INTRODUCTION

Recently educators and researchers have expressed considerable interest in the bullying behaviours experienced by adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) because those with disabilities experience more bullying episodes than those without a disability (Marini, Fairbairn, & Zuber, 2001). This literature review examines the research on the experience of bullying behaviours among adolescents with MID. There are very few studies that examine the issue of bullying strictly among those with an exceptionality. The majority of the studies compare children without an exceptionality to those with an exceptionality (Martlew & Hodson, 1991). These studies usually take place in a regular school and compare the students in regular classes with those in a special education class (Heiman & Margalit, 1998).

Researchers face many methodological issues when trying to examine bullying behaviours among adolescents with a mild intellectual disability. The challenges arise from the understanding of bullying and from the cognitive difficulties these adolescents face. The concept of bullying is often difficult for adolescents to understand and to admit to which makes self-reports a challenge. It is even more difficult for adolescents with MID to understand the concept of bullying because they have lower than normal intelligence.

MID is a learning disorder that is characterized by: (a) an ability to profit educationally within a regular class with the aid of considerable curriculum modification and support service; (b) an inability to profit educationally within a regular class because of slow intellectual development; and c) a potential for academic learning, independent social adjustment, and economic support. (The Government of Ontario, Ministry of Education: Special Education, 2002, Part A3, p. 22)

An online search for further description and characteristics of people with MID led to a webpage from the Lakehead District School Board that states that most students with MID demonstrate a mild to low borderline cognitive impairment which results in below average academic achievement in all
areas and the need for curriculum modifications and/or alternate specialized programming. Usually students are characterized by mild adaptive behaviour deficits, a full scale IQ in the high 50's, 60's or low 70's as measured by an individual intelligence test such as the WISC-III. Achievement in core academics is usually less than half the grade level expectancy based on the students' chronological age, and there is a need for program modifications related to general learning deficits (www.lhbe.edu.on.ca/public/sped/section8.pdf).

Because there are few studies exploring this topic, I begin building my case by synthesising the similarities, as stated in the research, between the characteristics of victims in a bullying scenario (without MID) and children and adolescents with MID. Similarities between the characteristics of bullies and of those with MID, as stated in the research, will also be reported. The studies that have explored bullying with the MID population will then be presented, followed by some literature discussing strategies for coping with bullying. This paper reviews the research on the bullying experiences of students with MID and demonstrates the need for research with this group of students, particularly with adolescents with MID, if we are to enable them to learn successfully in school and to participate fully in society.

TARGETED FOR BULLYING

Victimization can be caused by the victim's behavioural vulnerabilities and by a compromised social position (Crick & Nelson, 2002). Students may find themselves vulnerable and in a compromised social position when they do not have close friends at school. The negative effects of peer victimization, such as low self-esteem, loneliness, and depression are buffered when a friendship is present (Crick & Nelson). However, friendships can have a negative effect when victimized children or adolescents associate with friends who are weak, have internalizing problems, and are also victims. Crick and Nelson argue that these conditions can compromise the security that friendship has the potential to provide. Some examples of the internalizing problems that youth with MID may face include low self-esteem and self-concept as well as depression. Children and adolescents with MID may be more of a target for victimization than those without MID, due to their behavioural vulnerabilities and compromised
social position (Marini, Fairbaim, & Zuber, 2001), and this victimization may be more likely in an inclusive educational setting with students without disabilities, than in a setting where all the students have MID.

Typically, children with disabilities are friends with other children with disabilities (Martlew & Hodson, 1991), which may enhance their classmates' perception of them as targets for victimization. Crick and Nelson (2002) conducted a study with 496 children in Grades 3 to 6, which required them to complete the Friendship Qualities Measure — Self-Report, the Social Anxiety Scale, and the Child Behaviour Checklist. The findings showed a number of gender differences. Girls reported a higher level of friend indirect bullying, whereas boys reported a higher level of friend direct bullying. A number of studies have shown that victimization within friendship dyads was associated with adjustment difficulties such as social difficulties, and internalizing and externalizing problems. Those who are disliked and rejected by their peers are denied access to peer activities and are targeted for more forms of exclusion (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Crick and Nelson's study may explain the cycle of being disliked and rejected that children with MID often fall into; however, it is not clear whether adolescents would report the same experiences as children in Grades 3 to 6.

There are a number of reasons why students with MID may be a target for bullying. Students with MID tend to have a deficiency in social skills and social competence (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997), which shows a congruency between traits of victims and traits of those with MID. The website of the Lakehead Board of Education in Ontario outlined a number of traits that characterize students with MID; including self-devaluation, short attention span, poor memory, delayed language development, low tolerance for frustration, slow acquisition of motor and language skills, often avoided by peers, and often makes dichotomous interpretations (www.lhbe.edu.on.ca/public/sped/section8.pdf). Passive victims have a tendency to not seek help (Pepler & Craig, 2002) and students with MID may have inadequate language and social skills to seek help, which may contribute to them being targeted for bullying. Passive victims have a tendency to cry easily (Pepler & Craig, 2002), which may also be a result of a self-devaluation, often a characteristic of students with MID (www.lhbe.edu.on.ca/public/sped/section8.pdf). Some additional characteristics of passive victims are that they avoid aggression.
and confrontation; they do not elicit help from peers or fight back; they are not assertive; and they are anxious in social situations. There are a number of similarities between the characteristics of victims and the characteristics of students with MID, which increases the probability of victimization among students with MID.

RELATIONAL BULLYING

Crick and Bigbee (1998) view relational aggression as an act that harms others through hurtful manipulation of their peer relationships or friendships. They suggest relational aggressive episodes are more upsetting for girls than they are for boys. Crick and Bigbee conducted a study with 383 and 5th Grade students. Their participants completed both the Self-Report and the Peer Report of the Social Experience Questionnaire, as well as the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory. Results showed (a) victims of relational aggression experienced significant social and psychological problems and (b) victimized children reported high levels of internalizing problems. Displaying emotional difficulties made children more vulnerable to peer victimization because they were viewed as an easy target. Garbarino and deLara (2003) argued that emotional violence creates a dysfunctional social system making it difficult for participants to concentrate on learning. Submissiveness was seen as a hallmark of victimization in children. Given that young people with MID are often submissive (with low self-esteem and low social skills), it is reasonable that they might be vulnerable to a vicious cycle of peer victimization and social problems.

BULLYING AND EXCEPTIONALITIES

Some researchers have conducted studies looking at bullying among the population with exceptionalities. Siperstein and Widaman (1996) carried out a study with 43 children with mild mental retardation from four special education classes in three public elementary schools. Their study assessed the child's behaviour in task orientation and in peer interaction. The task orientation category included on and off task behaviours. The peer interaction category included the number of times that the target child interacted with other children and how many times other children interacted with the target child. The researchers also examined the quality of the interactions, whether the interactions
where of a positive or negative nature. Through a sociometric peer nomination technique, Siperstein and Widaman assessed the children's social acceptance and social rejection, which are both components of relational bullying. The children with mild mental retardation experienced both positive and negative peer interactions. It was observed that different behaviours influenced social acceptance and social rejection. Social acceptance seemed to be influenced by the quantity of interactions, specifically, one's ability to engage in peer interactions. Social rejection seemed to be influenced by the quality of interactions. Peers rejected others who displayed negative behaviours. Children with mild intellectual disabilities have a tendency to display interfering problem behaviours, which is likely to lead to peer rejection. Peers with disabilities may display negative and/or inappropriate behaviours due to their disability and, therefore, be rejected by their peers and be subjected to relational bullying.

Martlew and Hodson (1991) argued that children with exceptionalities misread subtle cues, are slow to respond, and behave in ways that are considered bizarre or unpredictable. Martlew and Hodson conducted a study to examine the issues of social integration, bullying/teasing, and teacher attitudes by comparing children with exceptionalities in a mainstream and in a special school. The subjects in the study were children with special education needs and mild learning difficulties (MLD). The special school had 128 students from 3-16 years old from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Observations were made on 18 MLD children with a mean age of 9.8 years old and 10 mainstream controls. Of this cohort 9 MLD and 8 mainstream children were interviewed. When interviewed, the MLD children defined teasing as verbal aggression, threats, and name-calling, and they defined bullying as physical aggression, hitting, kicking,
and tripping. Children with MLD reported being teased more than mainstreamed children, and they formed fewer friendships with their peers in and out of school. The older children with MLD reported being teased more than their mainstreamed peers, which suggests that it becomes more difficult for MLD children in mainstreamed schools as they get older. This is an important study because it included a wide age range, and it showed how disabled students compare to their mainstreamed peers in the extent of their bullying experiences. What would complement this study is research about the coping skills and strategies of both groups.

Marini, Fairbairn, and Zuber (2001) conducted a study with 17 participants with mild to moderate developmental disabilities, whose ages ranged from 21 to 63 years of age. The participants completed the School Life Questionnaire: A Comprehensive Assessment of the Bullying Experience that addresses the involvement in four types of bullying by three major groups of participants. The three types of roles that Marini et al. (2001) identified are bullies, victims, and bystanders. According to Marini and his colleagues, bullies pick on students who do not have the intellectual, social, and emotional resources required to oppose the bully. Victims are those who experience powerlessness, lack of physical and psychological strength, social isolation, loneliness, insecurity, and low self-esteem. The behaviours of those in the bystander role include following bullies, being disengaged onlookers, and even defending the victims. An assessment of the participants' understanding of bullying was administered that asked the participants to draw a picture of what they thought bullying was. This assessment was followed by participants telling the researcher a story relating to the picture that they had drawn. The last component of the study was four open-ended questions aimed at assessing the participants' understanding of bullying, its causes, and possible intervention strategies.

Results showed that cognitive bullying was the most predominant type of bullying experienced across the three roles. Cognitive bullying is typically considered verbal bullying, which includes teasing, ridiculing, insulting, taunting, or threatening (Marini et al.). Cognitive bullying can also be a menacing glance or hand gesture which acts as a reminder of the threatening presence that the bully has and of the harm that can be inflicted.
Sixty-five percent of the participants viewed bullying as a physical assault, which was observed in the notions of control and power in their drawings and stories. The study showed that adults with mild to moderate disabilities think that people get bullied because they are different and do not fit into the group. Students with disabilities acknowledge their differences, but it is unfortunate that their differences put them at such a social disadvantage.

COPING

The previous research has shown that students experience bullying. Now with this knowledge, the issue arises about how these students can cope with these negative experiences. Olweus (2001) defines coping as the preferred response patterns, whether cognitive, behavioural, or emotional, that are used in dealing with harassment, either as it is occurring or after one has been victimized. Children experiencing interpersonal conflict are reluctant to seek assistance from their teachers because they perceive help-seeking as a way of avoiding rather than resolving conflict (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001). Victimized children report that they do not tell adults of their experiences because they fear that the bully will return (Hanish, 2000; Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001). Some children do not seek help because they believe that help is not available or that it is not adequate for solving their problems (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001). Children with low confidence in their peer relations think that approaching a teacher for help will amplify their vulnerability in their classmates' eyes, which decreases their desire to seek help (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001). The previous research has stated that children and adolescents with MID have low confidence; therefore, it is doubtful that they would approach a teacher to cope with a bullying experience.

Crozier and Skliopidou's (2002) study of adults' recollections of name-calling showed that talking to a teacher was the least chosen strategy, and those who did speak to a teacher did not find it helpful. Wilton, Craig, and Pepler (2000) argued that effective coping skills require one to show skills representing important emotion-based developmental tasks. These emotion-based developmental tasks include showing frustration tolerance, engaging others, recognizing danger, coping with fear and anxiety, defending self and property, and acting in a socially
appropriate manner. Emotional regulation skills are the essence of adaptive coping responses (Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000). These researchers suggested that victims lack skills in emotional and regulation display. This could cause a vicious cycle for those who are victimized. They are victimized because they lack skills, and the continual victimization inhibits them from developing those needed skills. It has been shown that students with MID lack the needed skills to appropriately cope with bullying which may increases the likelihood that they will be subjected to a cycle of bullying.

Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) outlined two types of coping strategies: approach and avoidance. Approach strategies are direct attempts to alter stressful situations, such as problem solving and social support seeking (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Avoidance strategies describe ways that individuals manage their cognitive and emotional reactions, such as cognitive distancing, internalization, and externalization. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner conducted a study with 356 fourth grade children to look at their coping strategies. A number of measures were administered to the children during two 40-minute interview sessions. The children completed a revised version of Kochenderfer and Ladd's peer victimization scale, a modified Self-Reporting Coping Scale, a modified version of the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire, as well as sociometric nomination procedures. The teachers also completed the Child Behaviour Profile-Teacher Report Form. Results showed that children's psycho-emotional and social conditions influenced their coping strategy use. Depressed children were more likely to use internalizing strategies when coping with stressful events. Seeking social support was associated with low peer preference for victimized boys, and it reduced victimized girls' risk for social problems. Victorized girls were shielded from social problems because they were more likely to ask for help and advice. Girls who tried to ignore their problems were faced with the consequences of increased loneliness and social problems. It appears that seeking help provides benefits for victimized children; therefore it would be helpful if children were to take advantage of the people in their school and get help with their social problems. Once again, this was a study that was not conducted with students with MID.
A study by Heiman and Margalit (1998) showed that adolescents with mild mental retardation were at higher risk for developing symptoms of depression because of cognitive difficulties in processing social messages, and they had social difficulties and feelings of loneliness. Parents described symptoms of depression in children with mild mental retardation as difficulty making eye contact, very poor language skills, low self-esteem, anxiety and somatic complaints (Heiman & Margalit). According to these researchers, adolescents with mild mental retardation in a special school experience greater feelings of loneliness and a higher level of depression compared to adolescents with mild mental retardation in a regular school and compared to adolescents without mild mental retardation.

Raviv, Sills, Raviv, and Wilanksy (2000) conducted a study looking at the coping strategies, used by adolescents without MID. The participants consisted of 512 Israeli Grade 10 students from three high schools. The instruments that were administered to the participants measured demographic information, their willingness to seek help, their self-image measured by the Self-evaluation Questionnaire, and the variables that validated the Willingness to Seek Help Questionnaire included help-seeking behaviour, self-coping, perceived severity of the problem, and psychological benefit. The results showed that girls were more willing to refer themselves and others for help than the boys were. Male and female adolescents were equally more willing to refer others than themselves for help, and were more likely to refer themselves for severe problems than for minor problems. These results are explained by the threat to self-mechanism because seeking help implies feelings of need, inferiority, and incompetence on the part of the person seeking help. However, one cannot assume the same results would be found in a study of adolescents with MID because adolescents with MID have lower social skills and social competencies. Replicating this study with youth with MID would enable us to learn how adolescents with MID cope with their bullying experiences.

CONCLUSION
Adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities suffer a lot more than simply academically. This population of students is targeted for peer victimization more than their nondisabled peers. Research has shown that adolescents with low selfconcept and
other vulnerabilities are likely to be a target for peer victimization. Children with disabilities form fewer friendships with peers both in and out of school (Marini et al., 2001). There is evidence of difficulty in social processing associated with developmental disability, which affects their social competence leading to increased gullibility and susceptibility to exploitation. Research has reported an over-representation of children with disabilities in the rejected group and an under-representation of children with disabilities in the popular group (Marini et al.). The limited social skills and low self-concept both add to their likelihood of being a target for peer victimization. The fact that they are victimized inhibits them from developing and improving their social skills and developing and maintaining a positive self-concept. These students are stuck in a vicious cycle of poor social skills, negative self-concept, and a target for peer victimization.

Many of the studies examined in this literature review involve children rather than adolescents. It appears that adolescents with MID are under-represented in the literature. Studies of youth without disabilities suggest that those targeted by bullies share many characteristics with students with MID. It is not surprising then that youth with MID are seen as vulnerable and that they lack the social competence required to cope constructively with being victimized. The need for further research on this topic is clear.

References


