problems (Fonagy et al., 2005), psychological difficulties (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000), and social-relationship problems (Goldbaum et al., 2003). The overall sense of school inclusion, the mislabelling of students and the need to understand when actual bullying is occurring for the sake of all involved, are all clear and apparent reasons for recognizing that the bullying word is overused and problematic.

**Discussion on How “Bullying” is Learned**

Throughout the last thirty years, the notion of bullying, as previously mentioned, has received increased public attention, involvement, and conjecture. Policies have been written, ideas researched and published, programming developed and implemented, media reports released, and conversations on the topic have been held. However, as the literature review demonstrated, little has been done to critically examine and discuss how the bullying word is learned by students, parents, teachers, and administrators. This does not mean that it is not taught, as bullying appears in the Ontario Health curriculum and there are a variety of other policy documents, magazines, workshops and professional development opportunities that examine the issues and the related strategies.

If consideration is given to the conclusions made in the previous discussion section, as well as the overall vast array of bullying definitions found in this study and the current research literature, then knowing how such understandings were acquired becomes all the more necessary.
and imperative. The relationship between bullying, policy and education is central to a holistic understanding of the bullying word, and as Winton and Tuters (2015) wrote “critical democracy demands that bullying policies be subject to on-going re-examination, dialogue, and critique by affected and interested citizens” (p. 123). Thus, as a result of the apparent void in the literature, I will use previously introduced and relevant policy concepts to help frame and contextualize the findings on how bullying is learned.

**Students learned through Health class.** The majority of participants interviewed at both locations learned about bullying through direct instruction (i.e., being taught in health class for students, workshops for adults) or reading different information pieces. Health class was mentioned by a majority of students; however, they were often unable to expand upon what they had exactly learned. Students that did provide additional detail mentioned watching videos in class, doing different projects on bullying and talking about the different forms of aggression.

To reference the work of Stone (2002) and the idea that problem definitions occur in the collective space of different understandings, health class represents a time and place in which the students at both case study schools convene and develop their understanding of bullying. This finding led me to examine the most recent Ontario Ministry of Education’s (OME) *Health and Physical Education (2019)* curriculum document, so as to gain a better depiction of the expectations set by the provincial government. If students developed their understanding of bullying in health class, then there is a need to examine the overall implementation plan. The curriculum document reveals two key ideas that lead to a better understanding of a health class.

First, throughout the document the bullying word is used, but never defined. If a teacher or member of the larger educational community is looking for an OME definition of bullying, then their only solution is the long, complex and previously introduced definition provided in “Bullying
Prevention and Intervention: Policy Program” (2012). Second, throughout the primary and junior (grade 1-6) healthy living units, there is no explicit instruction for the definition of bullying to be taught, examined, explored or discussed. Bullying is mentioned in some grades through a variety of contexts and entry points, but the whole definition is never taught. For example, the following curriculum expectation, which is found in the “Personal Safety and Injury Prevention” unit, is the only time that word bullying is used in grade 2:

> demonstrate the ability to recognize caring behaviours (e.g., listening with respect, being helpful, respecting boundaries) and behaviours that can be harmful to physical and mental health (e.g., ignoring or excluding others; bullying; manipulative behaviours; sexually exploitative or abusive behaviours, including inappropriate touching; verbal, emotional, or physical abuse), and describe the feelings associated with each, as well as appropriate ways of responding, demonstrating an understanding of the importance of consent (p. 107)

This specific expectation should be regarded positively as it does provide a range of negative behaviours rather than just stating “bullying.” As mentioned in my literature review, one of the growing requests by researchers is to introduce new language to help students discuss different behaviour and social situations. However, the curriculum document does not help teachers define the differences, nor does it provide a link to an external result. These missing pieces of information expose the negative behaviour words to subjective interpretation.

**Students seek answers online.** When asked how they would find out about additional bullying information, the majority of the students said that they would use online tools such as Google, Wikipedia and YouTube videos. Some students also said talking to a teacher and two
students mentioned their parents as a resource. In Ontario, similar to other areas around the world, online connectedness and social networking has opened bullying to a new digital platform. Although no two internet searches are ever the same, as a result of cookies, geographical location, individual settings and customized options provided by the platform, I wanted to examine what a student would find if they searched “definition of bullying” on Google.ca. As of the date of the search (June 29, 2019), the website stated that ‘bully’ is to “seek to harm, intimidate, or coerce (someone perceived as vulnerable).” Implied is a sense of power imbalance as well as the idea that there are many ways to harm an individual, but absent is recognition of repetition and the various forms of aggression. The first link after the definition is to the Bully Canada homepage, which is a national organization that explains itself as being “the voice of Canada’s bullied youth, and we will stand by them until bullying ends.”

With students saying they would go online to find answers to their bullying-related questions, it becomes all the more important to recognize the role digital space plays in the ongoing social inclusion conversation. As my case study found, only one student did not discuss cyberbullying in their interview, while only 3 of the 10 adults made mention of the topic during our discussions. This finding extends Mishna et al. (2012) cross-sectional survey designed to examine cyberbullying among students in grade 6, 7, 10 and 11 attending school in a large urban Ontario city, which found that over 50% of the students in this study identified themselves as being involved in cyber bullying, as victims, bullies or both. Learning, networking and socializing are occurring more often within a digital space, and as my case study demonstrated students are actively using and discussing these technology-based options. The problem, thus, becomes whether the information they are getting is reliable, clear, and consistent, and whether adults are accurately recognizing the growing immensity and influence of the digital world. Furthermore, an
area of concern is that while searching for answers about bullying, students may inadvertently be exposing themselves to dangers related to potential cyberbullying.

**Direct instruction for educational staff and experience for parents.** In the same regard as students who learned about bullying through health class, adults commonly said that their understanding was rooted in direct instruction such as workshops and professional reading. Parents were more likely to learn about bullying through informal discussions with peers, media coverage, as well as their own experience, which varies from personal accounts to experiences of their children, or to the stories of family and friends. I will further examine the link between the media and bullying in the next and final section, but for now I want to compare these two sources of learning.

Throughout the interviews, teachers and administrators stated that their understanding of bullying was largely a result of professional development workshops and readings, but, as time has advanced, the topic of bullying has expanded within the realm of school inclusion, which now covers topics such as marginalized demographics, character development and creating a positive space. This development of topics was noticed by educational staff at both case study schools and reflects a logical progression towards current trends and popular cultural discourse. When it came to understanding the bullying word, participants often shared that this was an older topic that received limited attention in the current educational field. This observation should come as no surprise seeing as the research community has only just started to examine and discuss this phenomenon. As more studies, including this one, begin to emerge, the hope is that professional development continues to reflect current trends and the bullying word gains more attention.

On the other hand, parents often expressed that experience—either first-hand, related to their children, or discussions had with peer groups—played the most important role in developing
their understanding of bullying. Experiences are ultimately subjective and create a space in which the bullying word is exposed to different individuals with potential biases; a point that was interestingly enough recognized by a majority of participants who also stated a request for additional information from more reputable sources such as the school environment. As I noted in a previous section, there is a shared understanding of bullying among school staff (site specific), but that this common understanding often does not extend to students and parents. To help with communication parents often shared that they read paper or electronic newsletters; however, most expressed that mailboxes, whether they be actual or digital, are often filled with new information and requests from all avenues of life, so important information must be sent with extra clarity and priority.

**Media impacts bullying understanding.** Bullying is a complex problem that requires accurate facts and a clear understanding, especially if consideration is given to the fact that solving the problem leads to a more inclusive and safer environment as well as higher academic performance. Media exposure, either through fictional television programmes, real-world news coverage or online social platforms, was referenced at both sites as being detrimental to the overall communal understanding of bullying: “I am sure subtle, I have a bias based on what I have seen on television” (Lucy, parent HFS); and “it is ineffective for the topic of bullying to be sensationalized or to be very specific around one situation via media” (Scott, administrator HFS). My literature review reflected similar points: the misleading connection between suicide and bullying (Fisher et al., 2012); the sensationalized reporting of violent incidents leading to a false understanding that bullying is increasing (Bickmore, 2011), as well as the overall association between fear mongering and misunderstandings (Bazelon, 2013). Taken together, my case studies and literature review demonstrate the negative influence the media is having on understanding
bullying; a misunderstanding that becomes all the more meaningful when consideration is given to previously introduced policy concepts.

Earlier in my literature review, I had explained concepts relevant to Stone (2002) and her work on policy creation and narrative stories, specifically I mentioned the idea of the “story of decline” (i.e., a recitation of facts and figures purporting to show that things have gotten worse) and “synecdoche” (i.e., when a part or a particular incident imperfectly, in a policy context, represents the whole). Understanding the bullying word, as demonstrated in my case study and literature review, is a clear and accurate manifestation of a synecdoche, as often times singular instances, which go on to gain national coverage, then define the entire problem and become the cultural response. Whether it was principals I interviewed or the studies I found, people are aware of how the sensationalized reporting associated with bullying creates singular events that impact the whole understanding, and it leads to a story of decline in which the problem comes across as larger and uncontainable. This is not to diminish the significance of any particular bullying moment or event; instead, this serves as a request to exercise due diligence when reporting on or consuming stories about bullying. After all, as Stone (2002) explained, synecdoche has the strong potential to “suspend our critical thinking with its powerful poetry” (p. 145). To recall what Andrew, the administrator of Payton Hill School, said, “I think that a lot of it has to do with the presences of the word in social media…lots of focus on the word bullying without a lot of time spent on what the word is.”

**Implications for Bullying Policy in Ontario**

Delaney (2015) provided an overview of the current literature surrounding educational policy studies. Reviewing the benefits of well-written, well-organized, and continuously updated policy, Delaney stated that “when policies are written, there is rarely any ambiguity with regards
to the school and how the school is being administered” and that “policies ensure to a considerable extent that there will be uniformity and consistency in decisions and in operational procedures” (p. 15). Antithetical to these benefits is my proposed bullying word phenomenon, which unfortunately creates ambiguity within public as well as educational discourse and makes uniformed consistent decisions difficult. Review of the literature reflected an amalgamation of researchers who are starting to discuss with greater urgency a need to address the bullying word phenomenon, while my own multiple case study served to support this research as well as explore definitions, and how they were learned, from different viewpoints. The overall conclusion is clear: current policy does not address the bullying word phenomenon.

As teachers, we often talk about the zone of proximal development, which requires us to assess a student’s current skills, needs, strengths and barriers, and then set a reasonable expectation (e.g. a student who can now write a simple sentence, may have a goal of using a compound word). The same approach, I believe, must be considered when looking at implications for Ontario policymakers: set the goal to low and you risk zero net gains, or set the goal too high and you risk disinterest and unapproachability. With that said, the goals must show a reasonable understanding for the present situation and the future potential.

First, there must be more recognition of the bullying term phenomenon. This implication extends to all facets of public life from potential workshops for administrators to student friendly content on the problem—in the sections to come this idea of awareness will be repeated and expanded upon. It is difficult to think of any problem, either minor or major, that was solved best by consciously ignoring it and any associated responsibilities. For policymakers in Ontario, this means increasing awareness of the phenomenon through public advertisements and including reference to it in the information present in “Bullying Prevention and Intervention: Policy
Program.” Recognition and awareness allow new ideas to spread within the narrative of the policy process, which in turn extends to collective discourse at a variety of different levels.

Second, and this is the loftier of the two implications, is for Ontario policymakers to come together and reflect upon how they use the word “bullying” in the context of safe and inclusive school environments. Revising the definition of bullying, something that seems logical at first thought, is inherently problematic when you consider the themes discussed in my literature review and multiple case study. Words that might be used in a definition, such as repetition, mean, aggression and power imbalance, have been shown to be just as difficult to unilaterally understand as the bullying word itself. Instead, I suggest that revisions to the policy document provide more responsibility to the roles of teachers and administrators and situate them within the context of bullying as integral, understanding, informed and equitable individuals who can be trusted to make sound decisions when dealing with potential situations. There is increased clarity in a policy document that introduces the definition of bullying, mentions the bullying word phenomenon and then situates teachers and administrators as informed individuals who can make trusted decisions. The educational staff members in my multiple case study had experienced situations in which the bullying word was contested, and felt comfortable as well as supported when talking to students and parents. The next step is for Ontario policy to reflect the current narrative and provide educational staff with the documented support of their decision making. Establishing uniformed public awareness of the bullying word phenomenon and situating educational staff as trusted individuals to help with how the school is administered is a starting point that ought to be considered for the sake of improved school inclusion.
**Implications for Researchers Assessing Ontario Bullying**

In the same regard, researchers play an important role in spreading awareness of the bullying word phenomenon. Whether it is discussions at conferences, reading additional work on the theme, or promoting the ideas of others, researchers collectively have the capacity to spread awareness and guide public discourse. As my literature review and multiple case study demonstrated, the bullying word phenomenon is a growing concern for many different individuals and the potential benefits of awareness are extensive and far-reaching: improved problem solving, more meaningful discussions and intervention programmes, as well as overall school inclusion.

For researchers, the bullying word phenomenon carries significant implications for past, present and future studies and publications. First, as a result of the different understandings of bullying, researchers have to exercise due diligence when defining the word in the context of their work. Today, most researchers provide a definition that reflects an emphasis on Dan Olweus (1993) three criteria; however, through the process of writing this paper a new definition is beginning to emerge that still references the three criteria, but also puts greater emphasis on judging bullying based on *impact* rather than *intent* (Canty, Stubbe, Steers & Collings, 2014; Hellstrom et al., 2015; Thomas, Connor, Baguley, & Scott, 2016). There are different variations of bullying and just as it is important to accurately define terminology used, it is just as important to move past the idea that bullying is commonly understood by everyone. Second, researchers that look to assess bullying rates, or any other work that involves engaging the public in a bullying-related survey, must clearly define their criteria of bullying to participants. If a researcher asks members of a school community whether or not they have experienced bullying, the final results have the potential to be very subjective and misleading. With that said, as previewed in my literature review, more and more researchers are beginning to understand the implications of the
bullying word phenomenon, and as a result are conducting studies that either provide a definition of bullying to participants or require them to first define their one understanding.

**Implications for (Social) Media Production and Consumption**

It is difficult to not be aware of the observation that present twenty-first century media coverage is under vast scrutiny from a variety of different organizations, researchers, politicians and the general public. Media plays an important role in reflecting, presenting and projecting a host of different ideas and events, and as technology has progressed to include devices such as smartphones and platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook this information is becoming increasingly present and accessible. Bullying has become a popular media piece within the field of education coverage, but as my literature review and multiple case study demonstrated, there is a shared and growing concern over sensationalized pieces and stories that do not provide an accurate reflection of the event or issue. Administrators and teachers in my qualitative case study expressed this aforementioned point over media coverage, while some parents were even cognizant of how media outlets had shaped their understanding of bullying.

The implications, I believe, are two-fold and reflect the relationship between media producers and consumers. It goes without saying that an ideal implementation approach is for Ontario media producers to exercise improved coverage of “bullying” stories by using accurate and well-defined vocabulary, providing clear details and avoiding sensationalized pieces. With that said, a more achievable goal within the zone of proximal development is increased coverage of the bullying word phenomenon and in doing so inform the public of this important topic. Interestingly enough, the end of that implication marks the beginning of another: the public needs to become more critical consumers. Armed with an awareness of the bullying word phenomenon, Ontarians needs to evaluate, discuss and assess “bullying” related stories: Does the word
“bullying” in this piece reflect the same understanding as my educational community? What words are defined, not defined, or not even used? How does this story impact my understanding of bullying? Those are just some of the many questions that ought to be asked when consuming bullying-related media, because the word phenomenon becomes increasingly complex and damaging when critical awareness is not exercised. Spreading information is key for an informed public and the information that must be shared is the implications of bullying word phenomenon.

Implications for Ontario Educational Communities

My literature review and multiple case qualitative exploratory study highlighted a number of preliminary findings that are valuable to consider from an educational school community perspective; however, keeping in spirit with the zone of proximal development mindset that has guided the other implication sections, I want to conclude by suggesting two next steps that should not come as a surprise based on the previous sections of this thesis: public recognition of the bullying word phenomenon, and spreading awareness about this idea.

Although a number of adults in my interview-based multiple case study spoke about a perceived problem with the bullying word, school communities have yet to share a unilateral consensus on the phenomenon. Realizing that such an issue exists opens the door to social problem solving that is more constructive, dialogue that is more informed, as well as a better overall sense of authentic school inclusion. There are a number of individual deductions that educational school communities can learn from exploring this phenomenon such as how students are more apt to use the word “mean” when describing previewed acts of bullying, that power imbalance is important for administrators and most teachers, or that overall repetition is commonly used rather than commonly understood. Yet, even with all of these themes considered, likely the most important
one to consider is that when bullying is properly understood, discussed and applied by an educational school community, then data becomes more accurate and students feel safer.

In the same regard, awareness of the word phenomenon helps to add relevant information about bullying to the shared discourse of students, teachers, parents and administrators. Awareness is key and valuable, but if left unexplored and unexamined, then overall effectiveness is not fully realized. I wanted my case study to explore the different understandings, as well as how these definitions are learned. This latter point of exploration allows us to begin to look at how to best spread awareness and maximize the potential for communal understanding. In my case study, direct instruction was a key favourite among participants: students mentioned health class, and educational staff stated professional development workshops and readings. At first glance informing parents becomes a bit of a problem because they base their understanding on different kinds of experiences; however, if you look at how parents prefer to be informed via clear newsletters and emails, then spreading awareness becomes easier and more achievable. Spreading awareness takes time, but as research has shown long-term bullying plans are more likely to net positive results than short-term solutions. Only when educational school communities begin to realize and share awareness of the bullying word phenomenon, will collective discussions and problem solving become more accessible.

Implications for Further Research

You might remember the opening story of this thesis. I was recently asked, “your basketball try-out story has become synonymous with your exploratory research. In the story, it seems that the principal, the parent and the student were all able to find some sense of closure, but were you?” My response was that “closure came with finishing this thesis.” As I wrote these last few pages of my thesis, I felt excited to be part of an ongoing conversation on bullying and school inclusion,
but at the same time I also realized that the discourse needs to continue to grow and develop. There are numerous different avenues that the bullying word phenomenon ought to explore moving forward, but throughout the process of writing this thesis there were three ideas that kept reappearing while working on the literature review, data collection and overall analysis. First, previous studies have looked at the definition of bullying from the perspective of students, teachers, administrators and researchers, but I struggled to find any study that, like mine, explored the viewpoints of parents both within and outside of Ontario. The educational community is a consortium of different individuals and for too long the parental avenue has been left unexplored, which is a determent to the overall discourse because parents play a crucial role in their child’s development as well as key features in the daily school culture. Also, during my interviews, when educational staff members were sharing how the bullying word was overused and problematic it was often in the context of previous or ongoing issues with parents. As a teacher, one of my guiding principles is making it to the dinner table conversation. Instead of a student responding with the conventional statement “nothing” when asked how school went, I want my students to share their learning and accomplishments. With that said, we also have to understand that parents bring their own ideas and experiences to the dinner table, and as a result, to explore bullying in an educational community, we also have to seek out the ideas, opinions and experiences of parents.

Second, as I completed my literature review and had different conversations with teachers, educational assistants, and administrators, I often found myself looking for alternatives to the bullying word such as conflict, drama, teasing, left out, fight, ostracized, hostile and anxious. What words are students familiar with? What words are students using at school? Have schools found success by adding new words? Expanding overall vocabulary and educating students and staff on potential alternatives allows people to see negative social interactions through a different lens and
better understand an ongoing problem. I remember teaching a grade 7 class and a student had asked me, “what does drama mean?” As a class we had discussion, read an article online, and then we compared the term with bullying, and we were able to develop our shared language.

Lastly, as I have discussed often, when examining the bullying word phenomenon all voices matter. When interviewing the students I had the opportunity to explore how they understood the word through open questions and how they applied the word through example situations; a distinction that often led to a richer collection of data as well as exploration into other avenues. However, the latter option of how the word was applied was not given to adult participants. As mentioned, the administrators both shared how their understanding of bullying rested mainly on power imbalance, but this brings up other questions that speak to application: How do they perceive power imbalance? Do they focus on the intent, impact or both? The end of one qualitative study inevitably forms the building blocks for the start of further exploration, and I believe that the discussion around understanding and application is another next step to consider when examining the bullying word phenomenon.

Conclusion

I have always liked the message behind the nineteenth century story of Irish farmers looking to start a new growing season. The grass was green, the sky was blue and the small farming village was looking to take advantage of the new spring weather. It was a friendly and welcoming village and once all of the seeds had been planted and machinery fixed, the farmers sent their cattle out to the common land. As the growing season progressed, vegetables began to sprout and the smell of fresh flowers filled the air, but the farming village started to notice something disturbing with their cattle, specifically they were not growing at a sustained rate and the common land was transforming from a green pasture to a brown wasteland. This story originated in an essay written
in 1833 by British economist William Forster Lloyd, and as time developed a concept emerged that would encapsulate a problem in which a shared and unregulated resource is exploited: tragedy of the commons.

Today, the concept is often cited in connection with sustainable development, modern farming techniques and a variety of other situations in which resources are not properly managed. The concept has been applied to other abstract ideas, and I would argue that the current state of the bullying word is a modern tragedy of commons. Ontario policymakers, news reporters, researchers, administrators, parents, teachers and students have all used the word, but because of the vast input and lack of a shared understanding, the green pasture has become overrun and confusing. As I have suggested, based on my findings, the first steps for all of these individuals is to realize that a phenomenon exists and to start spreading awareness. The purpose of my exploratory multiple case study was to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy was communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. In the end, I have read numerous articles, talked with a variety of colleagues, conducted my own case study interviews and attempted to triangulate the data to make reliable observations, and all of this effort and hard work came out of a strong desire to improve school inclusion through building the collective knowledge and discourse. Only when taking a step back from our everyday lived experiences can we begin to see the ongoing bullying word phenomenon and potential for greener pastures.
References


doi:10.1002/pits.20045


Ontario Ministry of Education. (2012). *Bullying prevention and intervention: Policy/program*


York, NY: W.W. Norton.


Appendix A: Recruitment of Administrators

Dear <administrator’s name>

My name is Keith Alcock and I have been a part-time Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University working under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba. I am writing to you today to seek your participation in my ongoing study that explores how different members of the school community (i.e. administrators, students, teachers and parents) understand the word “bullying.” My hope is that this research will contribute to the larger collection of work being done in the field of school inclusion, and in doing so help all educational community members take the next steps in student success and wellbeing.

If you agree to participate, I will hold a 20-30 minute interview with yourself and, on separate occasions, interview two parents, two teachers and three-four students all connected to your junior division. At any time during the interview, participants can withdraw. However, after the interview, participants have until February 1, 2019 to withdraw their data/information. All interviews would be held at your school. I would recruit the aforementioned participants and I would manage scheduling based on the dates/times that worked for your school and. I am flexible with respect to timing, and would enjoy the opportunity to speak to you about this research further.

Sincerely,

Keith Alcock
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
613-876-0783
alcockkeith4@gmail.com
Appendix B: Recruitment of Students

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Keith Alcock and I have been a part-time Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University working under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba. You are receiving this letter because your administrator has approved this study to take place in your school environment, but please note that your administrator does not know who recruitment letters were sent it, nor if the opportunity to participate was accepted or denied. I am writing to you today to seek your child’s participation in my ongoing study that explores how different members of the school community (i.e. administrators, students, teachers and parents) understand the word “bullying.” My hope is that this research will contribute to the larger collection of work being done in the field of school inclusion, and in doing so help all educational community members take the next steps in student success and wellbeing.

The school administrator, <insert name>, has given me permission to send this letter home to parents who have a child in the junior division (grade 4-6), which is the focus age group of my study. If you agree to allow your child to participate, I will hold a 20-30 minute interview with your child at the school at a date/time that meets your convenience. At any time during the interview, participants can withdraw. However, after the interview, participants have until February 1, 2019 to withdraw their data/information. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interview. Participation is voluntary.

If you are interested in having your child participate, please contact me via email (alcockkeith4@gmail.com) or phone (613-876-0783) prior to <date three weeks after>. Upon expressing interest, I will send you the consent form, which you must read, sign and return before your child can be considered part of the participant pool. While I am grateful for anyone who volunteers to participate, on that date I will randomly select three-four students to interview.

Sincerely,

Keith Alcock
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
613-876-0783
alcockkeith4@gmail.com
Appendix C: Recruitment of Parents

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Keith Alcock and I have been a part-time Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University working under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba. You are receiving this letter because your administrator has approved this study to take place in your school environment, but please note that your administrator does not know who recruitment letters were sent it, nor if the opportunity to participate was accepted or denied. I am writing to you today to seek your participation in my ongoing study that explores how different members of the school community (i.e. administrators, students, teachers and parents) understand the word “bullying.” My hope is that this research will contribute to the larger collection of work being done in the field of school inclusion, and in doing so help all educational community members take the next steps in student success and wellbeing.

The school administrator, <insert name>, has given me permission to send this letter home to parents who have a child in the junior division (grade 4-6), which is the focus age group of my study. If you agree to participate, I will hold a 20-30 minute interview with yourself at the school at a date/time that meets your convenience. At any time during the interview, participants can withdraw. However, after the interview, participants have until February 1, 2019 to withdraw their data/information. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interview. Participation is voluntary.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email (alcockkeith4@gmail.com) or phone (613-876-0783) prior to <date three weeks after>. Upon expressing interest, I will send you the consent form, which you must read, sign and return before you can be considered part of the participant pool. While I am grateful for anyone who volunteers to participate, I will randomly select two parents to interview.

Sincerely,

Keith Alcock
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
613-876-0783
alcockkeith4@gmail.com
Appendix D: Recruitment of Teachers

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Keith Alcock and I have been a part-time Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University working under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba. You are receiving this letter because your administrator has approved this study to take place in your school environment, but please note that your administrator does not know who recruitment letters were sent it, nor if the opportunity to participate was accepted or denied. I am writing to you today to seek your participation in my ongoing study that explores how different members of the school community (i.e. administrators, students, teachers and parents) understand the word “bullying.” My hope is that this research will contribute to the larger collection of work being done in the field of school inclusion, and in doing so help all educational community members take the next steps in student success and wellbeing.

If you agree to participate, I will hold a 20-30 minute interview with yourself at the school at a date/time that meets your convenience. At any time during the interview, participants can withdraw. However, after the interview, participants have until February 1, 2019 to withdraw their data/information. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interview. Participation is voluntary.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email (alcockkeith4@gmail.com) or phone (613-876-0783) prior to <date three weeks after>. Upon expressing interest, I will send you the consent form, which you must read, sign and return before you can be considered part of the participant pool. While I am grateful for anyone who volunteers to participate, I will only randomly select two teachers to interview.

Sincerely,

Keith Alcock

Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
613-876-0783
alcockkeith4@gmail.com
Appendix E: Administrator Consent Letter

“The Bullying Word: Exploring how Students, Teachers, Parents and Principals Interpret ‘Bullying’”

<date>

Dear Participant,

My name is Keith Alcock and I have been a part-time Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University working under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba. I am asking you to take part in a research study on the definition of bullying within school communities. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interview. Participation is voluntary.

The purpose of my exploratory research is to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. You will be asked nine questions about how you conceptualize bullying and how the word is used at your school. The interview will take between 20-30 minutes. There is minimal risk involved in participating in this study. The nature of some of the questions around bullying may be sensitive to some people and may produce negative emotions. Although there are no risks to you, there may be minimal risk involved for students as the nature of the questions are around bullying which may be sensitive to some people and may produce negative emotions.

Due to the small sample size and unique nature of the content there is a remote chance that someone familiar with your school could deduce your identity from the final report. I will mitigate this possibility by using a pseudonym in place of your name and I will ensure that any identifying information is removed from my reporting of the research.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study before participating or during the time that you are participating. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. I hope to publish my study and the answers you provide may be quoted. However, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way. Data you provide can be withdrawn up until February 1, 2019 by contacting me directly via email at alcockkeith4@gmail.com. During the data collection process I, along with supervisor Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, will be the only individuals who have access to the data you provide. Audio recordings and transcripts of the interview will be kept on a separate, encrypted, password protected hard drive and all information will be deleted after five years.

There are no known risks associated with this study. The expected benefits with your participation is that you will provide my study with valuable information about bullying, and help to put school communities and the larger research community one step closer to understanding bullying and providing meaningful school inclusion for all individuals.

By signing below, you verify that: you have read the Letter of Consent and all of your questions have been answered. This Letter of Consent will be kept by the researcher and a photocopied version will be given to you at the time of the interview.
Date: _____________________________

Signature of Participant: ____________________________________

Participant consent for audio-recording the interview: ____________________________________

Keith Alcock, Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
613-876-0783 or alcockkeith4@gmail.com

Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca

If at any time you have any ethics concerns please contact General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca
Appendix F: Student Letter of Consent

“The Bullying Word: Exploring how Students, Teachers, Parents and Principals Interpret ‘Bullying’”

<date>

Dear Participant,

My name is Keith Alcock and I have been a part-time Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University working under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba. I am asking your child to take part in a research study on the definition of bullying within school communities. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interview. Participation is voluntary.

The purpose of my exploratory research is to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two rural elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. You will be asked seven questions about how you conceptualize bullying and how the word is used at your school. The interview will take between 20-30 minutes. There is minimal risk involved in participating in this study. The nature of some of the questions around bullying may be sensitive to some people and may produce negative emotions. If your child encounters distress during the interview they are allowed to stop the interview process and the principal will be available to talk to students who find the questioning distressing. If they encounter issues after the interview they can contact KIDs Helpline at 1-800-668-6868. All students will be made aware of these options at the start of the interview as well.

Due to the small sample size and unique nature of the content there is a remote chance that someone familiar with your school could deduce your child’s identity from the final report. I will mitigate this possibility by using a pseudonym in place of your name and I will ensure that any identifying information is removed from my reporting of the research.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study before participating or during the time that you child is participating. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed and you can obtain a summary of the research findings by emailing Keith Alcock. I hope to publish my study and the answers your child provides may be quoted. However, your child’s name and potential identifying factors will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only I will know their identity as a participant. Data your child provides can be withdrawn up until February 1, 2019 by contacting me directly via email at alcockkeith4@gmail.com. During the data collection process I, along with supervisor Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, will be the only individuals who have access to the data you provide. Audio recordings and transcripts of the interview will be kept on a separate, password protected hard drive and all information will be deleted after five years.

The expected benefits with your child’s participation is that they will provide my study with valuable information about bullying, and help to put school communities and the larger research community one step closer to understanding bullying and providing meaningful school inclusion for all individuals.
By signing below, you verify that you have read the Letter of Consent and all of your questions have been answered. This Letter of Consent will be kept by the researcher and a photocopied version will be given to you at the time of the interview.

Date: _____________________________

Signature of Participant’s Parent/Guardian: _______________________________

Participant consent for audio-recording the interview: _______________________

Keith Alcock, Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
613-876-0783 or alcockkeith4@gmail.com

Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca

If at any time you have any ethics concerns please contact General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca
Appendix G: Parent Letter of Consent

“The Bullying Word: Exploring how Students, Teachers, Parents and Principals Interpret ‘Bullying’”

<date>

Dear Participant,

My name is Keith Alcock and I have been a part-time Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University working under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba. I am asking you to take part in a research study on the definition of bullying within school communities. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interview. Participation is voluntary.

The purpose of my exploratory research is to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. You will be asked seven questions about how you conceptualize bullying and how the word is used at your school. The interview will take between 20-30 minutes. There is minimal risk involved in participating in this study. The nature of some of the questions around bullying may be sensitive to some people and may produce negative emotions. Although there are no risks to you, there may be minimal risk involved for students as the nature of the questions are around bullying which may be sensitive to some people and may produce negative emotions.

Due to the small sample size and unique nature of the content there is a remote chance that someone familiar with your school could deduce your identity from the final report. I will mitigate this possibility by using a pseudonym in place of your name and I will ensure that any identifying information is removed from my reporting of the research.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study before participating or during the time that you are participating. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. I hope to publish my study and the answers you provide may be quoted. However, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way. Data you provide can be withdrawn up until February 1, 2019 by contacting me directly via email at alcockkeith4@gmail.com. During the data collection process I, along with supervisor Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, will be the only individuals who have access to the data you provide. Audio recordings and transcripts of the interview will be kept on a separate, encrypted, password protected hard drive and all information will be deleted after five years.

There are no known risks associated with this study. The expected benefits with your participation is that you will provide my study with valuable information about bullying, and help to put school communities and the larger research community one step closer to understanding bullying and providing meaningful school inclusion for all individuals.

By signing below, you verify that: you have read the Letter of Consent and all of your questions have been answered. This Letter of Consent will be kept by the researcher and a photocopied version will be given to you at the time of the interview.

Date: _____________________________
Signature of Participant: _______________________________

Participant consent for audio-recording the interview: _______________________________

Keith Alcock, Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
613-876-0783 or alcockkeith4@gmail.com

Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca

If at any time you have any ethics concerns please contact General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca
Appendix H: Teacher Consent Letter

“The Bullying Word: Exploring how Students, Teachers, Parents and Principals Interpret ‘Bullying’”

<date>

Dear Participant,

My name is Keith Alcock and I have been a part-time Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University working under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba. I am asking you to take part in a research study on the definition of bullying within school communities. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interview. Participation is voluntary.

The purpose of my exploratory research is to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. You will be asked nine questions about how you conceptualize bullying and how the word is used at your school. The interview will take between 20-30 minutes. There is minimal risk involved in participating in this study. The nature of some of the questions around bullying may be sensitive to some people and may produce negative emotions. Although there are no risks to you, there may be minimal risk involved for students as the nature of the questions are around bullying which may be sensitive to some people and may produce negative emotions.

Due to the small sample size and unique nature of the content there is a remote chance that someone familiar with your school could deduce your identity from the final report. I will mitigate this possibility by using a pseudonym in place of your name and I will ensure that any identifying information is removed from my reporting of the research.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study before participating or during the time that you are participating. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. I hope to publish my study and the answers you provide may be quoted. However, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way. Data you provide can be withdrawn up until February 1, 2019 by contacting me directly via email at alcockkeith4@gmail.com. During the data collection process I, along with supervisor Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, will be the only individuals who have access to the data you provide. Audio recordings and transcripts of the interview will be kept on a separate, encrypted, password protected hard drive and all information will be deleted after five years.

There are no known risks associated with this study. The expected benefits with your participation is that you will provide my study with valuable information about bullying, and help to put school communities and the larger research community one step closer to understanding bullying and providing meaningful school inclusion for all individuals.

By signing below, you verify that: you have read the Letter of Consent and all of your questions have been answered. This Letter of Consent will be kept by the researcher and a photocopied version will be given to you at the time of the interview.

Date: _____________________________
Signature of Participant: _______________________________

Participant consent for audio-recording the interview: __________________________________

Keith Alcock, Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
613-876-0783 or alcockkeith4@gmail.com

Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University
ben.kutsyuruba@queensu.ca

If at any time you have any ethics concerns please contact General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or chair.GREB@queensu.ca
Appendix I: Administrator Interview Questions

“The Bullying Word: Exploring the Interpretations and Implementations of Bullying in Schools”

Interviewer: Thanks for agreeing to meet with me, I really appreciate it and I hope that with your help today through this interview we can better understand bullying as school. As the consent form mentioned, the purpose of my exploratory research is to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two rural elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. This is a semi-structured interview, so feel free to make points or ask questions throughout our discussion.

1. How long have you been a part of this school community?
2. How do you define bullying?
   Prompt: How would you define bullying for a new family at this school?
3. How did you come to this definition?
   Prompt: How was it learned?
4. How does the school teach students about bullying?
   Prompt: Describe some of the ways it is communicated,
5. How do you communicate bullying information to students?
6. How do you communicate bullying information to parents?
7. In your experience, what have been some effective and ineffective, if any, ways that bullying information is being communicated?
8. If you wanted to get out a message about bullying, what would be the best way for you to communicate that? Why?

Interviewer: Thanks again for participating in this interview. I am happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. At this time, I will also state that it is important to share all bullying concerns with a trusted adult in the educational community such as a teacher, parent, educational assistant, councillor and administrator. As a reminder, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only I will know your identity as a participant. With that, thanks for your participation. It is much appreciated.
Appendix J: Student Interview Questions

“The Bullying Word: Exploring the Interpretations and Implementations of Bullying in Schools”

Interviewer: Thanks for sitting with me today to do this interview. I am going to ask you a couple of questions that talk about bullying: It should take us about 20 minutes and we will go slow. There is no rush to give an answer. We will just take our time and feel free to ask me any questions.

1. What grade are you in?
2. How long have you been at this school?
3. What does the word “bullying” mean to you?
   Prompt: How would you describe bullying for a new student at this school?
4. I’m going to give you a couple of situations and you tell me if it is an example of bullying. Please make sure to explain “why”
   a) A student is playing a game of soccer at recess and gets hit
   b) A student calls another student “stupid” because the student lost a pencil
   c) Two groups of students refuse to play with each other
   d) A student sends an online message to another student saying, “Your sweater was ugly today.”
4. How did you come to this understanding of bullying?
   Prompt: how was it learned?
5. How does this school communicate information on bullying?
   Prompt: How does this school teach you about bullying?
6. If you wanted to find out information on bullying, what would you do?
   a) Who would you ask and why?
7. If I wanted to get out a message about bullying, what would be the best way for me to communicate that to students? Why?

Interviewer: Thanks again for participating in this interview. I am happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. At this time, I will also state that it is important to share all bullying concerns with a trusted adult in the educational community such as a teacher, parent, educational assistant, councillor and administrator. As a reminder, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only I will know your identity as a participant. With that, thanks for your participation. It is much appreciated.
Appendix K: Parent Interview Questions

“The Bullying Word: Exploring the Interpretations and Implementations of Bullying in Schools”

Interviewer: Thanks for agreeing to meet with me, I really appreciate it and I hope that with your help today through this interview we can better understand bullying as school. As the consent form mentioned, the purpose of my exploratory research is to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two rural elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. This is a semi-structured interview, so feel free to make points or ask questions throughout our discussion.

1. During this school year, what grade/s is your child/children in?
2. How long have you been a part of this school community?
3. How do you define bullying?
   Prompt: How would you define bullying for a new family at this school?
4. How did you come to this definition?
   Prompt: how was it learned?
5. How is bullying information communicated to you from this school?
   Prompt: Describe some of the ways it is communicated to you,
6. In your experience, what have been some effective and ineffective, if any, ways that bullying information is being communicated?
7. If I wanted to get out a message about bullying, what would be the best way for me to communicate that to you? Why?

Interviewer: Thanks again for participating in this interview. I am happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. At this time, I will also state that it is important to share all bullying concerns with a trusted adult in the educational community such as a teacher, parent, educational assistant, councillor and administrator. As a reminder, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only I will know your identity as a participant. With that, thanks for your participation. It is much appreciated.
Appendix L: Teacher Interview Questions

“The Bullying Word: Exploring the Interpretations and Implementations of Bullying in Schools”

Interviewer: Thanks for agreeing to meet with me, I really appreciate it and I hope that with your help today through this interview we can better understand bullying as school. As the consent form mentioned, the purpose of my exploratory research is to examine the perceived definitions and understandings of bullying amongst students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as to describe how bullying policy is communicated to and interpreted by these participants within two rural elementary (K-8) school communities in southeastern Ontario. This is a semi-structured interview, so feel free to make points or ask questions throughout our discussion.

1. During this school year, what grade are you teaching?
2. How long have you been a part of this school community?
3. How do you define bullying?
   Prompt: How would you define bullying for a new family at this school?
4. How did you come to this definition?
   Prompt: How was it learned?
5. How is bullying information communicated to you from this school?
   Prompt: Describe some of the ways it is communicated to you,
6. How do you communicate bullying information to students?
7. How do you communicate bullying information to parents?
8. In your experience, what have been some effective and ineffective, if any, ways that bullying information is being communicated?
9. If I wanted to get out a message about bullying, what would be the best way for me to communicate that to you? Why?

Interviewer: Thanks again for participating in this interview. I am happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. At this time, I will also state that it is important to share all bullying concerns with a trusted adult in the educational community such as a teacher, parent, educational assistant, councillor and administrator. As a reminder, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only I will know your identity as a participant. With that, thanks for your participation. It is much appreciated.
Appendix M: Ethical Clearance Letter

September 10, 2018

Mr. Keith Alcock
Master’s Student
Faculty of Education
Queen's University
Duncan McArthur Hall
511 Union Street West
Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-910-18; TRAQ # 6024403
Title: "GEDUC-910-18 The Bullying Word: Exploring how Students, Teachers, Parents and Principals Interpret 'Bullying'"

Dear Mr. Alcock:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDUC-910-18 The Bullying Word: Exploring how Students, Teachers, Parents and Principals Interpret 'Bullying'" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS 2 (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (405.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/traq indicating that the project is 'completed' so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events;" under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies." Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at University Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or Chair, GREB.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dean Tripp, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

C: Dr. Benjamin Kutsuyuru and Dr. Wendy Craig, Supervisors
Dr. Benjamin Bolden, Chair, Unit REB
Mrs. Erin Rennie, Dept. Admin.

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