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Priorities for School Safety: The Alignment between Federal and State School Safety Legislation and Safety Needs as Perceived by Education Stakeholders in Florida Private Schools for Exceptional Students

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Priorities for School Safety: The Alignment between Federal and State School Safety Legislation and

Safety Needs as Perceived by Education Stakeholders in Florida Private Schools for Exceptional Students

by

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EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERSPECTIVES

This dissertation titled Priorities for School Safety: The Alignment between Federal and State School Safety Legislation and Safety Needs as Perceived by Education Stakeholders in Florida Private Schools for Exceptional Students

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the amazing students of Greenwood School. The driving force behind my desire to become a high school administrator was to help students who were "falling through the cracks" of the education system in Florida—to mentor those who had been misunderstood, mistreated, misguided, and/or neglected by the machinery of modern education and its tendency to stifle the creativity and wonder of individual learning differences. Each one of you at Greenwood generously provides immense personal and professional fulfillment to my life, and I consider myself unfathomably privileged to be involved in your lives. At the same time, I am incredibly humbled by your passion, perseverance, and willingness to be vulnerable by partnering with me and with your teaching faculty to discover the wealth of opportunities awaiting you—and I am encouraged by your dedication to not only take advantage of those opportunities, but to use them to make your communities and the world around you a better, more understanding place.

I speak to you often about the concepts of truth, identity, and responsibility. Truth—not a simple collection of facts, historical events and dates, or scientific principles, but a critical understanding of why the world matters to you and how the world depends upon your influence. Identity—that you are not reducible to a number, a test score, a gender, a race, religion, or creed, but rather that you are a wonderfully complex and balanced recipe of all those ingredients, held together by those truths and values meaningful to your lives. Responsibility— not a simple habit of compliance to a set of rules, traditions, or customs, but a compelling need to use your understanding of truth and the power of your identity to positively impact the world around you. You are, and will increasingly become, the undeniable evidence that although the

cliché claims that one person cannot change the world, teams of individuals who have been empowered to express their true selves together can radically create a society that deserves respect because it practices respect for all.

Thank you for inspiring me, and so many others. Thank you for challenging me to become better. Most of you will likely never read this, but know that your daily examples are the foundation for my work.

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Abstract

This study investigates the apparent threat assessment priorities of potential risks to safety in the school environment in the United States and whether stakeholders in Florida private schools that serve exceptional students agree with the priority given to specific identified potential threats. Faculty and staff, high school students, and the students' parents and guardians at four Florida private schools for exceptional students rated their perceptions of the severity and likelihood of occurrence of nine potential threats identified in a review of federal and Florida state school safety laws and national and state government surveys of incident occurrences. Results showed that although violent potential threats such as an armed intruder, students bringing weapons to school, and physical assaults received priority attention in federal and state school safety laws, stakeholders in Florida private schools for exceptional students indicated that threats of a more personal nature—such as bullying, sexual harassment, and cyberbullying—were the most significant risks to the safety of their school environment. All three respondent subgroups, however, reported high ratings of their overall feelings of safety at their schools.

Keywords: school safety, exceptional students, risk assessment, school discipline

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Context

Bill Bond, former principal of Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky, described his firsthand experience as an administrator facing a nightmare scenario—an "active shooter" stalking the school campus. "I confronted the shooter. I'd already had three kids die right in front of me. I had to try something. I just walked straight toward him" (Benson, 2012, p.1).

Violence in school settings is not a recent phenomenon--incidents of multiple homicide perpetrated on school grounds occurred as early as the 1760s during the Pontiac Rebellion--but most violent deaths in schools prior to the early 1990s either were perpetrated by adults against specifically targeted individual victims or were suicides (Best, 2002; Ferguson, Coulson, & Barnett, 2011). Since the 1990s, however, school shooting tragedies appear to have evolved such that a mass shooting with seemingly randomly targeted multiple casualties has become the more common scenario (Lee, 2013). Historically, the lasting impact of school shooting incidents goes beyond the physical loss of young lives. School administrators, parents and families, and other students navigate an emotional and philosophically challenging process of determining whether or not the community can be confident in the safety of their school environments. As Frank Crawford, former teacher at Lindhurst High School in Olivehurst, California, stated after the 1992 shooting that left four dead and 11 others wounded, "this is a wound that is so deep, you can't measure it in terms of weeks, months, or even years to heal. It is something that I will never be over, and I don't think many who were there will" (Fast, 2008, p.5). Loss of life in the student body and/or faculty; weeks of pervasive media attention, glaring headlines, second-guessing and

theorizing about the school's level of preparation, efficiency of response, and elements of the school climate that may be pinpointed as causal factors, are all part of an administrator's experience in the aftermath of such a school tragedy. Three of Bond's students died that 1997 day in Kentucky and five others were wounded as their classmate fired upon a group of students who were participating in a prayer circle in the school lobby before classes began for the day. Now a School Safety Specialist for the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), Bond has struggled ever since to determine what could have made his school safer. In a 2012 interview on National Public Radio (NPR), Bond commented on preventative security measures at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 students and six faculty members were killed by an intruder two days earlier: "All of our security is based on we can deter a person because our force is greater than force and we will ultimately imprison you or we will kill you. But that's not a deterrent to people, the in-school shootings. So, your normal deterrents, what people think is normal deterrents, have no effect on this" (Martin & McDonnell, 2012). The haunting symbolism of such events has had broad and deep effects on both the communities directly affected and upon the national discourse on a variety of issues (Fast, 2008; Warnick, Johnson, & Rocha, 2010), but the prevailing question—asked of parents in a national Gallup poll every August—remains: are schools in the United States safe places? (McCarthy, 2015).

Review of public opinion trends over the past few decades suggests a widespread belief that student behavior has changed, become more violent, and that an entire generation of children is irrational, remorseless, dangerous, and must be controlled (Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998; Muschert, 2007a; Stein, 2000; Williams, 2005). In contrast, several educational theorists argue

that student behavior has not dramatically transformed, but rather that impersonal generalized distrust and severity have become norms in adult responses to student behavior (Browne-Dianis, 2011; Giroux, 2003b). Giroux's views align with Dewey's explanation that children learn their moral values by observing adult responses to their actions (1938/2007); through this lens, student discipline policies that give the impression that every student is a potential criminal are problematic, in that they are based upon legislative reactions to the behavior of a small percentage of individuals. Therefore, Dewey (cf. 1938/2007) might express concern that students subjected to such policies are learning an inaccurate and insufficient definition and moral priority of safety. The lesson seems to be that in the name of creating a "safe school" environment, the above assumptions concerning student behavior may have caused public policies to victimize the very individuals the laws intended to protect (Nance, 2013)..Former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Tom Ridge commented on the "blanket" security approach with regards to aviation safety procedures during his testimony before a Congressional panel in 2011: "Right now, everyone who checks in is treated as a potential terrorist" (Pawlowski, 2011, para. 9). It seems that some students in the United States feel the same way about the security measures in their schools; as one Brooklyn, New York high school student explained, "They treat us like criminals. It makes me hate school. When you cage up students like that it doesn't make us safe, it makes things worse" (Khan, 2012, para. 7).

Some public debates in the United States concerning educative and administrative policy within schools have continued for decades. Legislatively mandated racial desegregation of schools (Hancock, 2016), administratively sanctioned religious expression at school events (Holscher, 2016), and the grade-level appropriateness and extent of sex education programs

(Huber & Firmin, 2014), are just a few examples of controversial education topics that have yet to achieve public consensus in the United States. One of the most controversial debates over the past 20 years, however, is how to balance the demand to ensure the physical safety of our schools against violent threats and yet maintain respect for the constitutional rights of students. Specifically, legislators and educators have been struggling with the intricacies of the First, Fourth, and Fifth Amendment protections of freedom of speech and expression, freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures, and the right to refuse to offer testimony against oneself (National Archives, n.d.). Parents, educators, communities, politicians, and policymakers in each episode of the school safety argument uphold two overarching principles: 1) schools should be "safe" places for students; and 2) students have a right to feel protected (Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014). As for the nature of threats to safety, the manner in which safety should be provided, and even the very definition of safety, however, there is little agreement found in the public discourse.

One reason for the American public's lack of consensus and their fear of risk may be what Muschert and Peguero (2010) termed the "Columbine Effect," which refers to what many Americans perceive as an over-reaction by policy makers to public concerns over nationally reported incidents of school violence—ostensibly to prevent "another Columbine" from occurring. For example, the state-level legislative response to the December 2012 tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut spawned legislation on school security requirements in 20 states within months of the shooting, and every U.S. state had at least proposed new school safety laws (Armario, 2013). Such a brief timespan between the initial problem and the legislative response suggests a lack of policy learning behavior by legislative

bodies (Oakley, 2009); in other words, legislatures—which are composed of individuals not directly involved in schools on a daily basis—may not have taken enough time to determine potential effectiveness and shortcomings of any new policy approach before enacting the new laws. Instead, the new laws seemed to have imposed broad policies in response to an isolated incident. According to policy diffusion theories espoused by Kingdon and Thurber (1984) and Baumgartner and Jones (1993), rapid legislative responses to crises are often the result of the combination of public outcry and focused media attention upon a specific event. The event is portrayed as a national status quo issue rather than an isolated case or event—much like the school shootings of the late 1990s, culminated by the 1999 Columbine incident (cf., Best, 2002; Herda-Rapp, 2003; Muschert & Peguero, 2010). Given the historical trend of legislative reactions to incidents of school violence and the policy diffusion theories cited above, the "Columbine Effect" postulated by Muschert and Peguero (2010) provided a credible explanation for the fragmented views reflected by policy actions at the district, state, and even federal levels to attempt to standardize and guarantee students' safety (Henry, 2009; Muschert, Henry, Bracy, & Peguero, 2014). Every incident of school-based violence, whether perpetrated by an external threat or by a student, seems to have unleashed the "media marathon of [the] disaster coverage" (Sumiala & Tikka, 2010, p. 18) exemplified by the opening paragraph of this chapter. Reporting of incidents of school violence often ranged from speculation over unconfirmed information and emotional and/or political demands for action to an abundance of details. Seemingly trivial information about the perpetrator(s)' and victims' lives, step-by-step descriptions of the attacks, reactions of everyone in the community willing to be interviewed, and purported warning signs that may have been overlooked that could have prevented the tragedies are common themes

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(Barbieri & Connell, 2015). Moreover, the media spectacle following a school shooting is thrust to the forefront of news consumers' consciousness. The 24-hour cable television news cycle and the instant availability of up-to-the-minute information on internet news sites propel "breaking news" into our immediate daily lives and can often compound ongoing debates about school safety without allowing the public much opportunity to analyze and reflect upon the information reported to them (Coleman, 2004; Muschert & Madfis, 2013). If media attention is indeed a powerful influence upon legislative attempts to maintain the safety of the school environment, then the historical characteristics of media coverage of incidents of school violence are relevant to the description of the current state of school climates in the United States.

The process of mass media framing of an issue to maintain its salience and therefore press an agenda (Downs, 1972, Duwe, 2005) manifests as the media essentially telling American consumers what they should think about the issue at hand. It is at this point that the process of public policy diffusion may often take a potentially dangerous shortcut; if opinions and presumptions are built upon the foundation of electronic media soundbites and attention-grabbing front-page headlines (Duwe, 2000; Surette, 1992; 1999), they can quickly transform into collective public outcry and then generate demands for legislative action to remedy the situation that has been presented as out of control (Entman, 2007).

In recent years, the outcome of the cumulative pressures of the scenario above has been the depiction of school violence as a national epidemic in the United States (Herda-Rapp, 2003; Wondemaghen, 2014). What many in the American public have become conditioned to believe is that a mass or rampage shooting is not merely *possible*, but *probable* in any school in the country at any given moment—a fear reflected in remarks by then-President Barak Obama

during a social media Q&A session in 2014. In response to a college student's question of what could be done about recent shootings, President Obama stated, "we're the only developed country on Earth where this happens. And it happens now once a week" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2014, line 499). The result of the public's fears concerning school violence over the past two decades could be described as a moral panic (Burns & Crawford, 1999) that included an overwhelming demand for a comprehensive and preventative solution; the Columbine Effect had become the controlling thought process of the risk-averse American public consciousness (Muschert & Madfis, 2013). Between 1995 and 2000, public school student discipline policies in all 50 states operationalized a *zero tolerance* philosophy (Brady, 2002a) characterized by an oft-expanding list of behaviors for which students would be suspended or expelled (Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchick, 2010; Pinard, 2003) in an attempt to identify potential threats from within the student body (Forman, 2004; McGee & DeBernardo, 1999). Chapter Two (Review of Literature) of this study details the defining characteristics and effects of *zero tolerance* student discipline.

Context of the Problem

Given the media and legislative focus upon the risk of mass shooting incidents in schools, one might reasonably assume that deaths of students and faculty at the hands of an active shooter are the greatest statistical probability of threats to school safety in the United States. In reality, however, schools are among the least likely places for an individual to become a victim of a multiple homicide in the United States (Nekvasil, Cornell, & Huang, 2015). In fact, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported that of 160 active shooter incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013, only 27 of them occurred in schools (Blair & Schweit, 2014). Likewise,

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the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (2016) School-Associated Violent Deaths (SAVD) data indicated that of all homicides of youth ages 5-18 in the U.S. from 1999-2010, between 1% and 2% occurred on school grounds or enroute to/from school. Students are statistically safest when they are in school, as far as homicides are concerned.

If mass or rampage killings are not the highest-probability threat to the safety of U.S. students—as the studies above have indicated—then this raises questions about whether current legislation addresses the risk of school-based violence proportionally and appropriately with respect to other potential safety risks. The phenomenon of the incident/media coverage/public pressure/legislative action cycle associated with school violence may simply be a product of what Glassner (2010) termed the American "culture of fear," in which the American public tends to be afraid of certain things because they are told that they should be, even when statistics and other evidence indicate that the likelihood of victimization is relatively low. Exaggerated and unsubstantiated fear is the driving factor of a *moral panic* (Altheide, 2002a; 2009b; Altheide & Michalowski, 1999; Ben-Yahuda, 1986)—a particularly strong phenomenon across the news-consuming American public throughout the history of the United States. American citizens have on multiple occasions expressed indignant rage, imagined catastrophic destruction of society, and taken drastic action to combat purported fears. For example, reactions to moral panics have spawned events in American history such as The Salem Witch Trials (Reed, 2015); the "Ruby Payne" drive to increase educational standards in order to save the country from poverty (Pinto & Cresnik, 2014; Ungar, 2008); the 1980s "War on Drugs" (Goode, 1990; Hawdon, 2001), and the 2003 invasion of Iraq to root out "weapons of mass destruction" which were certain to be used to attack American cities (Barkun, 2011; Bonn, 2010). Most recently, moral panics in the

United States have given life to proposals by presidential candidates to curtail or to even halt immigration to the United States to save "American jobs" (Hammond, 2011) and to prevent unspecified acts of terrorism (Altheide, 2006). There have even been statewide legislation and lawsuits filed against the federal government to dictate transgender persons' restroom usage to prevent feared rampant sexual harassment and assault of women and children (Scherer, et al., 2016; Schilt & Westbrook, 2015). Cohen (2002) described *moral panic* as

> a condition, episode, person or group of persons [which] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media. . .; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; [and] ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to. (p. 1).

In each of the above examples, the public reaction was based upon limited information and examples from isolated incidents that represented legitimate fears, but the fear had been exaggerated to the level of hyperbole necessary to obtain an agenda-driven result (cf., Zadjow, 2008).

Within the context of moral panic, victimization risk related to school shootings is especially susceptible to public overestimation (Altheide, 2009a; Barbieri & Connell, 2015; Burns & Crawford, 1999) because the victims of such acts of violence are generally children— and "any challenge to the sacrosanct concept of childhood innocence generally leads to a heightened level of concern in society" (Robinson, 2008, p. 115). Multiple scholars, however, believe that societal concern for the protection of children has been warped by a control-focused agenda to define the nature of the child as one of dormant violence, held in check only by

managing their behaviors, enforcing hegemonic compliance to societal norms, and limiting their

access to deviant influences (Buckingham, 2000; Ferguson, 2008; Kelly, 2000). If prevailing

public opinion of adolescents has become an ephibiphobic tendency to view them as

superpredators (Killingbeck, 2001; Muschert, 2007a; Schissel, 2009), this view may a product of

the aforementioned "Columbine Effect"—a moral panic reaction that has endured for two

decades in the form of *zero tolerance* school discipline policies (Giroux, 2003b; Springhall,

2008).

Much of the scholarly literature concerning children and school safety is focused upon

the societal conceptions and constructions of youth behaviors and risks to youth safety, but

researchers have often overlooked or neglected students' perspectives on their own experiences

and thoughts about school violence. Children's attitudes and beliefs about the society in which

they are expected to develop into productive citizens are greatly shaped by their observations of

adult reactions to social phenomena, as mentioned earlier in this chapter (cf., Dewey, 1938/2007;

Thompson, 2006). The CDC reported in their 2006 study of school-associated violence that

nearly 99% of students in the United States have not experienced an incident of lethal violence in

their schools, and that percentage has varied only slightly in the biennial results through 2016

(CDC, 2016; Christensen, 2014; Cornell, 2009; Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014);

therefore, most students cannot draw upon personal experience of school violence to form their

opinions about it. Popenoe (1998) explained that in the absence of firsthand experience—and

diminishing parental guidance and example, adolescents must learn about school violence from

social media, broadcast news, and print coverage of incidents at other schools. Historically, U.S.

media coverage of school violence has increasingly framed each individual incident as evidence

of a prevalent national social problem (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Herda-Rapp, 2003; Muschert & Carr, 2006). It is therefore not surprising that much of the recent literature regarding students' perceptions of the safety of their own schools reflects the general trends of broadly claimed fears of victimization that the adults had expressed (Barrett, Jennings, & Lynch, 2012) with regard to incidents of mass violence.

The apparent misrepresentation of the prevalence of mass violence in schools has not only contributed to the current state of *zero tolerance* student discipline policies, but also may be masking risks to safety that students are actually confronted by on a daily basis. Other researchers have found that students often named a variety of different issues as their primary safety concerns, rather than the threat of mass violence. Bullying, for example, is a prominent school climate-related issue that students in nearly every school studied in the United States identified as a persistent risk in their school (Ferrans & Selman, 2014). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported in 2015 that nearly one in four students (22%) in the U.S. reported being bullied at school—a result which is reflected consistently in the literature, with only slight differences of opinion based upon the operational definition of "bullying" being used in respective studies (Huang & Cornell, 2015; Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). The stark contrast between the prevalence of bullying victimization and the 1 -2 % of U.S. students who endure firsthand encounters with mass violence at school (CDC, 2006), indicates that bullying prevention would logically receive greater attention in legislative prevention efforts than the prevention of school shootings.

In addition to students' concerns about at-school bullying, however, several other daily stressors were cited as prominent negative contributors to poor school climates. Public

accountability and the accompanying academic pressure to achieve (Conley & Lehman, 2012),

personality conflicts and relationships between students and teachers (Connor, Miles, & Pope,

2014), and sexual harassment (Conroy, 2013; Rahimi & Liston, 2011) are recurring issues that

have been identified by both students and teachers as factors which compose their personal

feelings of safety in the school environment. Although some of the identified issues do not

appear to be directly related to physical safety, all the factors contribute to the overall message

that individuals' definitions of their own safety in the school environment are a combination of

mass social construction and personal experiences. "Safe school" means different things to

different persons, in other words, and therefore standardized federal- and state-level legislative

approaches to ensuring school safety may not necessarily address individual stakeholders' needs.

This study examines one such example of the potential disconnect between school safety

legislation and the safety needs of individuals by examining the individual safety concepts of

specific subgroups of educational stakeholders in the state of Florida; specifically, those in

private schools which serve *exceptional student* populations. The differences in the personal

experiences of the individuals based upon their academic characteristics, categorization, and

physical contexts may vary greatly from the experiences described earlier in this chapter;

however, the safety perceptions of individuals in Florida private schools for exceptional students

have not been previously studied.

Who are "Exceptional" Students?

A rudimentary definition of an *exceptional student* simply recognizes that not all students

learn in the same ways. Some students, by the very nature of their psychological, emotional, and

chemical compositions and diagnoses, require variations and accommodations to traditional

instructional and administrative management practices that are uniform in public schooling in the United States (Baldwin, Baum, Pereles, & Hughes, 2015; Brody & Mills, 1997). These students' differences may be magnified in private schools that serve populations of students with unique learning needs, because of the intersection of school safety laws with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (2010) and more specifically, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). *Exceptional students*, their families, and the faculty, staff, and administration who serve them may have unique perceptions of factors affecting safety in the school setting. Many researchers have investigated stakeholder perceptions of school safety, and many studies have analyzed the overall impact of school safety laws upon both school safety and student achievement; however, no study has compared the perceptions of safety in a special-needs private school to the provisions of school safety laws.

The problem: Although a significant number of studies of stakeholder perspectives of school climate and safety exist, the alignment of apparent school safety policy priorities with the perceptions of subgroups (administrators, faculty/staff, students, families, communities, etc.) has not been thoroughly explored in the literature. Furthermore, the perceptions of exceptional student populations and educational institutions that exclusively serve such students have not been formally examined in relation to existing school safety legislation.

The purpose: The purpose of this study is to investigate the alignment of the provisions in federal and state school safety laws in Florida with the perceived priorities of school safety stakeholders in a private school serving students with learning exceptionalities.

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Key Questions

In order to determine how the safety perceptions of stakeholders in Florida private schools which serve exceptional students compare with the derived priority of school safety risks addressed by existing state and federal school safety legislation, the following research questions apply:

1. What are the most prominently addressed risks—in terms of severity and likelihood of occurrence—to school safety for general population public school students, exceptional students, and private school exceptional students, as indicated by federal and state school safety laws in the state of Florida?

2. What are the perceived priority factors of school safety, according to administrators, faculty, staff, students, and families of Florida private school students with learning exceptionalities?

3. What is the congruence between the risks identified by federal/state school safety laws and the safety concerns of stakeholders in Florida private schools for students with learning exceptionalities?

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Definitions of Terms

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Within the issue and history of school violence in the U.S., three broad concepts form the context of this study; 1) *zero-tolerance* school policies; 2) public *policy diffusion*, and 3) *school climate*. The role of each of these concepts within the theoretical framework of determining the school-level safety perceptions and needs of stakeholders in Florida private schools for exceptional students is specified below.

Zero tolerance refers to the application of formal student discipline policies—mandated by federal and state law—that are characterized by specification of mandatory minimum punishments for a range of offenses. As defined by an American Psychological Association (APA) task force report (2008), *zero tolerance* is a "philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the seriousness of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" (Skiba, et al., 2006). The most significant aspect of *zero tolerance* policies is the emphasis upon the mandatory nature of the prescribed punishments—school administrators are not granted the discretion to consider unique circumstances of an offense, nor the prior record of behavior or general character of a student implicated in the offense(s). In other words, *zero tolerance* policies presumed to combat school violence by suggesting that all students in all situations are the same, and that all discipline situations, if left unchecked, will progressively lead to the worst-case scenario; i.e., violence (Lorenz, 2010; Rice, 2009; Teske, 2011). The "one size fits all" approach of *zero tolerance* discipline corresponded with another moral panic—the academic achievement gap between U.S. students and their peers abroad (Kohn, 2001; Ohanian, 1999; Ravitch, 2010; Snell, 2005). The perceived performance shortfall, argued scholars such as Henry Giroux (2009) and Paul Gorski (2013), brought standardized, overgeneralized curriculum and performance standards to the U.S. and provided another avenue for the view of adolescents as an increasingly deficient and unstructured generation (Klehr, 2009).

Policy diffusion is the collective description of the mechanisms by which governments decide to implement policies employed by other governments. *Diffusion* is directly applicable to this study because it explains how *zero tolerance* became the norm for student discipline policies

in school districts across the United States over the past 20 years. *Diffusion* is the process by which a government at any level decides to implement the same or similar law that a neighboring or regional government has passed, or to implement an expanded or more severe version of a law established at a higher government level (i.e., state laws which add to mandated penalties required by federal policy; district-level laws which further intensify state requirements; individual school policies which are even more strict than the state laws require) (Gray, 1994; Karch, 2006; 2007).

School climate descriptions often include data from studies of stakeholder perceptions of school safety. The National School Climate Center (NSCC) (2016a) determined that "school climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (section 2). More specifically, the most accurate assessments of school climate include factors of stakeholder perceptions of physical and socio-emotional security as subscales of the *security* factor of the school climate (NSCC, 2016b). For purposes of this study, discussions of stakeholder *perception of safety* refer to the security subscale of school climate as defined by NSCC.

In addition to the broader concepts of *zero tolerance*, *diffusion*, and *school climate*, this study focuses upon the perceptions of stakeholders in private schools in Florida that serve students with exceptionalities. A private school is defined by the Florida Statutes (2015) as an organization that provides educational services without being primarily and directly funded by public tax dollars. The distinction between funding sources means that private schools are not specifically required to comply with the entirety of federal and state legal requirements imposed

upon school administration—specifically regarding student safety and discipline policies (United

States Department of Education, 2009). Furthermore, dependent upon the nature of their specific

student populations, private schools may have varying safety priorities to address the individual

concerns relevant to the families and students they serve.

For analysis purposes and for clarity of expression, school discipline policies (internally

focused upon the student body) and school safety policies (externally focused upon the

surrounding communities) are addressed by this study under the single term of "school safety

policies," due to the tendency of the literature, policymakers, and the general public to combine

and often equate the two distinct policy types.

Measures and Variables

The purpose of this study is to investigate the alignment of the provisions in federal and

state school safety laws in Florida with the perceived priorities of all directly involved school

safety stakeholders in a private school serving students with learning exceptionalities. To

quantify the comparison, a prioritized list of school safety risk factors was derived from

applicable existing safety incident statistics, federal and state laws, statutes, and regulations to

compare to the perceptions of school safety risks and factors as identified by stakeholders in

Florida private schools that serve exceptional students.

Operationalization of variables

For question one, risks to school safety for this study are the prioritized list of risks to

school safety, which were derived by examining existing studies of federal and state school

safety legislation. As described in Chapter 2 (Review of the Literature), studies which examined

the specific safety risks addressed by legislative mandate identified a clear list of what

lawmakers perceived to be the greatest severity and likelihood of occurring in any given school. The risk-determining process followed the pattern of Operational Risk Management (ORM), which is a procedure that is routinely employed in a wide variety of occupational fields to determine specific needs to be addressed by policy by combining the potential severity of negative safety incidents with the likelihood of their occurrence to determine the incidents' overall risk (Abkowitz, 2008; Chief of Naval Operations [CNO], 2010; McCormack & Sheen, 2013; McCormack, Sheen, & Umande, 2014). Mitigation factors (i.e., safety laws, in this study), are then recommended to reduce the residual risk of each type of incident. Similarly, the safety risks that the laws have discussed most prominently and for which the harshest punishments are mandated have been extensively featured in the extant literature on school safety; the synthesis of those studies, combined with school safety incident statistics, facilitated the generation of a prioritized list of risks to school safety.

For question two, a survey instrument was used to collect data from administrators, faculty and staff, students, and parents/guardians in Florida private schools that serve exceptional students to rank their perceptions of safety risks. The survey items were based upon the results of the synthesis of risks derived from the literature review of studies of current school safety laws. Respondents were asked to describe the safety risk factors' priorities in their perceptions of what it means to be safe at school. Format and structure of the survey measure are detailed in Chapter 3 (Methodology).

Congruence between the provisions of the federal and Florida state school safety laws and stakeholder perceptions were determined by using factor analysis procedures in SPSS to evaluate the factor loading and magnitude of identified school safety risk factors, in addition to

comparisons of Pearson correlations between respondent perceptions and previously evaluated risk assessments (Lorenzo-Seva & ten Berge, 2006).

Overview of Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study is to investigate the alignment of the provisions in federal and state school safety laws in Florida with the perceived priorities of school safety stakeholders in a private school serving students with learning exceptionalities. Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) is an ideal framework through which to investigate the potential differences in perceptions of the unique population subgroups selected for this study. Bronfenbrenner recognized and emphasized that it is impossible to fully understand the development of an individual by viewing them as a process in isolation (Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Darling, 2007); instead, researchers strive to account for *all* the processes and systems which impact individuals and in which the individuals interact, and the dynamics between different *levels* of systems affect the unique development of individuals.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1994) represented the interactions of individuals' influencing environments as four levels and a time-based dimension. The *microsystem* (immediate environment), *mesosystem* (individual directly operating in multiple simultaneous settings), *exosystem* (individual operating in multiple simultaneous settings, in at least one of which they are not directly involved), *macrosystems* (broad environments encompassing all other levels of the individual's settings), and *chronosystems* (the timing and frequency of interactions between an individual and the various settings). The seemingly infinite possible combinations of influencing factors upon an individual's development that result from interactions between the

levels of processes defined by Bronfenbrenner substantiate his tenet that isolated processes cannot adequately generalize and define the behavioral tendencies, priorities, and choices of any particular group. Events that occur within individuals' systems and alter the interactions between the levels are what Bronfenbrenner called *proximal processes* (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; 1995; 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). In short, Bronfenbrenner's theory depicts the concept of *context* in the opinions and actions of human beings as both dynamic and interdependent upon other processes:

> The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21).

Throughout his career, Bronfenbrenner's work reflected the issue he was studying—human development—in that he adapted and refined his theory over decades of research as the circumstances and characteristics of people changed from generation to generation (Darling, 2007). There are, therefore, three interwoven and overlapping phases to Bronfenbrenner's theoretical model of human development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnick, 2009). The theoretical framework for this study--the *Process-Person-Context-Time* (PPCT) Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983)—is a refinement of Bronfenbrenner's earlier theories and adds emphasis to the *proximal processes* that take place within and between contextual spheres of influence. PPCT further categorized the influencing systems not by the magnitude of spheres of influence, but by

describing the effectiveness (i.e., impact) of buffering proximal processes in terms of the

presence of risk to which the processes are responding (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Tudge, Mokrova,

Hatfield, & Karnick, 2009). PPCT components are discussed in-depth in Chapter Two of this

study, but a brief overview of their direct applications as a framework for this study is provided

below:

- *Process*: community/society opinions are simultaneously voiced through and influenced

  by media coverage of school safety issues; legislative outcomes (e.g., school safety laws

  and academic standards) result from the proximal process of *policy diffusion*;

- *Person*: the "developmentally instigative characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 14)

  of *exceptional students* represent differences between the ways the students experience

  and interact with school safety-related topics, events, and school climate factors, in

  comparison with the interactions of their peers in general education settings;

- *Context*: the contrast between public schools with federal- and state-mandated *zero*

  tolerance school climates that emphasize conformity and control and private schools

  which are granted greater discretion represents additional processes that may generate

  widely differing perceptions of school safety factors (cf., Bronfenbrenner, 1985); and,

- *Time*: the history (i.e., *diffusion*) of policy reactions to school safety issues and the past

  experiences of *exceptional students* in Florida private schools interact as chronological

  processes that may alter perceptions of school safety factors (cf., Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

Significance

Multiple researchers have discussed administrators and students' perceptions of safety

and their safety needs at school; however, no study has addressed the potentially large

differences in those perceptions for private school students—particularly for students with special education needs. This study addresses a gap in the existing literature on school safety and stakeholder safety perceptions by bringing attention to a potentially difficult issue that is largely accounted for by legislative efforts to provide safe school environments for all students. By providing critical data to clarify the understanding of specific safety needs of exceptional students, this study informs the policymaking process and draws further attention to the need to return discretion to school administrators in matters of school safety. Increased awareness in the academic community that inflexible discipline policies detract from the safety factor of school climate—particularly for exceptional students—may contribute to improved professional development practices for administrators and teachers of exceptional students in both inclusive public school settings and exclusive private school student populations.

Finally, the application of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT Bioecological Systems Theory as a framework to study the intersection of—and interactions between—socially constructed concepts of school violence, student disabilities, school choice, and school climate engineering emphasizes that a beneficial focus of future research in pedagogical theory would be to maintain the necessity and justice of treating all students as individuals with unique academic and personal needs, as opposed to the current educational trends of treating students homogenously. To support the pursuit of relationship-focused pedagogical research, this study contributes individual voices from amongst a previously underrepresented population—educators, students, and families of exceptional students—to the body of literature on the perceptions of safety in school environments.

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Limitations of the Study

The use of a time-sensitive survey instrument is a potential limitation of this study. By distributing the survey to potential respondents with a "due-by" date expressed, respondents may feel pressured to respond and therefore not take adequate time to explore and to express their true thoughts and feelings, or many may choose not to respond because they do not believe they can make the time to do so before the due date. A low response rate may present the limitation of a non-response error that is unlikely to be representative of the targeted population (Umbach, 2005). However, because the survey targeted a closed and somewhat homogenous population who were contacted in advance to obtain their consent (informed assent for the students who are still minors), a higher response rate seemed more likely (Fricker & Shonlau, 2002; Coughlan, Cronin, & Ryan, 2009). Additionally, the adult respondents may have been more likely to complete the survey because it indicated that their opinions are sought due to their membership of an exclusive portion of the population (i.e., stakeholders in a specialized private school) (Umbach, 2005).

An additional limitation of conducting survey-based research is that the results are merely a measure of respondents' feelings and attitudes at the distinct moment in time that they complete the survey. The results cannot account for changes that may occur due to other variables (e.g., an incident occurred at a different school recently of which respondents are aware, respondents had a "bad day" the day they were responding to the survey, etc.) (McKenna, Hasson, & Keeney, 2006).

Finally, the Operational Risk Management (ORM) process employed in this study is, by design, a subjective practice; accurate determination of likelihood, severity, and mitigation of

identified risks depends upon the training and practical experience level of the ORM user

(United States Marine Corps Institute, 2002). The principal investigator in this study completed

formal training in the use of the ORM process and was certified as a Safety Officer Afloat

(Naval Education and Training Command, n.d.), in addition to nearly two decades of practical

application of the ORM process as the Operations Department Head in multiple afloat and ashore

commands. The principal researcher's current involvement with the exceptional student

population in Florida and personal experience with the ORM process were important in the

process of making appropriate comparisons of school safety threat assessments in this study.

Delimitations of the Study

A delimitation of this study is the selection of the problem itself. The problem statement

earlier in this chapter noted that although many researchers have reported on stakeholder

perspectives of school climate and/or safety, very few have looked at the alignment between

school safety legislation and the perceptions of the populations those laws directly affect. No

researcher has formally examined the perceptions of exceptional student populations and

educational institutions that exclusively serve such students in relation to existing school safety

legislation.

In addition to the selected research problem, another delimitation of this study is the use

of nonrandom sampling to select the targeted population. A nonrandom sample may not be

representative of the population of interest; however, the nature and purpose of this study

required a purposely-selected sample because it specifically sought the perspectives of educators,

students, and families in Florida private schools that serve exceptional students, as described by

the purpose statement earlier in this chapter. This study does not attempt to suggest that the

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results will be representative of student populations across the United States; however, results may be representative of exceptional student populations in the state of Florida who attend specialized private schools. Therefore, the sample is intended to be "representative in a purposive sense" (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 355).

Organization of the Study

General Overview

This study is organized in five chapters, with this introductory section serving as Chapter One to describe the historical context and to define the problem to be studied, establish the purpose and significance of the study, and to provide an overview of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks in which this research is situated. Chapter Two offers a robust review of extant literature in the areas of mechanisms of policy diffusion, the characteristics and effects of *zero tolerance* school discipline policies, educational options for exceptional students, and the measurement of stakeholder perceptions of school safety.

Chapter Three provides description of the research design, sampling methods, data sources, collection, and coding, as well as reliability and validity evidence for the instrumentation. Additionally, Chapter Three includes the generation of the prioritized list of school safety risks derived from review of studies of federal and state school safety legislation, as well as the resultant survey instrument used to determine stakeholder perceptions of school safety risks in Florida private schools for exceptional students. Finally, Chapter Three previews the data analysis process, to include the intended statistical model(s) and justification for their use, as well as the analysis procedures used. Chapter Four includes the narrative of the data analysis process and reporting of results. Finally, Chapter Five provides a discussion of

interpretation of the data in reference to the research questions stated in Chapter One, presents conclusions and implications for policy, practice, and theory impacts for the field of research, and offers suggestions for future research that may contribute to the robustness of the study or extend the work into other aspects of the topic area.

The theoretical framework is Bronfenbrenner's PPCT Bioecological Systems Theory, which explains that the combined interactions between individuals' societal *processes*, *person*[al] characteristics, environmental *contexts*, and *time* (i.e., timing and frequency of interactions) serve as the comprehensive development of individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and actions (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). In other words, the current state of *zero tolerance* approaches to public education in the United States is unlikely to result in policies that appropriately represent the needs and concerns of all students in all educational settings.

Overview of the Research Process

First, appropriate schools from which to collect data had to be identified and contacted. The schools had to be in Florida, be private schools, and serve students with learning exceptionalities. The principal researcher contacted the administrators of the schools to explain the study and to request permission to administer a survey to them, their faculty and staff, their students, and the parents/guardians of their students at the start of the 2017-2018 school year. The survey did not require personally identifying data other than what category of respondent has completed the survey (administrator, faculty, staff, student, family member).

Data collection was completed in the fall of 2017 via electronically-delivered survey instruments (Qualtrics). Data collection and organization took approximately seven weeks.

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Chapter One Summary

Although school-based violence has been a heavily studied topic over the past 20 years, little consensus has been reached on causes, effects, or appropriate preventative policies and practices. A large number of studies have focused upon measures of perceptions of safety that purport to analyze elements of the school climate that may indicate the degree of likelihood that particular types of schools are at greater risk for incidents of violence and which student behaviors may be indicators that the student(s) are potentially violent. Most researchers agree that attempts to develop a profile of conditions and/or persons may have helped to create the *zero tolerance* disciplinary environments of the majority of public schools in the United States, and that the *zero tolerance* approach has been largely ineffective—and in fact unfair and harmful to many student subgroups—in the prevention of violent incidents.

Absent from the thousands of studies and public discourses mentioned above are the voices of a particular subgroup of the student population in the United States--those of exceptional students. Exceptional students occupy a somewhat vaguely defined position in the literature, the legislation, and the national school system; an opportunity to understand the unique needs, legal status, opportunities, and potential perceptions of the exceptional student population in the state of Florida has been established in this chapter. The subsequent chapter synthesizes the broad range of school safety themes recently addressed by scholars and identifies specific gaps in the literature that may be obscuring the missing pieces of the more complete picture of stakeholder safety perceptions.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which school safety legislative priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of school administrators, faculty and staff, students, and families in private schools for exceptional students. Preliminary review of the literature suggested that school safety legislation in Florida—similar to most other states in the U.S. —focuses heavily upon *zero tolerance* provisions related to weapon possession and other predictors of potentially violent behavior by students. Meanwhile, school administrators' perceptions of safety in their schools are generally most concerned about the likelihood that a mass shooting will occur at their school. Statistical evidence, however, has shown that such an event is certainly high in risk, but low in probability.

One reason for the apparent disconnect between legislative safety provisions and administrator's priorities may be the effects of media coverage of prior incidents of school violence upon both the policy implementation process and the public's perceptions of risk. Media framing of school violence incidents and subsequent political pressure to generate laws at the national and state levels to prevent such incidents may have resulted in laws that do not provide appropriate support to the safety priorities of those education stakeholders who are directly involved in and affected by potential school safety risks. Additionally, significant differences exist regarding both the legal responsibilities and safety needs of private schools in the U.S.; the differences may be more prevalent for stakeholders in specialized private schools for exceptional students due to IDEA requirements and the priorities of exceptional students' perceptions of safety factors. This study investigates the alignment of the provisions in federal and state school safety laws in Florida with the perceived priorities of all directly involved

school safety stakeholders in a private school serving students with learning exceptionalities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The brief overview of PPCT provided in Chapter 1 of this study explained that there are phased, overlapping iterations of Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development. PPCT is a refined model that focuses more keenly upon what Bronfenbrenner called *proximal processes*, i.e., the events which intersect levels of environmental settings to form the connections between influential factors of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; 1995; 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Specifically, a *proximal process* is the means by which an event impacts one's overall development, which may include an individual exerting influence to alter the setting in which they are currently operating:

> A proximal process involves a transfer of energy between the developing human being and the persons, objects, and symbols in the immediate environment. The transfer may be in either direction or both; that is, from the developing person to features of the environment, from features of the environment to the developing person, or in both directions, separately or simultaneously (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 818).

> Risks to safety at school—whether perceived as such by direct victimization in a

student's immediate environment or by prevalence of information about victimization in exterior environments—are *proximal processes* that traverse students' spheres of individual and collective learning. Bronfenbrenner's body of work was extensive and continually built upon, expanded, and refined his original Ecological System Theory of Human Development

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is therefore important to specify that although the bases of

Bronfenbrenner's original theory are described here, this study is framed in terms of the phase of

his later work from the mid-1990s until his death in 2005. During this latter phase of his career,

Bronfenbrenner focused his discussions upon *proximal processes* within and between

individuals' spheres of *process*, *person*, *context*, and *time* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005;

Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Recent research that purported

to be framed by Bronfenbrenner's theoretical model has often been imprecise about which form

of his work governed their inquiry (Bogenschneider, 1997). Analysis of 25 studies conducted

between 2001 and 2008 that claimed Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as their

framework showed that only four of the articles used the matured PPCT form of

Bronfenbrenner's work. Most of the other studies had either vaguely defined which portion of

his theoretical refinement they had selected to undergird their own studies or mixed portions of

the different phases of Bronfenbrenner's theory refinements (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, &

Karnick, 2009). Bronfenbrenner himself urged researchers to distinguish between his earlier

work and his PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). This study provides an overview of

Bronfenbrenner's original theory as detailed in his 1979 work; however, the study design, data

collection instruments, and discussion of results are framed by his second-phase PPCT

Bioecological System Theory as derived from his work from 1994 to 2005 (cf., Bronfenbrenner,

1994; 1995; 2001/2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

The Origin of PPCT

Bronfenbrenner postulated the original iteration of his human development model in his

1979 work and then summarized it in 1994 as he described its evolution into PPCT. The

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Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994) described four levels of human environmental influences that shape our development: in the *microsystem*, the individual is directly shaped by his/her immediate environment; as individuals move between multiple settings, the links and processes connecting those settings (each of which is a *microsystem*) comprise the *mesosystem*. However, people are also affected by environments in which they are not directly present or involved. Bronfenbrenner described the connections between these second-order settings and the individuals' personally involved settings as the *exosystem*. Everyone's *exosystems* are connected as components of *macrosystems*, which are overarching patterns and include all *micro-, meso-,* and *exosystems*. *Macrosystems* interact with one another via *chronosystems*—which are not simply about age-based development, but more specifically, timing and frequency of when and how often all the above system environments interact to shape the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013).

If one were to frame the question of how a modern high school student might view issue of school safety within Bronfenbrenner's original theory, then context would own the lead role as the primary factor in the hypothetical student's development. He/she is influenced by of *microsystems* in which they are directly and immediately involved, such as their parents, their physical characteristics, individual interactions with other family members, etc. Those *microsystems* are all connected as a *mesosystem*, because he/she is directly involved in each setting and sometimes simultaneously present in several of them. However, the student is also affected by the attitudes, opinions, and activities of the local community, geographically-based pride, success of his/her favorite sports teams, etc. —settings in which the student is not necessarily directly involved, but which interact with his/her *mesosystem* to form an *exosystem*.

Also included in the *exosystem* may be out-of-context, socially-constructed beliefs about particular phenomena interpreted by public attention in ways that may or may not reflect the true nature of the original circumstances—e.g., moral panics over school shootings (cf., Blumer, 1973; 1998; Huebner, 2012; Mayer, 2007). *Exosystems* interact together within *macrosystems* in which the student is also influenced by the socioeconomic status of his/her family and the local community, the laws of the state in which the student lives, national patriotism, teachings of his/her preferred religion, trending popular entertainment and fashion amongst his/her peer group in the country, and many other broader structures. Finally, all the influences upon the development of the individual student are impacted by time—but it is not simply the child's age which determines the developmental outcome of the interactions between his/her nested levels of systems. Rather, it is the timing of the child's introduction to each of the respective influences and the frequency with which he/she interacts with those influences that determine the relative impact of each level of interactions—i.e. the individual's *chronosystem* which sequences and regulates their exposure to the various influences in their lives (cf., Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Darling, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner recognized in his 1989, 1994, and 1999 reflections on the use of his theoretical model that his early work may have led researchers to place too great an emphasis upon the *context* factor of systems interactions in human development, at the expense of analysis of the interconnectedness of *process*, *person*, and *time* (Tudge, Gray, & Hogan, 1997)—factors which he concluded are joined by and interact through *proximal processes* (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). It was Bronfenbrenner's critical examination of his own theories and others' application (and misapplication) of his work that led to his more mature

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model—the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Bioecological Systems Theory of Human

Development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Darling, 2007),

which is the theoretical framework for the current study.

PPCT and School Safety

Discussion in this study of school safety issues are framed within PPCT as follows:

- *Process* includes formal public policy/legislation that addresses school safety topics and
  school-level policy and practices regarding facility safety and student discipline;

- *Person* includes the definitions—both specified and implied—of students and
  assumptions of their predicted needs and behaviors, and perceptions of safety as they
  differ between types of students, faculty, and families;

- *Context* includes school climate factors and regional geographic influences; and

- *Time* includes the timing of school safety legislation enactment and implementation and
  measurement of stakeholder perceptions with respect to occurrences of incidents of
  school violence.

The proximal processes that connect the influencing factors above for students, faculty, and

families at any given school in the United States are *policy diffusion*, *zero tolerance* school

discipline policies, and the actual *perceptions* of safety of the respective stakeholders.

Core Concepts

Before investigating the relationship between the current school safety laws and the

perceptions of stakeholders in Florida private schools for exceptional students, there are several

key concepts to be discussed. The conceptual frameworks (i.e., *proximal processes*) employed

within PPCT Bioecological Systems Theory in this study are public *policy diffusion* of *zero*

tolerance school discipline policies, the *mandates* of federal and state-level school safety laws in the state of Florida, and *stakeholder perceptions* of safety factors at school. Each of these concepts have been previously addressed, but their situation within the theoretical framework of PPCT are further defined below.

First, this review places analysis of the progression of school safety policy and its development into the *zero tolerance* style approach prevalent in most schools today within the context of the theoretical framework of PPCT. Exploration of *zero tolerance* policies in the current literature must also include a discussion of the mechanisms of *policy diffusion*; in other words, how an organization or government makes decisions about adopting particular policies. Second, the current legal *mandates* are described through the lens of studies on students' rights versus the requirements of *zero tolerance* policies. This literature review summarizes analyses of state-level reflection of federal *mandates* for school safety as a function of *policy diffusion* mechanisms over the past two decades as the public focus has progressively narrowed and rallied around the issue of risk of mass shooting incidents in schools.

Explanation of the process of development of state-level school safety legislation begins with description of the four primary mechanisms of *policy diffusion* as formulated by Shipan and Volden (2006, 2008, 2012) and their direct application to the expansion of *zero tolerance* student discipline policies in the United States and the state of Florida. This section includes analysis of the intersection of the rights of students with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which apply directly to the study population.

Finally, to frame the discussion of the perceptions of the targeted population, the current review details the applicability of school safety laws and legal peculiarities of private school operation in the state of Florida. This review collates specific safety factors prioritized by their frequency of occurrence and assumption of risk indicated by the severity of prescribed actions required by school safety laws in Florida. It is necessary to determine what factors appear to be deemed most important to school safety in order to make a logical and statistical comparison of the legal provisions to the safety perceptions of education stakeholders in Florida private schools. Chapter Two also describes specific legal requirements and accountability factors for private school administrators in Florida as derived from existing school safety legislation, and further details the intersection of those laws with the provisions and *mandates* of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in order to specify the baseline safety factors data for comparison to the perceptions of stakeholders in Florida private schools that serve specialized populations of students with exceptionalities—which is the purpose of this study.

Once this study has explained the manner by which strict state-level *zero tolerance* school safety legislation came to exist and how school safety laws apply to private schools in Florida, the actions of legislators in prioritizing risks and implementing policies are examined by detailing the perceived risks to school safety that have been identified by studies of the existing statutes. The potential severity of a negative safety incident such as the possession of a firearm (i.e., potential for a mass shooting) is certainly of concern, but the likelihood of its occurrence is often overestimated because of the social construction of public fear of such an incident (Altheide, 2009b; Akiba, 2010; Barbieri & Connell, 2015; Eisenbraun, 2007). Therefore, some

researchers believe the mitigation factors applied by the statutes (i.e., *zero tolerance* disciplinary actions for weapon possession at school) have been broadly misinterpreted and misapplied (Beger, 2002; Brady, 2002a, 2002b; DiVenanzi, 2012; Hirschfield & Celinska, 2011; Mongan & Walker, 2012).

Diffusion: Legislative Bandages Gone Gangrenous

Policy diffusion is a proximal process that connects *process* to *context* and *time* in the PPCT framework. The mechanisms of how public policy spreads both horizontally (i.e., city to city, state to state, etc.) and vertically (i.e., between levels of government; city to state, state to federal, and vice-versa) are *processes* for which their *contexts* have often been defined and dictated by public opinion. Additionally, the pressure of public demands may affect the *timing* of legislation enactment and implementation.

The discussion of policy diffusion begins with media framing. Media framing is how a media organization implies the boundaries of what the public will see (i.e., what will be *named*, cf., Blumer, 1973) about the phenomenon being reported. By framing an event, media organizations use language and symbols—including sensationalism of words, placement and images—to define for the public consumer what is important about the phenomenon being reported (Entman, 2007; Mongan, 2013). Framing activity often employs the generation of moral panic (Altheide, 2002a; Goode & Ben-Yahuda, 2009) to elevate the issue's public salience-- either to obtain/retain consumers' attentions (Downs, 1972), or to advance an agenda favored by the media organization's leadership or interest group partners (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Weaver, 2007). Thus, media sensationalism in coverage of incidents of school violence is of interest within the PPCT framework. If the sensationalism factors of the copious amount of

media coverage of violent incidents in schools in America do have a potential causal influence upon legislative action, then that sensationalism persuades the public of the name and severity of the possible safety risk (Best, 2002; Burns & Crawford, 1999), its most likely cause(s) (Altheide, 2002a; 2002b; 2009a) and the least risky solution(s) to the problem (Muschert & Madfis, 2013).

Multiple studies also discussed the exacerbating effects of television and internet media and the exponential growth of informal news sharing on social media as a normalizing agent in the social construction of public perception of the potential for school violence as an ever-impending threat. Circulation in a globalized media network created an assumption of consensus; because school violence was perceived as a significant national risk, local communities translated the constructed threat as present in each of their own environments even though statistical evidence continued to show that incidents of school violence were rare in the national context (Herda-Rapp, 2003; Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003; Sumiala & Tikka, 2011). The normalization of national perceptions—as encouraged by the sensationalism of media coverage—to local communities may be a key enabling mechanism for the implementation of *zero tolerance* school discipline policies (Benbenishty, Astor, & Zeira, 2003). Examining the provisions and mandates of federal and state-level school safety laws within the framework of PPCT may explain why school safety policies appear to focus upon one of the statistically least likely occurrences as one of the greatest risk factors associated with school safety.

Diffusion Mechanisms

The study of diffusion of public policy has focused primarily upon the mechanism and process of policy proliferation, rather than attempting to show direct causal relationships. *Policy diffusion* can occur between any levels of government, although some research indicated that the

professionalism of a given state legislature—which is defined later in this chapter--and the level

of influence exerted by special interest groups might significantly affect the process (Godwin &

Schroedel, 2000; Shipan & Volden, 2006).

There are four primary mechanisms of *policy diffusion*, according to Shipan and Volden

(2008):

- *Policy Learning* occurs when governments observe the success of a policy in another

  government and therefore decide to enact a similar policy;

- *Economic Competition* occurs when governments (most often cities) witness positive

  economic benefits from a policy in a nearby government, and therefore decide to enact a

  similar policy;

- *Imitation* occurs when governments see their nearest bigger neighbor adopt a policy, and

  decide to enact a similar policy in order to be perceived as being more like the bigger

  neighbor; and

- *Coercion* occurs when a higher tier of government (e.g., state, federal) enacts a policy

  that affects lower-tier governments (e.g., city, county, state), to include preemption of

  unique policy enactment by the lower-tier governments.

Much of the policy diffusion in the educational policy arena happens via the *coercion*

mechanism. The most prominent example relevant to this study was the Gun-Free Schools Act

(GFSA) of 1995, which required all state governments to implement a mandatory minimum one-

year expulsion for any student in possession of a firearm on school grounds (United States

Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools [USDOE-OSDFS], 1995).

Likewise, the descriptions in scholarly literature on the spread of *zero tolerance* school policies

after the Columbine shootings closely resembled the diffusion mechanisms of *economic competition*, *imitation*, and *coercion*. State legislators felt pressure from their constituents to reassure the public that the Columbine tragedy would not be repeated in other schools (Mongan & Walker, 2012; Muschert, 2007b; Muschert, Henry, Bracy, & Peguero, 2014; Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013) to avoid migration of the state's population to other areas of the country in search of perceived safer educational environments (cf. Gray, 1994; Tiebout, 1956). Implementing *zero tolerance* policies, which purported to prevent the presence of weapons on school grounds, seemed at the time the most effective way to preclude future headlines of "another Columbine" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011; Muschert & Madfis, 2013; Rich-Shea & Fox, 2014). Regarding *imitation*, the same pressures came to bear; as neighboring states instituted get-tough school safety and student discipline policies, many states simply imitated their actions (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Giroux, 2009; Hess & Leal, 2003; Muschert & Peguero, 2010). The GFSA itself was an example of *coercion*, as it explicitly required every state to implement several measures, including the mandatory one-year expulsion of any student found in possession of a weapon on school grounds (United States Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 1995; Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002).

Moral Panic Circumvents Policy Learning

The most beneficial mechanism of diffusion, however—*policy learning* (Boehmke & Witmer, 2004; Boushey, 2012; Gilardi, 2016)—was depicted in the literature as neglected and nearly nonexistent in school safety policy developments across the United States (Gilardi, 2010; McDermott, 1999; Meseguer, 2006; Mintrom, 2000). Rather than observe the outcomes of

school safety legislation in other states, most state legislatures—and even the U.S. Congress or the President of the United States himself—have often rushed to create and implement changes to school safety laws during the confusing aftermath of a nationally reported incident of school violence. Multiple studies pointed to the mass-market print and television media as a driving force behind policy enactments; in many researchers' descriptions, media framing of school violence incidents has not only included excessively sensational news coverage, but has also insisted upon the urgency of determining exact causes of the violent acts (Scharrer, Weidman, & Bissell, 2003). Studies by Muschert (2007b) and Birkland and Lawrence (2009) described the media coverage of school shootings through the lens of a phenomenon that Heider (1988) called the *Rashomon effect*—that incidents of school violence involve so many different variables and are such emotionally charged events that observers of the exact same event will describe it in wildly varied accounts, with details tailored to the individual observer's perspective (and often aligned with the observer's agenda) and equally diverse conclusions. Viewing school safety policy diffusion through this lens suggests that the media frenzy surrounding incidents of school violence and subsequent public pressure upon legislators has precluded the time and organizational structure necessary to conduct adequate policy learning behavior. Instead, the combination of the other three mechanisms of policy diffusion described above in response to the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 became the more common trend in school safety legislation (Herda-Rapp, 2003; Hess & Leal, 2003; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Muschert & Madfis, 2013; Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013; Winburn, Winburn, & Niemeyer, 2014; Yell & Rozalski, 2008; Yue & Weaver, 2009).

In addition to media coverage and public pressure for schools to generate student performance in pristine, safe environments, one factor that Shipan and Volden (2006) found to be particularly influential in policy decisions by states was the *professionalism* of the legislature. They deemed a state legislature to be *professional* if it spent the majority of the year in legislative session and lawmakers were paid salaries sufficient to designate their position as their primary occupation (e.g., the California State Legislature). Less professional legislatures spent only a few months of the year in session and were paid salaries equivalent to secondary employment (e.g., the Florida State Legislature). Professional legislatures were more likely to create a "snowball" effect by mimicking the legislative actions of neighboring states that have enacted policies that exhibit some measure of success, thus generating a regional diffusion effect (Balla, 2001; Berry & Berry, 1990; 1991; 1992; 1999; Boehmke & Witmer, 2004; Mooney, 2001; Shipan & Volden, 2006; 2008). Less professional legislatures, however, were less likely to engage in policy learning and therefore more likely to treat policies within the state as "pressure valves" in response to public outcry on specific issues (Boehmke, Gailmard, & Patty, 2006; Hallam, 2002; Mintrom, 1997a; 1997b), thereby resulting in a lower incidence of city-to-state policy diffusion. Federal-to-state diffusion, however, occurred at a steadily increasing rate, particularly in the arena of educational policy (Allen, Pettus, & Haider-Markel, 2004; Donovan, Mooney, & Smith, 2013).

Extant literature on the development of school violence as a national phenomenon overwhelmingly identified the 1999 Columbine High School murders in Littleton, Colorado as a watershed event that fundamentally altered the way in which the media, the American public, and government agencies viewed violence in the school setting and generated an urgency to

prevent incidents of mass violence (Boomgaarden & deVreese, 2007; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Herda-Rapp, 2003; Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004; Skiba, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Because the two young men who perpetrated the crime were from upper-middle-class families with reasonably involved parents, had mostly average grades, and were socially involved with their peers—whom they meticulously targeted, planned their attack against, and murdered (Cullen, 2009), they did not fit the profile of school shooters with which the public was familiar. Chyi and McCombs (2004) found that media coverage of Columbine rapidly shifted away from discussing the tragedy as a personal (i.e., victims and their families) and community (i.e., impact on the school and town) event to a dominant theme of representing the shooting as a societal (national) problem situated in the present timeframe. In other words, the media portrayed Columbine to the public as "this is what is wrong with *America right now*" (cf., Stein, 2000). As a result, the focus of the national media, government agencies, and the academic community shifted to attempts to identify other students who may also be dangerous (Bender, Shubert, & McLaughlin, 2001; Borum, 2000; Langman, 2009; Muschert, 2007a; 2007b; Muschert & Carr, 2006; Reddy, Borum, Berglund, Vossekuil, Fein, & Modzeleski, 2001; Snell, Bailey, Carona, & Mebane, 2002) and to regulate student behavior by mandating that students respect one another and respect authority (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Forman, 2004; McGee & Debernardo, 1999; Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001; United States Secret Service & United States Department of Education, 2002). The confluence of the above researchers' conclusions suggested that the combined effects of the federal government's unwillingness to study potential policy impacts before mandating sweeping changes, and the public pressure on schools to

"toughen up" bypassed the gradual implementation characteristic of the *policy learning*

mechanism of diffusion and resulted in the current zero tolerance environment of U.S. schools.

Zero Tolerance

Zero tolerance school discipline policies were the outgrowth of the apparent legislative

shortcuts described in the previous section. *Zero tolerance* education laws represent a proximal

process connecting *process* to *person* within the PPCT framework, but the laws seem to neglect

the aspect of *context*. The *zero tolerance* approach to student discipline may be viewed as a

distortion of the concept of *person* in that it defines adolescents as the exotic "Other" of social

constructivist lore; characterized, feared, and treated as a whole based upon the exaggerated risk

of recurrence of the behaviors of a few (cf. Stonebanks, 2004). Several researchers—most

prominently Henry Giroux—concluded that the disarticulation and rearticulation (Apple, 2015;

Hall, Morley, & Chen, 1996) of the language and deficit approach of the U.S. government's

"War on Drugs" of the 1980s took the form of austere, authoritarian efforts to control the thought

and behavior of adolescents, who were consistently represented as untamed, unpredictable, and

unstable as a cultural whole (Giroux, 2003a; 2009; 2013; McClennen, 2012; Peters, 2012;

Pollard, 2014).

Several researchers cautioned against a single-cause argument that school shooting

incidents—and Columbine, in particular—generated the rush to implement *zero tolerance* school

discipline across the United States. Moral panics do not always involve matters of physical

safety; amidst the media and legislative aftermath of Columbine, the American public also turned

their attention in 2001 to a compounding frenzy—educational performance and assessment—

represented by President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. The distraction

of trying to get our students "caught up" with the rest of the world academically potentially not only generated a completely new method by which to declare youth "deficient," but also turned over the last vestiges of control of the criminalization of school behaviors. As schools experienced more and more pressure to market themselves under the new federal guidelines for school choice under NCLB (which included permission for parents to transfer their students out of "dangerous" schools), administrators recognized that a school image and reputation for being "violence-free" was key to attracting families of the best students, and zero-tolerance-based policies took over (Snell, 2005). There were even allegations that some schools have used selective discipline practices to keep some low-performing students out of school on testing days (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008). Law enforcement gained extensive jurisdiction over school behavior issues, for our "expectation of school crime in fact create[d] it" (Dohrn, 2010, p.550).

The two defining characteristics of *zero tolerance* school discipline policies are the application of mandatory penalties—typically in the form of suspensions and expulsions—for certain types of offenses and disregard for contextual information; such as determination of student intent, record of past behavior, the student's age, or the circumstances of the alleged offense (Stader, 2004). A facet of such policies that is perhaps the most contentious, however, is the inherent mandate—sometimes tacit, but often clearly stated in written policy—to refer many student behavioral offenses to the criminal justice system (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Swain & Noblit, 2011; Sussman, 2012; Youth United for Change & Advancement Project, 2011). Such policies are therefore deeply rooted in the *process* of PPCT, but distort the *person* and ignore the *context*.

Concerning *zero tolerance* school discipline policies themselves, the majority of the literature in this field addressed detriments of the policies. The "school-to-prison pipeline" has received considerable attention as researchers showed the cyclical connection between law enforcement activity in schools and juvenile incarceration (American Psychological Association, 2008; Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Daggett, 2013; Hirschfield, 2003; 2009a). Additionally, increased dropout rates of students who have been arrested at school (Nogura, 2003; Sweeten, 2006; Youth United for Change [YUC] & Advancement Project, 2011) and racial inequities in enforcement of school discipline policies (YUC & Advancement Project, 2011; Sussman, 2012) are well-represented in the literature. Some of the aforementioned studies of public reactions to the Columbine High School shootings claimed Columbine was the impetus for the spread of *zero tolerance* school discipline policies (Benbenishty, Astor, & Zeira, 2003; Herda-Rapp, 2003; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Muschert, 2007a; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013).

The connection between *zero tolerance* discipline and policy diffusion actually began with a series of legislative actions dating several years prior to Columbine. A perceived rise in school violence and media framing of school violence as a national problem in the early 1990s prompted President Bill Clinton to take action (Herda-Rapp, 2003). Two laws—the Improving America's Schools Act and the Gun Free Safe Schools Act (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 1994; 1995)—paved the way for *zero tolerance* school discipline policies. Although the Improving America's Schools Act was essentially a routine reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, it was also symbolic signature legislation for the Clinton administration and viewed as a major step towards fulfillment of his campaign promises to reform American education (New York State Education Department, 2009). The

following year, President Clinton co-opted the language of the Reagan administration's War on Drugs and signed into law the Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA), which required states to establish a state-wide school safety policy within the next year. Policies had to specifically include the mandatory one-year minimum expulsion of any student found in possession of a firearm on school grounds (USDOE, 1995).

Although the original mandate applied only to firearms and allowed school administrators to use their discretion in considering individual circumstances of each incident, nearly every state has since expanded the *zero tolerance* concept to include any form of weapon—often vaguely defined, if defined in writing at all. Many states also added a myriad of offenses to the "mandatory minimum punishment" category of student misbehavior, to include non-violent offenses like verbal defiance, truancy, or excessive absences from classes. In short, many student behaviors traditionally dealt with administratively had become criminalized (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Theriot, 2009; Sussman, 2012).

One of the more controversial aspects of the nationwide effort to provide secure schooling environments is the permanent presence of law enforcement officers in schools. Approximately 14,000 to 20,000 School Resource Officers (SROs) are assigned to schools throughout the United States, but because law enforcement agencies are not required to report how many police officers are assigned to schools, it is difficult to determine exact numbers (James & McCallion, 2013; National Association of School Resource Officers, n.d.). SRO policies and opinions concerning their roles and authorities (Stinson & Watkins, 2014), competence in the educational environment (Weiler & Cray, 2011), and even their funding sources (Na & Gottfredson, 2011) vary widely from state to state and even within individual

school districts (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). In general, SRO programs have as their primary goal the enhancement of student, school personnel, and facility safety (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006).

Law enforcement officers have for many decades served as partners with the school to educate students on safety issues (Lambert & McGinty, 2002), but the current SRO programs began to take shape as the phenomenon of rampage and mass school shootings became a national focus (Herda-Rapp, 2003). Unfortunately, in Kupchick's view (2010), the opportunities for SROs to provide positive and professional support to school administrators and act as role models for students have often given way to confusion over roles and responsibilities between the embedded law enforcement officers and school administrators. Additionally, many situations in which the best and most appropriate response to student behaviors would have been counseling were instead managed as legal infractions—leaving the actual root cause of the students' behaviors undiscovered and discarded as less important than providing the appearance of safety.

Public Schools and the Constitution

The legal status of students is central to the debate over the balance between their safety and their rights. The U. S. Supreme Court has often—but not consistently—granted school officials broad discretion in the form of *in loco parentis* authority (i.e., acting with the same authority as the child's legal guardian(s) wield, in the absence of those guardians) (Hall & Manins, 2001; Neel & Ennis, 2012; Nevin, 2014). In many instances, however, the Court recognized that there must be limits to the schools' authority to curtail students' individual liberties, particularly with respect to the First, Fourth, Fifth, and Fourteenth Amendments' protections. Justice Fortas delivered in the majority opinion in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent*

Community School District in 1969 the most quoted precedent regarding students' rights when he stated, "it can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (p. 506). The Supreme Court cases synthesized below provide a clearer picture of the difficulty of balancing students' rights against safety concerns.

First Amendment: "It's a free country" was a popular retort in a previous generation to express dissent against various rules and requirements. In the past several decades, however, students' freedoms of speech and expression have been repeatedly curtailed in the name of safety, as explained above. U. S. Supreme Court rulings in four key First Amendment challenges established the standards by which school officials must balance their discipline of students and respect for their rights. The *Tinker* standard, as the aforementioned opinion by Justice Fortas came to be known (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969), is the precedent lens through which all student First Amendment challenges are typically viewed by the courts. *Tinker* established a two-pronged test of school policies and administrative actions: for a student's speech or expression to be justifiably limited by the school, the school must show that the speech caused a substantial disruption to the educational environment or curriculum objectives, and that the nature of the speech or expression encroached upon the rights of other students or faculty (McDonald, 2012; Strumwasser, 2013; Willard, 2013).

As the Court applied *Tinker* to other cases, legal scholars have determined that four categories of speech and expression by students were established--three of which are governed by their own precedent standard for application of constitutional law (Kaplan, 2007; Willard, 2013). The first category is perhaps the most oft encountered in American secondary schools:

obscenity. Lewd or obscene expressions, as defined by the *Fraser* standard (*Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser*, 1986), in which the Court determined that prohibition of vulgar and offensive terms in official public discourse was an appropriate function of the schools' authority because schools are responsible to teach students the boundaries of socially appropriate behavior (Macais, 2012; Weeks, 2012). Secondly, school-sponsored speech, such as articles in the school newspaper, may be censored by school officials if the administrator has a reasonable belief that the speech will cause disruption (Bittner, 2013; Zeidel, 2012), according to the *Hazelwood* standard (*Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier,* 1988). Third, schools may forbid student speech that promotes illegal activity by application of the *Morse* standard (*Morse v. Frederick*, 2007); the greater the interest the community or the government may have in deterring the illegal activity in question, the more discretion the Court allowed school officials (Weeks, 2012; Zeidel, 2012).

The most troublesome category--for which no current Supreme Court precedent exists--is the enforcement of limits on the specific content of student speech. It is the arena in which anti-bullying policies dare to tread and in which fear of student-perpetrated, Columbine-style violence necessitate determination of whether a student's speech constitutes a true threat or merely an emotionally expressed opinion of dissent (Dee, 2000; Goodno, 2011; Torres & Chen, 2006). Lower courts have most often upheld school administrators' discretion and the schools' responsibility to prevent violence against other students or school faculty (Ianelli, 2010). The regulation of specific content of student speech has been particularly amorphous in the context of student internet speech, to which the *Tinker* standard invites a debate over where the

"schoolhouse gates" end (Goodno, 2011; Lopez, Levine, Dautrich, & Yalof, 2009; McDonald, 2012; Strumwasser, 2013; Weeks, 2012; Willard, 2013).

Fourth Amendment: Students' rights to protections against unreasonable searches and seizures, guaranteed by the Fourth Amendment, have been a disturbing issue for student advocates since the landmark Supreme Court decision, *New Jersey v. T. L. O.* (1985). In *T. L. O.*, the Court declared that the nature of schools' responsibilities for student safety made the application of the strict legal requirements of warrant and probable cause in the initiation of searches of individuals and their personal property (Aizenstein, 1985; Mulhall, 2014; Waldman, 2011). Instead of the standards, which govern law enforcement officials' authority to search adults and their property, the Court stipulated that school officials must have a reasonable suspicion that a search would yield evidence of a crime or of violation of school rules, thus granting significant discretion to administrators (Cooke, 2012; Nance, 2013; Spung, 2011). Lower courts have upheld the reasonable suspicion standard in a variety of challenges and at times have expanded the scope of schools' authority in proportion to the severity of the suspected potential offense that prompted the search (Cooke, 2012; Torres & Chen, 2006).

Among the many concerns regarding school officials' potential violations of students' Fourth Amendment rights, scholars noted that the use of force by school officials to restrain and/or detain students in order to effect a search (Croston, 2009; Wasserman, 2011), drug testing of students involved in extracurricular activities (Edmonson, 2002; Hartsock, 2010; Waldman, 2011), and search and seizure of students' cell phones (Maddox, 2012; Mulhall, 2014; Spung, 2011) required further clarification by the Supreme Court. In the meantime, such deviations from the *T. L. O.* standard must therefore be carefully handled by administrators on a case-by-case

basis, with attention to balancing the school's interest in deterrence with consideration for student privacy with until such rulings are issued. Recent studies have suggested that the inconsistency with which schools have exercised their authority to search students will inevitably bring a challenge to the highest court and deliver the necessary clarifications of the law (Beger, 2003; Nance, 2013; Torres, 2012; Torres & Callahan, 2008).

Fifth Amendment: American citizens' right to refuse to provide testimony that may incriminate themselves was set forth by the Fifth Amendment, and the application of such protection to students suspected of violations in the school setting has been the subject of multiple recent challenges. In school, administrators must consider Fifth Amendment protections in conjunction with restrictions of school officials' authority to conduct searches of students and their property; once the threshold of reasonable suspicion has been met, administrators may engage in interrogation of the student under suspicion while conducting the search for evidence. Problems arise, however, when the student's custodial status has not been made clear prior to their questioning by school officials. In other words, if the student has not been read their *Miranda* rights (*Miranda v. Arizona*, 1966) to remain silent and to have legal representation present (Freeman, 2007; Mussman, 2012), then they are legally not in custody and are free to leave rather than be interrogated, according to the Supreme Court's ruling in *Fare v. Michael C.* (1979) which declared that juveniles are entitled to the protections of the Fifth Amendment (Gottesman, 2013; Green, 2013).

Recent challenges have shown a trend by the Court to cite scientific research in attempts to clarify the parameters of adolescents' Fifth Amendment rights. In *J. D. B. v. North Carolina* (2011), the high court ruled that research has determined that juveniles are significantly more

susceptible to coercion than are adults—therefore, age of a suspect must be a determining factor in school officials' custodial decision when interrogating students (Carey, 2014; Gottesman, 2013; North, 2012). When a law enforcement official—to include School Resource Officers (SRO)—becomes involved in the situation, student susceptibility drastically increases. Students may not understand that they are free to leave if they have not been placed in legal custody, for example (Green, 2013; North, 2012). Additionally, the guidance of precedent is vague and potentially hazardous to the provision of adequate constitutional protection of the student because of the *Thompkins* rule (*Berghis v. Thompkins*, 2010) which permitted police to continue to question individuals until they revoke their right to remain silent. *Thompkins* has not been challenged as to whether applies to juvenile suspects interrogated at school, and therefore clarification is needed concerning the requirement to grant students their *Miranda* rights when a law enforcement official is present (Carey, 2014; Green, 2013; Gottesman, 2013; Holland, 2006; Russo, 2013).

Fourteenth Amendment: When ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that public schools must provide equal opportunity and access to quality education, the Supreme Court likely did not imagine that decades later they would be hearing Fourteenth Amendment challenges based upon *Brown* as precedent for due process claims. However, the zero-tolerance policy environment in many schools has increasingly involved extensive use of suspensions as disciplinary actions and the constitutionality of removing students from the educational setting as a form of punishment has been challenged multiple times on Fourteenth Amendment grounds (Black, 2005; Blake, 2009). Schools have historically been granted broad discretion for use of suspensions, but the Supreme Court in *Goss v. Lopez* (1975) set forth some specific guidelines.

In the *Goss* ruling, the Court determined that suspensions greater than ten days risked violating students' rights to due process. Additionally, school officials were required to grant students receiving suspensions an oral or written notice of the intended disciplinary action, an explanation of the evidence being used against them, and an opportunity for the accused student to respond— preferably via a formal hearing, at which the students should also be entitled to legal counsel (Black, 2005; Garman & Walker, 2010; Mussman, 2012; Stone & Stone, 2011).

In addition to limits placed upon disciplinary actions by the school, there are also Fourteenth Amendment concerns with the privacy rights of students. Specific problems with the manner in which schools use the non-academic information of students include requiring parental consent for over-the-counter medication use at school and students' contraceptive choices, as the students were not given the option not to disclose their medical choices to their parents/guardians (Cullitan, 2011; Elliot, Fatemi, & Wasan, 2014). Although students are protected from the dissemination of their personal information under the federal Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and the Family Educational Records Privacy Act (FERPA), enforcement of those protections requires systematic oversight and knowledge of how students' information is being used (Frost, 2006; Waldman, 2015).

The above discussions of legal patterns regarding students' rights and schools' administrative discretion highlight the diverse nature of the school climate and the inability of a standardized *zero tolerance* approach to safety issues to meet the needs of all students.

Private Schools and School Safety Laws

The preceding few pages have described the ongoing debates over the status of students' rights and their perceived effects upon school safety in public schools; however, the same legal

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

circumstances do not always apply to private schools and their students. The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which school safety legislative priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of school administrators, faculty and staff, students, and families in private schools for exceptional students. It is therefore necessary to define some distinctions between the applicability of current law to public and private schools, respectively, and between general education students and exceptional students; the differences between the categories of schools and types of students are elements of *context* and *person* within the PPCT framework.

The rapidly growing support for school choice across the United States over the past several decades has significantly increased enrollment in charter and private schools (Carlson, 2014; Gross, 2014; Linkow, 2011; Manno, 2010), which do not always have the same relationship to school safety laws as do public schools (Gregg, 2013; Schwartz, 2013). In Florida alone, the Florida Council for Independent Schools (FCIS) lists 157 private schools accredited and governed by FCIS in 2016 (FCIS, n.d.; Eadie, 2009). Additionally, programs such as the McKay Scholarship and the Personalized Learning Scholarship Account (now retitled as The Gardiner Scholarship) in Florida have helped to enable the growth of schools which serve specialized student populations, such as socioeconomically at-risk students (Heyneman & Stern, 2014) and students with learning differences (e.g., Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD], dyslexia, dysgraphia, short term memory deficits, anxiety, Autism Spectrum Disorder, etc.; Baum, Schader, & Hebert, 2014; Winters & Greene, 2011; Wood & McClure, 2004). Due to both the education-based provisions within the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the nature of the students' specific

learning differences, the safety needs of such specialized student populations and their families may be significantly different than those of their public school counterparts (Hensel, 2010; Miller, 2011; Taylor, 2005).

In the state of Florida, "a private school is a nonpublic school defined as an individual, association, copartnership, or corporation, or department, division, or section of such organizations, that designates itself as an educational center that includes kindergarten or a higher grade or as an elementary, secondary, business, technical, or trade school below college level or any organization that provides instructional services…A private school may be a parochial, religious, denominational, for-profit, or nonprofit school" (Florida Statutes, 2015, §. 1002.01, para. 2). Although the definition of a private school is informative, the real determining characteristic has everything to do with funding sources. Under the U.S. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the basic defining difference between a public school and a private school is that public schools are entirely funded by public (tax) funds and families have the right to participate in public educational services without additional cost (i.e., tuition) (United States Department of Education, 2015). Due to the nature of their funding source(s), public schools are subject to direct regulation by the state Department of Education regarding curriculum standards, teacher certification, and student discipline and school safety, among various other aspects of school operations (Florida Statutes, 2015, §. 1002; United States Department of Education, 2009, p. 51-56). Charter schools—mentioned above in the discussion of policy diffusion—are still publicly funded but are granted specific exception to certain areas of regulation (e.g., curriculum development, student progress requirements). Private schools, however, are entitled to exercise discretion in determining the manner they will provide educational services, because such

services are not funded by public tax dollars—except under certain circumstances. According to Florida Statute 1002.20, paragraph 6b, parents of public-school age children have the right to choose private education at public expense under certain conditions; the conditions stipulated include the use of the McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities (§. 1002.39), which will be discussed further below.

There has been little written about the differences in application of public policy on school safety to the private school sector. Much of the current literature related to safety laws and private schools deals with higher education; specifically, with the exemption of private universities from state laws which forbid possession of firearms on campus (Eden, 2014) and the status of legal authority and the associated code of conduct for university police forces (Jahnig, 2015). Several researchers have drawn attention to the increased number of exceptions occurring in private schools to student immunization laws (Lai, Nadeau, McNutt, & Shaw, 2014; Shaw, Tserenpuntsag, McNutt, & Halsey, 2014; Wheeler & Buttenheim, 2014). The addition of the topic of school choice and private schools has garnered significant research attention, particularly regarding the ethics and appropriateness of the use of public funds for vouchers that allow families to send their children to private schools (Johnson, 2013).

The most complete summary of legal regulations that apply to private schools was compiled by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (Hammons, 2008; Friedman Foundation, 2016), but their summary does not specifically address safety regulation of private schools. Florida private schools must register with the state, but are not required to be accredited, to comply with teacher certification processes, nor to allow oversight of their curricula by the state. The only state statutes concerning school safety that apply to private schools in Florida are

those which deal with background check requirements for school employees, mandatory

reporting requirements for suspicion of child abuse, food service and transportation safety, and

immunization compliance (Catt, 2014; Florida School Choice, n.d.; USDOE, 2009). Private

schools are, however, bound by the requirements of the 1995 Gun Free Schools Act concerning

weapon possession on school grounds; the law specifically states its applicability by declaring,

"'school' means any preschool, elementary school, middle school, junior high school, secondary

school, career center, or postsecondary school, whether public or nonpublic" (USDOE, 2015, p.

38). Additionally, Florida private school administrators are required to include in student records

any arrest for offenses that would be considered felonious if the individual were an adult

(USDOE, 2015).

Aside from the applicable state and federal regulations noted above, however, Florida

private schools are not subject to regulation or oversight of student codes of conduct and are

therefore granted greater discretion in their methods of prevention of most student safety issues

that have been previously discussed in this chapter.

ADA, IDEA and Exceptional Students

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which school safety legislative

priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of school

administrators, faculty and staff, students, and families in private schools for exceptional

students. It has only been since the late 1970s that research began to focus upon defining the

various challenges that some individual students face and recognizing that these students had

different educational needs (Baldwin, Baum, Pereles, & Hughes, 2015). Scholars also noted that

academically gifted students may also have a specific learning disability and vice-versa—most

commonly referred to as *twice exceptional* students (Erten, 2005; Silverman, 1989, 2005; Willard-Holt, 1999; Yssel, Prater, & Smith, 2010). Montgomery (2003) delineated multiple categories of twice exceptional learners, including 'gifted with specific learning difficulties', 'gifted with Asperger's/autism', 'gifted with attention deficit disorder', 'gifted with dyslexia', 'gifted with dysgraphia', 'gifted with sensory disabilities' and 'gifted with behavioral disorders'. For the purpose of this study, *exceptional students* refers to the broader concept of 'gifted children with learning difficulties', as defined by Brody and Mills (1997):

> Gifted/specific learning disabilities students are students of superior intellectual ability who exhibit a significant discrepancy in their level of performance in a particular academic area such as reading, mathematics, spelling or written expression. Their academic performance is substantially below what would be expected based on their general intellectual ability. As with other children exhibiting learning disabilities [difficulties], this discrepancy is not due to lack of educational opportunity in that academic area or other health impairment. Because academically gifted students with learning disabilities [specific learning difficulties] demonstrate such high academic potential, their academic achievement may not be as low as that of students with [specific] learning disabilities who demonstrate average academic potential. Consequently, these students may be less likely to be referred for special education testing (p. 285).

The development of the *exceptional* subgroup of students in the research was accompanied by acknowledgement in the academic community and in the legal realm of United States educational policy that the learning needs of such students may not always be best served

by traditional public education environments; thus, the debate over the practice of *inclusion*

ensued. Early recognition that millions of students with learning disabilities were completely

excluded from educational opportunities led to a series of laws from 1965-1975 (portions of the

1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act; Education of the Handicapped Act of 1970; the

Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) (Gordon, 2006). However, without a

thorough understanding of the challenges that exceptional students faced, many students were

"included" in the classroom without sufficient access to the appropriate supports and

accommodations that their specific learning needs required (Jamgochian & Ketterlin-Geller,

2015; Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002; Sansosti & Sansosti, 2012). Others lacked the self-

advocacy skills to access such accommodations (Goepel, 2009; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Prater,

Redman, Anderson, & Gibb, 2014). In addition, inclusion in mainstream classrooms often

resulted in social exclusion of exceptional students by their peers (Lalvani, Broderick, Fine,

Jacobowitz, & Michelli, 2015; Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London, 2010; Nowicki, Brown, &

Stepien, 2014).

The concept of inclusion is in itself a problematic idea, in that many studies have

described the lack of even a clear and consistent definition of the term in American education

(Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006; Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2013; Göransson

& Nilholm, 2014; Shyman, 2015). Some view inclusion of exceptional students in general

education classes to be a right of the exceptional students (Gordon, 2013; McCausland, 2005),

while others merely describe it as a socially-oriented legal mandate that lacks enforceable clarity

(Barton & Oliver, 1992; Dickson, 2012; Mitchell, 2015; Waitoller & Thorius, 2015)—although

the word *inclusion* itself is not found in the laws in question. Most researchers agreed that

current laws do not provide a clear picture of what *inclusion* should include. It is not surprising,

then, that specific provisions and guidelines for the safety of exceptional students at school are

difficult to identify. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is an outgrowth of

the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990; IDEA specifically addresses the rights of

children with disabilities—to include both physical disabilities and learning exceptionalities—in

the educational environment (McCarthy & Soodak, 2007; Palley, 2004; Pasachoff, 2014;

USDOE, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2015). For purposes of this

study, IDEA refers to both the federal statute (20 U.S.C. §§ 1400, 1401) as published in 2004

and amended in 2015 and the associated regulations published by the U.S. Department of

Education (34 C.F.R.). The statute (20 U.S.C. § (3A) 2004, 2015) describes those students that

are protected as follows:

> **(A) In general**, the term "child with a disability" means a child—
>
> **(i)** with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or
>
> language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional
>
> disturbance (referred to in this chapter as "emotional disturbance"), orthopedic
>
> impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific
>
> learning disabilities; and
>
> **(ii)** who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

"Specific learning disabilities" are further defined in 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (30A-B) (2004, 2015):

> **(30) Specific learning disability**
>
> **(A) In general**, the term "specific learning disability" means a disorder in 1 or more of
>
> the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken

or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

(B) Disorders included

Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

The majority of the legal provisions in IDEA are focused upon access, accommodations, and effectiveness of educational facilities and instructional practices. Although the law specifically addresses and promotes the practice of inclusion in the general education population of students with disabilities and exceptionalities and the right of such individuals to a free appropriate public education (USDOE, 2015; Zhang & Biying, 2015), the benefits available to students with exceptionalities do differ when parents place their children in private schools and are addressed in Part B of IDEA, which was released in 2006 (USDOE, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Office of Non-Public Education, 2008). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1975 also reinforces the status of students with disabilities by requiring public schools to meet the needs of all students with equal adequacy. Section 504 partners with Title II of ADA to ensure that students with disabilities are protected from discrimination at both the federal and state levels (Weber, 2011).

Aside from the "least restrictive environment" (LRE) provision, which has at times been interpreted to apply to students with cognitive differences that included behavior issues in peer interactions and the challenge of ensuring their least restrictive inclusion in class environments with typically developing students (Alquraini, 2013; McGovern, 2015; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014), the law does not specifically mention safety needs or disciplinary requirements

unique to students with exceptionalities. Research that included the intersection of private

schools with provisions and mandates of IDEA is somewhat scarce, but primarily addressed

issues of restraint and seclusion in student discipline (Freeman & Sugai, 2013; Miller, 2011;

Stewart, 2011; Sullivan, VanNorman, & Klingbeil, 2014). Several researchers have provided

summaries of legal protections for students with exceptionalities, to include school placement

(again, the "least restrictive environment" language), due process, and parental notification in

disciplinary incidents (Daggett, 2013; Ferster, 2008; Gowdey, 2015; Weber, 2014). Finally,

some studies have described the need to include protections for students with disabilities in

school anti-bullying laws (Ferster, 2008; Heinrichs, 2003; Raskauskas & Modell, 2011; Sayman,

2011; Summer, 2015).

Specialized Private Schools for Exceptional Students

By accepting federal funding for school, all 50 U.S. states are required to meet the

requirements of federal law with regard to IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA (Turnbull, Wilcox,

& Stowe, 2002). However, as detailed earlier, the federal laws specify mandates to provide "free

appropriate public education" to exceptional students; the wording inherently creates a gap that

generates the question of what to do when the free public school system is unable to meet the

specialized educational needs for an exceptional student. Families have legal recourse to seek

resolution of claims of unsatisfactory performance by special education structures in public

schools, but many families are unable (for financial and personal reasons) or unwilling to pursue

litigation when the matter is not resolved at the school level (Bailey & Zirkle, 2015; Hensel,

2010).

Many states have created legal options—in the form of special education voucher programs—for such families to have a broader, less restrictive control over the choice of schools for their children. Although special education voucher programs have not been without controversy and debate (Buck, 2012; Greene & Buck, 2010; Hensel, 2010), courts have largely upheld their use as appropriate and in compliance with the federal disability laws that were discussed in the previous section (Etscheidt, 2005; Keller, 2010; Taylor, 2006). However, state Supreme Court decisions since 1990 have stipulated that such school choice programs must be separately funded to avoid the appearance of direct funding of private schools—and more specifically, sectarian religious private schools—by general fund tax dollars (McCarthy, 2006; Mead, 2015). For example, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Mitchell v. Helms* (2000) ruled that although the Constitution cannot prohibit the use of federal taxpayer-funded voucher systems for private school choices (i.e. the so-called "Blaine Amendment" of 1875), individual states were free to restrict such voucher programs to prevent public funds from going to religious-oriented private schools (Burke & Stepman, 2014; Watson, 2015).

Florida is one of ten states that specifically permits the use of voucher programs for families of exceptional students to choose schools that they deem more appropriate to meet their education needs (Mead, 2015; Weidner & Herrington, 2006; Winters & Greene, 2011). The McKay Scholarship program, which became law in the state of Florida in 1999, provided options to families of students with documented learning disabilities. If families of exceptional students are dissatisfied with the education their student is receiving in a Florida public school, they can, through McKay, transfer to another public school, another district, or enroll in a private school better suited to meet their student's needs (48 Fla. Stat. § 1002.39, 2002; Salisbury, 2003; Wood

& McClure, 2004). In 2015, Florida added the Personal Learning Scholarship Account

(PLSA)—which was renamed the Gardiner Scholarship in January 2016—as an option for

families of students with special needs to "individualize" their children's education. Gardiner

Scholarships are funded by non-profit organizations and provide funds to not only choose an

appropriate private school, but also enables financial access to an array of therapists, tutors,

assistive technology, and savings accounts for college (Florida Department of Education, 2016;

Step Up for Students, 2016).

Within the narrowly defined sector of publicly funded private-sector special education,

private schools that specifically serve exceptional students and are legally able to apply public

funding against families' tuition costs have been successfully established in some states. In

Florida, the McKay Scholarship program has given many families access to private specialized

education for their exceptional students that they would have otherwise not been able to afford

(Salisbury, 2003; Greene & Forster, 2003). From the pre-kindergarten to the high school level,

nearly 10,000 Florida students are currently attending the 181 special education private schools

statewide (Private School Review, 2016).

Are Schools Safe? Indicated risks

As indicated earlier in this literature review, many researchers have concluded that

exceptional students are often disproportionally represented in the "victim" category of empirical

studies on bullying in schools (Biggs, Simpson, & Gaus, 2010; Estell, Farmer, Irvin, Crowther,

Akos, & Boudah, 2009; Hartley, Bauman, Nixon, & Davis, 2014; Rose, Espelage, Monda-

Amaya, Shogren, & Aragon, 2015; Rose, Stormont, Ze, Simpson, Preast, & Green, 2015; Rose,

Swearer, & Espelage, 2012). Exceptional students are also often more deeply affected by

bullying victimization and suffer longer-term effects from bullying than do their general education classmates (Healy, 2014; Insoo & Moss, 2012; Rose, Espelage, Aragon, & Elliott, 2011; Rose, Forber-Pratt, Espelage, & Aragon, 2013). Exceptional students, in other words, seem likely to be more concerned about bullying when considering their safety at school than other students may be. The safety of all students is of paramount concern, of course, but the question remains whether the risks to students as indicated by current federal and state school safety laws are prioritized in a manner congruent with the perceptions of safety of exceptional students, their families, and faculty and staff of schools that serve those students.

Assessing Risks to School Safety

One of the most significant challenges in addressing school safety needs, as discussed in several portions of this study, is determining what factors need to be considered. For the purpose of this study, the United States Navy's Operational Risk Management (ORM) process provides the framework to quantify the most prominent threats to school safety captured in the literature and school safety incident statistics.

The ORM process incorporates the potential severity of an identified risk, the historical and/or statistical likelihood of the threat occurrence, and pre-emptive mitigating actions, policies, or practices; the outcome is a Risk Assessment Code (RAC) for each potential threat or risk. ORM, therefore, provides a consistent—but adaptable—structure that enables confident, data-informed risk management decisions (Chief of Naval Operations [CNO], 2010). ORM does *not* remove risk altogether, but *does* assist decision-makers in reducing risk to acceptable levels by identifying "effective control measures, particularly where specific standards do not exist" (CNO, 2010, para. 4.a.8).

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To conduct ORM, decision makers follow a five-step cyclical process:

1. Identify the hazards;

2. Assess the hazards;

3. Make risk decisions;

4. Implement controls; and

5. Supervise (CNO, 2010, para. 7a).

For purposes of this study, steps one and two were used to quantify the threats to school safety as depicted by federal and state school safety laws and statistical data of safety incidents in U.S. schools; greater detail about steps one and two of the ORM process is provided below.

Figure 1: U. S. Navy Operational Risk Management Risk Assessment Matrix (Naval Education and Training Command, n.d.).

Risk Assessment Matrix

The Risk Assessment Code (RAC) Matrix is used to determine the RAC for a hazard. You must cross probability and severity to obtain this code.

Risk Assessment Matrix			PROBABILITY			
			Frequency of Occurrence Over Time			
			A Likely	B Probable	C May	D Unlikely
SEVERITY — Effect of Hazard	I	Loss of Mission Capability, Unit Readiness or Asset; Death	1	1	2	3
	II	Significantly Degraded Mission Capability or Unit Readiness; Severe Injury or Damage	1	2	3	4
	III	Degraded Mission Capability or Unit Readiness; Minor injury or Damage	2	3	4	5
	IV	Little or No Impact to Mission Capability or Unit Readiness; Minimal Injury or Damage.	3	4	5	5

Risk Assessment Codes
1 – Critical   2 – Serious   3 – Moderate   4 – Minor   5 – Negligible

As Figure 1 displays, the Risk Assessment Code (RAC) for each identified risk is determined by judging the potential severity of the possible event and the probability of the event's occurrence. For purposes of this study, the wording of the ORM matrix was adapted to describe threats related to school safety. Specifically, the severity of an identified risk to school safety is evaluated as follows:

- Severity I: occurrence may cause loss of the school's ability to operate or may cause death.

- Severity II: occurrence may significantly damage the school's ability to operate or may cause serious injury.

- Severity III: occurrence may cause damage to the school's ability to operate or may cause minor injury.

- Severity IV: occurrence may not cause damage to the school's ability to operate or cause injury.

The probability of an identified risk to school safety is determined in this study by referencing synthesis of current literature that has examined federal and state school safety laws and by citing school incident data from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveys.

Investigation of scholarly literature on school safety suggested that the statutory provisions and proscribed penalties indicated the following threats as prominent risks to school safety, based upon the frequency with which they were addressed in legislation and the attachment of mandatory penalties to the offenses:

- weapon possession at school (Duplechain & Morris, 2014; Jennings, Khey, Maskaly, & Donner, 2011; Losinski, Katsiyannis, Ryan, & Baughan, 2014; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Stader, 2004);

- threats (with or without weapon); assault without a weapon (Anderson, 2004; Arnold, 2015; Brady, 2002b; Crawford & Burns, 2015; Jarboe, 2011);

- drugs (Butler, 2012; DuPont, Merlo, Arria, & Shea, 2013; Lamberson, 2013; Levy & Schizer, 2015; Loesevitz, 2007); and

- bullying, to include cyberbullying (Cornell & Limber, 2015; Cron, 2016; Garby, 2013; Kramer, 2015; Kueny & Zirkle, 2012; Pelliccioni, 2003; Roberge, 2012; Waldman, 2012; Willard, 2011).

According to the literature, the offenses above garnered the most attention and carried the most severe penalties in federal school safety laws, and state school discipline laws in Florida reflected similar priorities (USDOE & Child Trends, 2015). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) compiled the annual data of over 20 "indicators" of school safety at the national level and biennially in each state. The most recent data available (2015 for national, 2016 for Florida) indicated that for public and private secondary schools, the most frequently occurring risks were:

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Table 1: *School safety risk factor occurrence*

Risk	National (% of students)[a]	Florida (% of students)[b]
Hate speech	27.2	*
Drugs availability	22.5	17.0
Bullying	20.8	14.3
Gang activity on campus	11.3	*
Physical fights	9.0	7.9
Cyberbullying	11.5	11.5
Weapon carrying on campus	4.0	3.2
Violent threat	5.7	8.4

* indicates that this category did not have a corresponding statistic for Florida students

[a] National statistics were extracted from the reported results of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Indicators of School Crime and Safety survey for 2016 (Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk, 2017). [b] Florida numbers are from the Florida Youth Risk Behaviors Survey (United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

In addition to the threats to safety from other individuals, certain natural phenomena must be considered in the list of threats to school safety—particularly since this study focused upon schools in the state of Florida, where tornadoes and hurricanes often force school evacuations and/or closures. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 40 percent of all U.S. hurricanes affect Florida (2017a). Storm-tracking research organizations also noted that Florida experiences average of 54.6 tornadoes per year (behind only Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma); over three-fourths of those tornadoes occur during months that schools

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are in session (NOAA, 2017b). Finally, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reported in their January 2016 summary that an average of 3,570 structural fires occurred per year on school properties from 2009-2013 (NFPA, 2017). The statistics were not separated into the number of fires per state, however.

Most of the data cited above was obtained through anonymous self-reporting by students and school faculty, which reinforces the need to obtain stakeholder perceptions of safety in schools for the purpose of this study. Multiple studies have attempted to determine stakeholder perceptions of school safety, and there is little agreement in the literature about the best assessment method (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014; Hernandez, Floden, & Bosworth, 2010). Most studies of school climate included safety and perceptions of safety as key factors in creating a positive school climate, while also noting that decreased occurrences of violence, physical bullying, and verbal harassment were the main reasons to declare a positive climate in any given school (Cohen, 2006; Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih, & Huang, 2010; Karcher, 2002; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

Although studies of school climate have employed diverse descriptions in past decades, the most common definition used in recent literature was from Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009), who stated that school climate "refers to the quality and character of school life . . . based on patterns of people's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (p. 10). A review of the literature on perceptions of safety within the assessment of school climate yielded studies of multiple stakeholders' perceptions of student safety and the most significant safety concerns on their minds.

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Administrator Perceptions

School principals often described the need for increased security for protection against violence as one of their top safety concerns (Ewton, 2014; Sprague, Smith, & Stieber, 2002); however, the results generally did not differentiate between fear of external perpetrators and fear of armed violence by students at school. In a 2016 national survey of 349 school principals, over half the respondents expressed frustration over the lack of time and resources to examine best-practices research and train their staff on how to respond to violence (Price, Khubchandani, Payton, & Thompson, 2016; Sparks, 2016); most principals do not feel adequately prepared for assumingly inevitable violent actions at their school (Timmons, 2010). McAdams and Foster (2008) conducted follow-up surveys with 202 school principals who had participated in a 2002 study of trends in student aggressiveness. The principals expressed concern that the attention they had to focus upon order and control of potentially violent students was severely detracting from their mission as educators to foster creativity and academic discovery, to the extent that many principals now regretted their career choice.

Faculty Fears

Although school principals have indicated that one of their main concerns may be the inadequate training to respond to incidents of school violence, the literature indicated that teachers have experienced significant fear of victimization and feelings that policies and other safety measures cannot prevent violence at school (Finley, 2003; Johnson & Barton-Bellessa, 2014; Ricketts, 2007). On a more personal level, some teachers felt they were likely to be primary targets of an incident of school violence (Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, 2007; Hollis-Peel, Reynald, vanBavel, Elffers, & Welsh, 2011; McMahon, et al., 2014; Wilson, Douglas, & Lyon,

2011). Teachers directly affected by an incident of school violence--or are indirectly affected by school violence due to heightened fears of victimization--are less effective in the classroom because they are hindered in their ability to form relationships with students (Duffy & Mooney, 2014; Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Scott, 2012; Yablon, 2010). Studies also indicated that those teachers are far more likely than most to leave the teaching profession altogether (Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, 2007; Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004).

How do Students Feel?

Studies of student perceptions of safety were replete with theories of why violent actions at school seem to have become a sociocultural-based manufactured risk for teens across the United States, in particular. DeVenanzi (2012) theorized that the hegemonic, hyper-masculine, narcissistic influence of popular media culture in the U.S. created an ultra-competitive social stratification in schools (Esala, 2013; Milner, 2004; Sternheimer, 2006). Social stratification is often coupled with the authoritarian environment generated by *zero tolerance* approaches to school safety and student discipline (Garland, 2001; Hirschfield, 2008; Simon, 2007). In such circumstances, marginalized teens who didn't "fit" in the social categories occupying the higher spots in the social status hierarchy (i.e., athlete, fashion sense, sexuality) often became angry, more oppositional, and sought someone to blame for their outcast status (Bauman, 2001; 2004; Kupchick, 2010). Such students have sometimes chosen violence as a means to express their dissatisfaction (Newman, Fox, Roth, & Mehta, 2004; Wilkins, 2008).

The influential link between bullying victimization and violent expressions at school has been established by multiple studies (Brockenbrough, Cornell, & Loper, 2002; Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen, & Brick, 2010; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Glew, Fan, Katon, & Rivara, 2008;

Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002; White, LaSalle, Ashby, & Meyers, 2014).

A review of recent research on student perceptions of safety at school reflected the fear of

violence resulting from a "bullied vs. bullies" culture in many U. S. schools (Astor, Benbenishty,

Zeira, & Vinokur, 2002; Esselmont, 2014). Similar to the results reported in review of the

literature on teachers' perceptions of school safety, students tended to express a greater degree of

safe feelings when they were able to trust that school policies could and would be consistently

and effectively enforced (Booren & Handy, 2009; Booren, Handy, & Power, 2011). Students'

fears of victimization that were specifically related to bullying-related violence often cited lack

of trust in policy enforcement and were frequently noted in relation to issues of race

(Thibodeaux, 2013; Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015) and gender nonconformity

(Russell, McGuire, Lee, Larriva, & Laub, 2008; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). For urban

schools in particular, the importance of a caring relationship between teachers/students and the

School Resource Officer (SRO) and students was a key influence upon feelings of safety

(Johnson, 2009; Johnson, Burke, & Gielen, 2012; Karcher, 2002). A large-sample ($n=7318$)

study of ninth-grade students in Virginia also emphasized the importance of caring relationships

between students and faculty/staff. Students—particularly female students—were far more likely

to seek help and to report threats or weapon possession by other students when they perceived

the faculty and/or staff to be supportive, caring, and respectful (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan,

2010).

Review of the literature comparing student and teacher perceptions of school climate and

safety indicated that students were more likely than teachers to express fears of violence (Berg &

Aber, 2015; Skiba, Simmons, Peterson, & Forde, 2006). However, students were also more

likely to overestimate threats of violence at school, particularly related to weapon-carrying behavior by their peers (Cao, Zhang, & He, 2008; Hemenway, Vriniotis, Johnson, Miller, & Azrael, 2011; Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). In addition, the security measures put in place by administrators to detect and/or prevent weapon carrying may often foster greater feelings of powerlessness and lack of connection for students (Bracy, 2011 Kupchick, 2010; Perumean-Chaney, & Sutton, 2013).

The Elusive Factor of Parental Perceptions

The parent and family perspectives on the climate of their children's schools are vital to understanding best practices to establish and maintain healthy, supportive, and cooperative learning environments where all stakeholders feel as safe as possible (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Nassar-McMillan, Karvonen, Perez, & Abrams, 2009). Students' families are often the primary influence on children's attitudes about general school satisfaction (Eccles, 2006; Harackiewicz, Rosek, Hulliman, & Hyde, 2012). Additionally, parents are the decision-makers in choosing which school their child will attend—as discussed earlier in this chapter—and perception of neighborhood and campus safety is often a prominent factor in school choice (Bukhari & Randall, 2009; Garen, 2014; Oluyomi, Lee, Nehme, Dowdy, Ory, & Hoelscher, 2014).

Measures of parents and families' perceptions of their children's safety at school varied greatly in the literature; unlike administrators, teachers, and students, there are few formal, nationally published assessments that gauge specific risk-based perceptions of the parent/family stakeholder subgroup. Some school districts and counties in the United States do conduct annual parent surveys on a variety of topics, which include matters of student safety. However; one such

survey in Whitfield County, Georgia, indicated that families of elementary school students expressed greater degrees of confidence that their children were safe in school than did families of secondary students (Bernhardt Survey, 2012). Ewton (2014) found that the administrators of Whitfield County schools consistently rated student safety more highly than the parents did, and he noted that because the survey was conducted prior to the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut in December 2012, the results were unlikely to represent families' current perceptions of student safety.

The past several years' results from the annual Phi Delta Kappa (PDK)/Gallup survey of *Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* highlight the complexity of scientifically determining the best combination of leadership, physical safety measures, legislative provisions, faculty training, student demographics, instructional supports, and community relationships that constitute the safest and most productive possible school climate. The most recent PDK/Gallup survey results have indicated that Americans' top concern about public schools is the quality of teachers (Starr, 2015) and the past several years have shown similar priorities, focused upon educational policy, governance, and teacher training rather than safety as their primary concerns about public education (Bushaw & Calderon, 2014; Bushaw & Lopez, 2010, 2011, 2013).

In addition to limited availability of parent surveys, inconsistent timing of survey administration, and the multitude of factors comprising school climate, the lack of validation of measures employed presents a difficulty in using the resultant data to generate a representative understanding of the school and community climate regarding safety matters (Bear, Yang, & Pasipanodya, 2015; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Schueler, Capotosto, Bahena, McIntyre, & Gehlbach, 2014). In the absence of a measure of parent perceptions of safety agreed

upon by a majority of school climate researchers, the most consistent national measure that contributes to the discussion of stakeholder safety perceptions is Gallup's Work and Education poll, which has been conducted in the U.S. every August since 1977. The Gallup items regarding school safety specifically ask parents if they fear for the physical safety of their oldest child while the child is at school and whether their children have expressed school-related safety fears to them at home. Result trends over the years that this poll has been administered indicate that parental fears tend to dramatically increase in the year following a nationally reported incident of school violence, then gradually diminish to at or near pre-tragedy levels—and each temporary increase in parental fears has been smaller in magnitude than the previous spikes. The Gallup trends illustrate the pattern of legislative pressures discussed in the policy diffusion section of this review; the historical high of 55% of parents expressing fear for their child's safety was in the year following the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999. Meanwhile, the percentage of parents stating that their children had expressed fears for their own physical safety at school had remained relatively stable throughout the past decade and a half of the Gallup survey (McCarthy, 2014; 2015). Of additional interest were the differences in levels of parental fears by gender, race, and socioeconomic status in the most recent poll—mothers, parents in non-white families, and parents in low-income families all exhibited higher percentages of fear for their children's safety than did their counterparts (McCarthy, 2015).

Conclusion—What Knowledge is Missing?

Review of the literature related to the safety of the school environment, when focused through the lens of the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Bioecological Systems Theory, showed a progression of legislative actions resulting from public pressures in response to

incidents of school violence and global competition over academic achievement. As previously

which created the *zero tolerance* atmosphere in which students in the United States are

struggling to establish and maintain a positive and productive identity. Students with

exceptionalities have experienced a singularly difficult time trying to "fit" into the public

educational framework, and state legislatures, particularly in the state of Florida, have responded

by enabling families to place exceptional students into specialized educational institutions.

Stakeholders (administrators, faculty, students, and families) in such environments are likely to

express different priorities of personal safety in the school setting than do their counterparts who

participate in general public education, who consistently express fears of personal and

organizational victimization by acts of school violence, despite the statistical rarity of such

danger.

Research on the topics of school safety provisions for students with exceptionalities and

the general perceptions of educational stakeholders regarding school safety indicated that

applicability of federal and state legislation on school safety and student discipline to private

schools is unclear and largely unaddressed in the literature. Although several national indicators

did include private school students in the survey sample, private schools were not consistently

represented in the data and were not included in the Florida Youth Risk Behaviors Survey. This

study will fill the gap in the literature by providing a link between stakeholder perceptions of

safety in a private school for students with exceptionalities and the legal provisions of Florida

school safety laws.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which school safety legislative priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of school administrators, faculty and staff, students, and families in private schools for exceptional students. The specific research questions posed in this study are:

1. What are the most prominently addressed risks—in terms of severity and likelihood of occurrence--to school safety for general population public school students, exceptional students, and private school exceptional students, as indicated by federal and state school safety laws in the state of Florida?

2. What are the perceived priority factors of school safety, according to administrators, faculty, staff, students, and families of Florida private school students with learning exceptionalities?

3. What is the congruence between the risks identified by federal/state school safety laws and the safety concerns of stakeholders in Florida private schools for students with learning exceptionalities?

Research Design

This study used a non-experimental research design to investigate a non-causal relationship between two data sets—school safety risks as prioritized by existing federal and state laws within the state of Florida, and the priority of risks as described by educational stakeholders in Florida private schools that serve exceptional student populations. Neither data set was manipulated as an independent variable, nor were any controls for extraneous variables used; therefore, the non-experimental research design is the most appropriate to accomplish the

purpose of this study (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Price, 2012). Specifically, this study is

correlational research; no treatment or program of instruction was administered to the

participants in this study (i.e., the data set of *indicated safety risks* was not manipulated for any

subgroup of the study population). Rather, the study analyzed the congruence of the study

participants' perceptions of priority of safety risks with the list of derived safety risk factors

without manipulation and without intent to show any sort of causal relationship between the two

variables (Price, 2012). The function of correlational research is to seek to identify and describe

a relationship between two variables, and it is perhaps the most common design for quantitative

studies in educational psychology and sociology (Huitt, 2003).

Site selection- Context and access

High school students, their parents/guardians, and school faculty and staff in four similar

locations participated in this study via electronic survey completion. Within the context of the

purpose of this study, sites were required to be private schools that serve students with

exceptionalities as a majority of their student bodies, and the schools must be geographically

operating within the state of Florida. The schools must also be under the jurisdiction (i.e., must

be schools serving K-12 students) of the specific school safety laws, as discussed in the previous

chapter, regarding the prioritized risks to school safety. There are 170 private schools in Florida

that meet the base criteria detailed above (Private School Review, 2016). To determine the most

appropriate sites from which to select participants for this study, only those schools that

exclusively served students with exceptionalities were considered; additionally, the schools had

to include high school aged (i.e., grades 9-12) students. By choosing exclusivity and age of

student population as filtering criteria, the number of sites available for this study narrowed to

122 schools. From these 122 schools, those that reported a total student population of less than

40 students were excluded, to ensure the selected sites offered a sufficient number of potential

participants in each surveyed subgroup and allows the reasonable assumption that the students'

class sizes were such that opportunities for social interactions between students were a daily

occurrence. Filtering the list for size of student body resulted in a list of 57 schools from which

to choose; removing schools reporting less than 30 high school students narrowed the population

to 35 schools. Many (19) of those schools were multi-site campuses under a corporate franchise

model, and the parent schools of those organizations, by policy, do not permit their schools to

participate in research; three others were removed from consideration due to previously

established relationships with the researcher, in order to prevent a conflict of interest.

Initial inquiry letters to the administrators of the remaining 13 schools resulted in two

schools declining to participate; four others requested additional information and declined after

reviewing an outline of the study details. Four schools agreed to participate and provided letters

of support, and the final three remained undecided but open to further communication.

Description of the Population

The selected participant schools are representative populations of the description in the

previous chapter of *exceptional students* (i.e., gifted students with learning difficulties). The

selected schools serve students challenged by ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, Persistent

Developmental Delays (PDD), and various Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses by

presenting a multisensory curriculum and social skills coaching. There are, of course, many

private schools in Florida that serve similar student populations; however, not all of them are

equipped with appropriately trained faculty and staff to accommodate the needs of all the

learning differences that were detailed previously, and therefore many of the schools have only one type or a few types of exceptional students. The selected schools are a more representative sample of the exceptional student population in Florida because they do include students across the entire spectrum of exceptionalities listed in chapter two of this study; additionally, the schools operate in four separate counties and the families they serve are of varying ethnicity and socioeconomic status. A brief demographic summary of the four sites is displayed below.

Table 2: *Demographic summary of selected research sites* (Private School Review, 2016; United States Census Bureau, 2016)

Sites	High School Students	Student/ Teacher Ratio	Student (K-12) Ethnic composition	County ethnic composition	County median income	County population
1	40	6:1	70% white and Hispanic	80% white and Hispanic	$57,010	455,479
			30% African-American	12% African-American		
2	29	10:1	10% white and Hispanic	68% white and Hispanic	$46,745	287,822
			90% African-American	31% African-American		
3	62	9:1	79% white and Hispanic	71% white and Hispanic	$50,579	1.38 million
			21% African-American	17% African-American		
4	32	10:1	67% white and Hispanic	68% white and Hispanic	$46,764	880,619
			33% African-American	30% African-American		

Description of the sample (size and power)

Preliminary examination of the population from which the sample was selected identified a total of 2,831 high school (grades 9 – 12) students currently enrolled in 122 private schools for exceptional students within the state of Florida (Private School Review, 2016). Ideally, as large a sample as possible would maximize the likelihood that the sample will be representative of the population from which it is drawn—but the statistical power of the actual obtained sample may

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achieve significant results with smaller sample size (Vogt, 2007). However, the criteria discussed

in the previous paragraph must be considered in order to select a sample that was representative

of the exceptional student community in Florida in terms of specific learning difference

diagnoses. For survey research—which is the most common instrumental choice for quantitative

studies in education research (Muijs, 2011), the ideal response rate achieved by dissertation

researchers is 40% (Vogt, 2007). Therefore, with a potential sample population of 163 students,

an assumption of 40% response rate would yield a sample size of 65 students, which would

exceed the required sample size of 61 students to achieve a confidence interval of 10% with

confidence level 95% (Creative Research Systems, 2012). Assuming the same numbers for

students' parents/guardians (allowing for instructions to respondents to submit only one parent

response per student), at least 61 respondents is ideal. For the faculty/staff subgroup, the

participating schools reported their faculty and administrative staff personnel totals prior to

shipment of study recruitment packets; total high school faculty/staff population of $N = 57$.

Therefore, to achieve the same CI/CL of 10% and 95%, respectively, 36 faculty respondents is

ideal.

Sampling method(s):

The purpose of this study necessitated a deliberate sampling method, in that the targeted

population was a group with rather specific characteristics (exceptional students, their

parents/guardians, and their teachers/administrators) and resided in specific locations (Florida

private schools that exclusively enroll exceptional students). Therefore, the sample was a

purposive nonprobability sample that resulted in selection of a population of cases that were

most likely to be typical of the targeted population, rather than a random sample of the state's

population of students in all forms of education providers. Purposive nonprobability sampling is one of the most common sampling methods in survey-based research, because it provides the researcher the opportunity to achieve the maximum number of respondents in each selected subgroup. The population from which the sample is drawn is considered either typical of the type of respondent sought or in some cases, the most diverse population available (Vogt, 2007). Selection of schools to invite for participation also employed the method of *judgement sampling* (Fowler, 2014): choosing the four school sites selected from which to draw the sample maximized the likelihood of drawing a sample that would yield both the most typical and diverse representation of the exceptional student population in Florida. Although nonprobability sampling methods do not eliminate bias as efficiently as random sampling practices and therefore the resultant sample is not as statistically generalizable as representative of the targeted population (Vogt, 2007), the sample can be said to be "representative in a purposive sense" (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 355).

Protocols and Instrumentation

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which school safety legislative priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of groups in private schools for exceptional students. The principal instrument to obtain stakeholder perceptions of safety risks was an electronic survey, which was distributed to high school students, teachers, administrative and services staff, and parents/guardians of the four schools that agreed to participate. The survey was comprised of a series of magnitude scales regarding respondents' perceptions of prevalence and importance of specific risks to school safety.

There are several reasons for the choice to conduct the survey electronically. First, the characteristics of the student subgroup of the targeted population made certain precautions necessary to protect the emotional well-being of the respondents. Some of the students in the target population may experience greater levels of anxiety in both academic and social situations due to the nature of their personal learning differences (e.g., high-functioning ASD, etc.). Therefore, a face-to-face survey conducted by an unfamiliar person (myself as the researcher) with perceived authority may have caused the student undue anxiety (Kuusikko, et al., 2008). Such anxiety would potentially limit the openness of their responses (Jansch & Hare, 2014; Vogt, 2007), in addition to negatively impacting the students' emotional state. Additionally, because extended written responses often present difficulties and stressors for some student respondents who are challenged by dyslexic and dysgraphic learning differences (Berninger, Richards, & Abbot, 2015), the survey items were constructed as closed questions rather than open-ended responses that would require more extensive writing. Constructing closed survey items was also preferred due to the likelihood of decreased standardization and comparability of open-ended response survey items (Muijs, 2011).

To prevent the loss of individual autonomy, however, survey items included a "no opinion" option so that respondents were not forced to take an artificial perspective on any questions or topics that did not personally concern or interest them (deVaus, 1990; Muijs, 2011). The definition provided to respondents for the no response option clearly stated that the option means the respondent does not have any positive or negative opinion about the issue addressed by the question(s) (Nadler, Weston & Voyles, 2015). The clarification of the no response option mitigates respondent tendencies to select it without thinking about their actual opinions—a

phenomenon Alreck & Settle (1985) called "piling on the midpoint" (p. 156). The use of a sliding magnitude scale to register respondents' perceptions lessened the potential for "overspecifying the data as having interval or ratio properties [which] will misrepresent the relations truly implied by their judgements" (Lodge, 1981, p. 30). In other words, using a numeric estimation in the form of a sliding scale to register respondents' impressions may more accurately represent the intensity of respondents' perceptions of the individual safety risk factors.

The survey itself was hosted via Qualtrics to allow for simplified data collection and coding. Conducting a survey electronically also has the added benefit of protecting the anonymity of participants' responses, which should result in a greater response rate (Vogt, 2007). The schools' administrative staffs distributed the link and access procedures for the survey and forwarded the pre-written instructions to the rest of the faculty and staff, the high school students, and the students' parents and guardians. The instructions are included in this document as Appendix C.

All adult respondents expressed their informed consent to participate via electronic signature on an intermediate webpage; a respondent's electronic signature on the statement of informed consent granted them access to the survey questions and was by design isolated from their specific set of answers to the survey questions. School administrators distributed to parents and guardians a hard-copy consent statement for their children to participate, accompanied by a statement of informed assent for minors. Survey access and instruction packets were sent only to students whose parents/guardians had returned both signed forms (via self-addressed, stamped envelope included in the recruitment packet), and student surveys presented respondents with a reminder of their assent and rights in similar fashion to the adult respondents' survey access

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pages. All statements of consent and assent are included in this document as Appendix B. The

survey required no personally identifying data other than what category of respondent has

completed the survey (i.e., administrator, faculty, staff, student, family member) and general

demographic information. The surveys were distributed the survey during the Fall 2017 school

semester, after school had been in session for at least one month and at least one month prior to

semester exam periods, which provided a window of six weeks from September and October to

collect data.

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Research Protocols and Instrumentation

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Reliability and Validity

Reliability refers to the stability and consistency of the measures used to obtain research

data, or more practically, the degree to which the research process and instrumentation is free of

measurement error (Muijs, 2011). The purpose of this study is key to understanding the

reliability-related risks of the non-experimental, correlational design of the research.

Specifically, there was no manipulation of the data sets, which represented the variables in the

study, and this research sought to quantify the congruence between the legislatively estimated

risks and stakeholders' perceptions of school safety priorities. It would be difficult to determine

any sort of causal relationship because the temporal order of the variables cannot be established

and too many other possible factors could be responsible for causing the perceptions of the

targeted population (cf. Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Both the process of recruiting

respondents and the format and content of the survey instrument remained focused upon

determining stakeholder perceptions without suggestion, implication, inference, or claim of any

causal relationship between the legislatively identified risk priorities and respondents' responses.

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Because the survey instruments were administered a single time in this study, repeated-measurement methods of reporting reliability were unavailable; therefore, the internal consistency of the measures and the resultant respondent data must suffice (Crocker & Algina, 1986; Muijs, 2011). Overall coefficient alpha (or Cronbach's alpha), preferred above 0.7 (Crocker & Algina, 1986), is reported below in Table 3 (below). Table 3 is a summary of the reliability statistics for the three survey instruments; the instruments were evaluated for the *likelihood* related items and *severity* related items separately in order to prevent negative correlations between the sections of the instrument(s).

Table 3: *Reliability data of survey instruments*

Parameter	Alpha
Parent/Guardian Likelihood	.803
Parent/Guardian Severity	.800
Faculty/Staff Likelihood	.878
Faculty/Staff Severity	.759
Student Likelihood	.922
Student Severity	.894

Because this study is a non-experimental research design and therefore does not seek to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between variables, questions of internal validity are not at issue (cf., Mitchell, 1985). However, the validity of the statistical conclusions drawn in this study are quite dependent upon the reliability of the measurement instrument and appropriate use of statistical tests for the data. Unclear operational definition of the key concepts of the variables

of legislatively identified risks to school safety and stakeholder perceptions of safety risks could act as confounding variables, despite the non-experimental, correlational design. Thus, operational definition is in essence a matter of *construct validity* (cf., Cook & Campbell, 1976) and evidences as variance in the measure that was not in the construct or vice versa (Schwab, 1980).

Validity, in this study, is approached as a process that works to refine operational construct as well as the measurement instrument (cf., Campbell & Stanley, 1963); the approach also borrows from Messick's (1980) theory that all forms of validity are merely subdivisions of construct validity. Therefore, evidence reported in terms of the conclusions drawn from the perceptions measurement and their appropriateness with the instrument items are effective representations of the construct of risks to school safety. With such an approach in mind, the *content validity* of the survey instrument is evidenced by evaluation of survey item content as to whether the items are the best selections and properly worded to measure the concept of perception regarding the prominence and priority of school safety factors (cf., Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Muijs, 2007; Vogt, 2011). The previous chapter's literature review provided the baseline for content evidence by cataloguing knowledge of the various aspects of the school safety concept. *Face validity*, however, requires evaluation by others who are knowledgeable about the problem studied; other private school administrators in Florida who were not involved with this study reviewed the survey instruments and judged that the surveys provide sufficient opportunity to accurately rate perceptions of school safety factors and their relative importance. Finally, to show the *criterion validity* of the study, the survey instruments are comparable to commonly used questionnaires in existing studies, such as the CDC's Youth Risk Behaviors

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Survey (YRBS), USDOE's National Indicators of School Crime and Safety, and GLSEN's

National School Climate Survey. The survey instruments for this study used similar rating scales

and were structured in similar fashion, with intentional differences in tone and wording of survey

items to prevent any suggestion to respondents of the inherent prevalence or priority of any

specific potential threat to school safety.

Data Sources and Coding

Results of the review of extant literature on the most prevalent and highest perceived

risks to school safety in federal and state legislation were combined with the results of the most

recent national school climate, youth risk behaviors, and school crime indicators to generate the

data set of prioritized identified safety risks, as described in Chapter Two. The list of factors was

then subjected to the ORM process to account for the likelihood of an identified risk to safety

occurring. The ORM Risk Assessment Matrix, displayed as Figure 1 in Chapter Two, is

represented in Table 4 (below). Each identified risk was evaluated for severity based upon its

description of potential outcomes; the probability of the risk actually occurring was determined

by historical data of school safety incidents, as described in Chapter Two and noted below.

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Table 4: *Identified Risks Assessment Matrix*

Identified Risk	Severity Category	Probability Subcategory	Initial RAC	Mitigation Measures	Final RAC
Weapon possession	1	C (may)	2	Federal, state laws; physical security measures[a]	3
Physical threats/assault	2	B (probable)	2	State laws; Student Code of Conduct [b]	3
Drugs	3	A (likely)	2	Federal, state laws [c]	3
Gang Activity	2	B (probable)	2	Federal, state laws [d]	3
Bullying	3	B (probable)	3	Federal, state laws; FLDOE Model Policy[e]	4
Cyberbullying	3	B (probable)	3	State laws [f]	4
Hate Speech	3	B (probable)	3	Federal, state laws [g]	4
Sexual Harassment	3	C (may)	4	Federal, state laws; district, school policy [h]	5
Destructive Weather	2	D (unlikely)	4	Federal, state laws [i]	5
Fire	2	D (unlikely)	4	State regulations [i]	5
Armed attack by intruder	1	D (unlikely)	3	Best practices, FLDOE memos [j]	4

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[a] Possession of weapons—specifically firearms—in or near a school property is expressly prohibited by the Gun Free Schools Act, U. S. Title IV, Part A, Subparts 1 and 3. The law directs states to require a minimum one-year expulsion for any student discovered to be in possession of a weapon on school property. Florida state statutes further define "weapon" in § 790.001(13) and mandates the one-year expulsion for possession of firearms or other items meeting the "weapon" definition (§ 790.115).

[b] Threats of physical violence are treated by Florida statutes as either *stalking* (§ 784.048), *threats/extortion* (§ 836.05), or *written threat* (§ 836.10), as applicable. All such offenses carry potential felony-level penalties. Actual physical assaults are addressed as *assault* (§ 784.011) or *aggravated assault* (§ 784.021), and both carry potential felony-level penalties. FLDOE mandates district-level Student Codes of Conduct classify threats of assault and actual physical assaults as TRE-Level 3 Offenses, which in most cases requires school officials to surrender the case to law enforcement (2014).

[c] Both federal law and Florida state law consider drug possession, use, and/or distribution within certain distances of a school as a separate crime with greater penalties than a regular drug-related offense. 21 U.S.C. 841, the federal Controlled Substances Act, details fines and mandatory prison sentences for possession and/or trafficking, which vary by the type of drug involved in the offense. The 1989 Amendments to the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act permitted states to determine the size of the "Drug-Free Zone" around their schools. 21 U.S.C. 860 doubles the maximum federal punishments for drug offenses if they occur within 1,000 feet of a school. Florida § 499.03 (possession), 877.111 (use), and 893.147 (possession or promotion of drug paraphernalia) mandate a pattern of enforcement similar to that expressed in federal law. FLDOE

(2014) requires possession, use, or possession of paraphernalia within 1,000 yards of a school be treated as a Level III offense, which requires reporting to law enforcement.

[d] 18 U.S.C. 521 Criminal Street Gangs statute defines gang activity as an individual knowingly participating with an organization known to have committed a continuous series of criminal events (Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act,1994, 2011); Florida § 874 affirms the same definition. FLDOE guidance indicates that gang activities on school grounds should be documented and reported to local law enforcement agencies (2014). Dependent upon the actual activity (i.e., assault, threats, weapon possession, harassment, etc.), gang activity in schools may be dealt with according to the individual actions of reported gang members, and schools may request state funding to participate in local juvenile crime prevention programs under Title I, Part D (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965, 2016).

[e] Documented bullying behaviors at school may be addressed as *harassment* under 42 U. S. C., Titles VI and IX (The Civil Rights Act of 1964, 1972), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, or Title II (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990), dependent upon the nature of the bullying behavior and the race, gender, and/or disability status of the victim(s). Florida statutes affirm the treatment of bullying behaviors as harassment under § 1006.147 and by FLDOE Model Policy guidance for district-level enforcement (2006, 2016).

[f] Laws that specifically address cyberbullying, particularly in a school context, do not currently exist at the federal level, nor in the state of Florida. Because cyberbullying behavior typically occurs outside of school hours and away from school grounds, the jurisdiction of the school to take disciplinary action is limited (Evans, 2011). Verified and documented incidents of

cyberbullying may potentially be prosecuted as stalking or harassment, but burden of proof prevents many cases from being reported (Young, Tully, & Ramirez, 2017).

[g] Hate speech is another difficult offense to document, as the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of expression under First Amendment rights (Kader, 2015). Additionally, hate speech may be considered legal under the Fourteenth Amendment "Equal Protection Clause," which states that a citizen's privileges and immunities (in this instance, their First Amendment right to free expression) may not be abridged (Moore, 2016). Speech that school officials are in fact able to legally define as a hate crime under 18 U.S. Code 249 would still be difficult to prosecute— the law is not specific nor consistent about hate speech without an accompanying physical act of violence, and "hate itself is not a crime" (United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.).

[h] Sexual Harassment is both defined and forbidden by U.S. Title IX and clarified by U.S. DOE 4000-01-P Guidance Memorandum (1997). Florida Statutes, under § 1006.147, treat sexual harassment at school as a form of bullying (2015).

[i] Destructive weather responses and fire prevention for schools are briefly and vaguely covered by federal law through the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which requires written disaster response plans for any business with greater than ten employees (Occupational Safety and Health Standards, 29 C.F.R., 1996). Florida law requires annual fire drills for all Category I buildings, which includes schools (Atwater, 2014). Florida schools are specifically required to conduct annual drills for fire, natural disasters, bomb threats, and emergency notification for situations involving weapons or a hostage (Florida Statutes, 2015, §1006.07(2)2m4).

[j] Florida Department of Education policy mandates participation and compliance with U. S. Department of Homeland Security initiatives concerning campus access, security equipment,

emergency notification processes, and training through the DHS National Incident Management

System (NIMS) (Winn, 2006).

For purposes of this study, the identified risks in Table 4 (above) are grouped on five safety

risk factors:

- *General Feelings of Safety*: Physical (Facility) Measures, Administrative Responsiveness,

  General Attitudes

- *Criminal Activity (External)*: Drugs, Gang Activity, Armed Intruder

- *Unkind Behaviors*: Bullying, Cyberbullying, Hate Speech, Sexual Harassment

- *Criminal Activity (Internal)*: Weapon Possession, Threats/Assault, Theft

- *Uncontrollable Phenomena*: Destructive Weather, Fire

Respondent data was utilized in comparison with the RAC for four of the above five factors by

loading designated survey questions onto each factor and conducting Principal Component

Analysis (PCA) in SPSS, the results of which are described in Chapter Four. The fifth factor,

Uncontrollable Phenomena, was omitted from the data collection and analysis process because

the Residual Risk after applying mitigating actions resulted in a risk rating of "5," or "negligible"

(see Figure 1). Determination of destructive weather and fire risks to school safety was based

upon the historically low (modern era) fatalities and injuries attributed to such phenomena and

that schools are cancelled or not in session during the majority of destructive weather and/or fire

events (NFPA, 2017; NOAA, 2017a, 2017b). Additionally, more than two-thirds of fires on

school properties were caused by something other than intentional human actions (Campbell,

2017).

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Data Collection

Prior to collection: The data collection procedures described earlier in this chapter commenced after establishing an agreement with the administrative staffs of the selected schools concerning the methods for distribution of the survey link, consent protocols for participants, and guidelines for the actual administration of the survey. Criteria covered by the agreement with the selected schools included:

- potential respondents' contact information will remain under the control of school officials, and at no time will the researcher have direct access to such information;

- potential respondents must read and electronically sign the informed consent for their own participation; parents/guardians must read and physically sign the consent form for their minor students to participate; and minor students must read and electronically sign the informed assent form for their own participation before the survey link will allow them access to the survey questions; and

- signed consent and assent forms will be electronically stored on the secure drive at University of North Florida for the duration of the study only, and only the researcher and the faculty committee will have access to view the files, which will be destroyed upon completion of the study (see Appendices B and C for examples).

During data collection: Data collection commenced September 16, 2017 and continued until November 8, 2017. Participant packets were shipped to each participating school to distribute one to each faculty/staff/administrative member and one to each family (parent/guardian) of their high school students. School administrative directors and principals

were also reminded that student participant packets would only be sent after the signed Parental Consent forms were received, which parents/guardians could return via a self-addressed, stamped envelope included in each Parent/Guardian participant packet.

Responses to the Parent/Guardian survey were returned at an unexpectedly high rate within the first three weeks and far outpaced the Faculty/Staff and Student responses overall; however, parents returning the Parental Consent forms for their children to receive a survey packet took much longer to accomplish. Eventually, just under 30 percent of them were returned, all of which arrived during the fourth and fifth week of the data collection period. Student packets were shipped to administrators at the end of the fifth week--with a list of students with parental consent-- to distribute the packets to the appropriate students.

Administrators of the participating schools voluntarily kept in touch throughout the seven-week data collection period. "Friendly reminder" messages from the principal researcher to the schools' administrative principal/director were emailed every other week during the planned six-week data collection period to encourage maximum participation, and the survey remained open for one additional week for all participating schools in response to a request from one of the Directors to do so.

After data collection: Once the additional (seventh) week of data collection had passed, the principal researcher closed access to all three surveys in Qualtrics, uploaded scanned copies to (UNF OneDrive) of the Parental Consent and Informed Assent documents that had been returned, and shredded the original signed copies, in accordance with the pre-collection written agreement with the participating schools.

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Researcher positionality

As an administrator in a Florida private school that serves exceptional students, the principal researcher was keenly interested in capturing the perspectives of the unique population targeted in this study, but also particularly aware of and greatly concerned with the protection of the privacy and well-being of the subgroup of students addressed. Strictly enforced safeguards, as described in this document, ensured that respondents' confidentiality was protected by separation of their personal information—to include descriptive demographics of gender, age, and grade level, as well as their signatures of consent/assent—from their survey responses. Additionally, the questions presented in the survey instrument were worded in such a manner to prevent generating unsafe feelings or undue fears in the respondents concerning the potential risks addressed by the instrument. Participants retained the right to end their participation without completing the survey at any point during the survey administration; this option was made clear to them in the survey instructions, in addition to the assurance that there will be no negative feedback or effects should they choose not to complete the survey.

Threats to internal validity

Because this study is a non-experimental design and involves a single measurement in a single point of time for each subgroup, many of the threats to the internal validity of a quantitative study are not factors for this study (e.g., history effects, maturation, etc.). However, the precision of the measurement instruments employed in this study may present a threat to the internal validity of the measure. Since the survey instruments use a sliding scale from 0-100 to indicate the magnitude of a participant's response, there is potential for *ceiling* and *floor* effects—the high and low ends of the rating scale may be rendered less precise if respondents

begin to cluster their opinions toward one or the other, thereby making it more difficult to

determine if any significant difference exists between their thoughts on groups of items. Such

respondent behavior could also represent a *testing effect* as a threat to internal validity (cf. Lund

Research, 2012).

Threats to external validity

The purpose of this study targeted only the population of Florida private schools that

exclusively serve exceptional students. Results may be considered generalizable across that

population only. Concerning threats to the study's external validity, the description earlier in this

chapter of the sampling and selection methods employed minimized potential effects of *selection

bias*—the sample was purposively selected to be directly representative of the targeted

population. However, because this study focused on a non-probability sample and all the

respondents to the survey instruments volunteered to participate, the extent to which another

researcher could replicate the results of this study may be limited due to *volunteer bias*. Finally,

the effects of major school safety-related incidents occurring in close proximity to administration

of the measurement instruments would be likely to produce different results in measurement of

respondents' perceptions of the *constructs* of incident *likelihood* and *severity*, as well as their

overall general feelings of safety (Lund Research, 2012).

Ethical issues

All participants were required to provide their informed consent by use of a gate-keeping

response item at the start of their surveys, as previously described. The item repeated details of

the study and conditions for their voluntary participation and was an identical copy of the

consent paper contained in their participant recruitment packet. A "no" response to the question

of their desire to participate resulted in a brief message thanking them for their time, and the survey access was immediately terminated. In addition, parents/guardians were required to return a Parental Consent form, which included Informed Assent for Minor Participants, before a student participant recruitment packet could be sent to potential student participants. The students who then accessed the survey were presented with the same gate-keeping question to ensure they were participating voluntarily and with full information about the conditions of their participation. Copies of consent and assent forms, in addition to the University of North Florida Institutional Review Board approval of the research protocol, are located in Appendix A of this document.

Treatment and Sorting of Data

In order to compare respondents' perceptions of school safety risk factors' *likelihood* and *severity* to the previously determined ORM matrix Risk Assessment Codes based upon state and federal laws and incident statistics (see Table 4), the aforementioned ORM matrix data had to be added to the respondent subgroup datasets. Additionally, because ORM *likelihood* data is coded by the letters A, B, C, and D, the letter coding had to be converted to a numbered system to enable statistical comparisons to the respondents' perceptions, which were measured by sliding-scale responses ranging from 0 to 100. Likewise, to compare mean respondent ratings of specific identified threats' *likelihood* and *severity*, the sliding scale ratings had to be converted to ORM matrix compatible ratings. Table 5 (below) is an explanation of the data conversions conducted.

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Table 5: *Respondent rating to ORM Matrix data conversions*

Respondent ratings (mean)	ORM severity rating	ORM likelihood rating
76-100	1	1=A (likely)
50-74	2	2=B (probable)
25-49	3	3=C (may)
0-24	4	4=D (unlikely)

ORM data from Table 4 was uploaded to SPSS in Excel format and merged as new variable with the appropriate subgroup data set; one variable for ORM *severity* ratings, and one variable for ORM *likelihood* ratings. Missing data, due to respondents skipping a question, selecting the "no opinion" response option rather than rating their perception, or not completing the survey was ignored. Replacing the missing responses with the mean value for the subgroup responses would have made no significant difference, but replacing missing values with zeroes would have greatly skewed the results, due to the small size of the sample.

Data Analysis

The initial intent for data analysis was to conduct a factor analysis of the respondent data to determine congruence of the targeted population's perceptions of risk priorities to the previously determined factors identified in state and federal school safety laws and incident statistics, as detailed earlier in this chapter. However, respondent data for each subgroup loaded predominantly on only one or two factors, making such a congruence comparison untenable (cf. Lorenzo-Seva & ten Berge, 2006). Chapter 4 (Results) includes a detailed description and discussion of the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) conducted in SPSS and why the results

led to a decision to instead focus upon analysis of Pearson product-moment correlations between respondent perceptions and the pre-determined ORM matrix data from Table 4.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which school safety legislative priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of school administrators, faculty and staff, students, and families in private schools for exceptional students. A non-experimental, correlational research design is the most appropriate to determine the answers to the research questions presented in Chapter One (and repeated here in the opening of this chapter), because the purpose of this study is to identify a compare-and-contrast relationship between the risk factors, rather than formulating a conclusion of causality between them. Also for reasons of ease of comparison, a magnitude-scale survey is an effective choice and was delivered electronically in order to ensure participant confidentiality. Survey items were crafted to address each of the potential risks identified, but worded such that they do not suggest, imply, or lead respondents to answer in any particular fashion, and also to avoid causing undue stress and anxiety in respondents. Finally, the data was analyzed through SPSS to evaluate correlation between the identified risk factors set and the respondent risk factors set.

Anticipated conclusions from analysis of the data relationships included evidence of incongruity between what federal and state legislators seem to believe are the greatest risks to school safety and what educational stakeholders in the targeted population perceive on the same factors. Conclusions from data analysis are discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which school safety legislative priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of school administrators, faculty and staff, students, and families in private schools for exceptional students.

Data Preparation

Participating schools returned 76 of 163 Parent/Guardian, 38 of 57 Faculty/Staff, and 46 of 163 Student surveys. Not all responses were complete, as some participants declined to answer certain questions or did not finish the survey in its entirety; also, as detailed in Chapter 3, a "no opinion" response option was available to respondents for individual survey items. For the purposes of this study, the number of respondents for individual items is reported in Tables 8, 9, and 11 to clarify the mean values of the responses.

Following the original plan to conduct factor analysis of respondent data to compare to the previously determined risk factors from federal and state school safety laws and incident statistics, the data was subjected to the appropriate tests in SPSS to verify suitability for Principal Component Analysis (PCA). The data was continuous and displayed adequate linear relationships, and although the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) was not above the desired 0.8, values were over 0.7 for each subgroup's set of data and all subgroups' data yielded a low p-value for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (IBM Knowledge Center, n.d.; Lund Research, 2012). However, the results of the PCA were not at all suitable to perform a logical comparison for the purpose of this study. Specifically, nearly all the items for each subgroup

loaded on only two factors, and nearly all the *severity* items for each subgroup loaded together

on factor 2 (see Table 6, below).

Table 6: *Respondent data item loading, PCA results*

Factor	Parent/Guardian items	Faculty/Staff items	Student items
1	22	20	18
2	8	7	9
3	0	1	1
4	0	2	1
5	0	0	1

Because the PCA results did not provide comparable factors to the four categories/factors

derived in Chapter 3, it was appropriate to investigate Pearson correlations between the *severity*

and *likelihood* items for each subgroup in order to establish an adequate framework for

comparison. Assumptions for Pearson's *r* include normally distributed continuous data with

linear relationships between pairs of variables, with minimal/no outliers, and the data must

exhibit homoscedasticity, all of which were checked for each subgroup dataset by examining

their Q-Q plots (Lund Research, 2012).

Respondent Demographics

Key demographic data of the respondent subgroups are reported as percentages of the

responding population in Table 7 (below).

Table 7: *Demographic statistics of participant subgroups*

Demographic	Parent/Guardian % (*N*=76)	Faculty/Staff % (*N*=38)	Student % (*N*=46)
Gender: Female	80	81.1	35.1
Male	20	18.9	45.9
Self-describe			10.8
Race: Caucasian/White	78.5	78.4	67.6
African-American/Black	15.4	10.8	18.9
Hispanic	3.1	2.7	5.4
Asian/Pacific Islander			2.7
Other	3.1	5.4	5.4
Education: High School	9.2	2.7	
Some college	21.5	8.1	
Associates' Degree	10.8		
Bachelor's Degree	35.4	56.8	
Graduate Degree	16.9	32.4	
9th Grade	29.7	16.2	16.2
10th Grade	29.7	13.5	21.6
11th Grade	20.3	21.6	29.7
12th Grade	18.8	10.8	29.7

Administrative/Staff	32.4

Note: Current grade-level position is read as current grade level of child for Parent/Guardian

subgroup; grade level taught for Faculty/Staff; and current grade in school for Students.

Results

Participants were asked a series of questions concerning how severe an impact certain

potential threats might have upon their feelings of safety at school. The sliding response scale

ranged from zero ("minor problem") to 100 ("worst thing that could happen"). All three

respondent subgroups generally agreed upon their perceptions, although the order of priority for

each group was slightly different. Overall, parents/guardians perceived *sexual harassment* and

weapon possession by a student to be the most severe threats; faculty and staff indicated that an

armed intruder presented the most severe potential (followed closely by *sexual harassment*).

Students agreed with their parents that *sexual harassment* would most severely impact their

safety, but indicated *cyberbullying* was second.

Table 8: *Mean respondent ratings for severity items*

Threat	Parent/Guardian	Faculty/Staff	Student
Bullying	59.44	58.97	56.38
N	64	37	37
Fights	68.28	60.95	57.95
N	64	37	37
Armed intruder	81.78	77.08	64.31
N	65	37	36

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Hate speech	71.31	61.75	57.32
N	65	36	37
Weapon possession	82.45	68.40	61.92
N	64	35	36
Cyberbullying	72.89	61.00	68.03
N	63	36	37
Violent threats	74.85	68.29	66.14
N	65	35	36
Sexual harassment	84.80	76.39	73.22
N	64	36	37
Drugs on campus	75.13	64.71	59.17
N	64	35	36

Ranking an order of priority, however, was difficult, since none of the subgroups' mean responses clearly differentiated between the potential threats, as indicated in Table 8 (above). Similarly, when asked to rate their perceptions of the *likelihood* of occurrence of a series of potential threats, all three respondent subgroups indicated that *cyberbullying*, *bullying*, and *sexual harassment* were the most likely to occur in their school, respectively. Overall, however, participants rated nearly every potential threat somewhere between "would never happen" and "could happen," near the lowest end of the sliding scale.

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Table 9: *Mean respondent ratings for likelihood items*

Threat	Parent/Guardian	Faculty/Staff	Student
Racial hate speech	16.29	18.62	17.03
N	62	37	37
Violent threats	13.97	19.65	14.43
N	66	37	37
Mass violence	16.66	13.22	15.38
N	65	37	37
Drugs available	19.83	17.73	13.62
N	64	37	37
Weapon possession	15.30	13.54	11.00
N	64	37	37
Bullying	32.12	35.73	32.49
N	66	37	37
Religious hate speech	16.06	20.11	15.78
N	64	37	37
Substance abuse	12.67	13.29	12.64
N	63	34	36
Sexual harassment	19.89	25.21	27.24
N	64	38	37
Gangs	5.39	8.09	8.59
N	57	35	34

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Cyberbullying	37.66	47.03	42.95
N	62	38	37
Police necessary	11.66	22.77	16.06
N	50	35	36

The purpose of this study was to compare the perceptions of stakeholders in Florida private schools for exceptional students concerning threats to safety to the risk assessment priorities apparent in federal and state school safety laws and incident statistics. Pearson's *r* for product-moment correlations between respondent ratings and the previously determined ORM *severity* and *likelihood* ratings from federal and state school safety laws and incident statistics (see Table 4) yielded only one statistically significant result. Correlation of parent/guardian ratings with Table 4 data of the potential severity of illegal drugs being available on campus was $r(62) = 0.88$, $p = .008$. There were, however, several rather large effects as well for parent/guardian ratings, although not statistically significant. Parent/Guardian severity rating for cyberbullying was $r(62) = 0.67$, $p = .100$, and for sexual harassment $r(62) = 0.51$, $p = .246$. Neither the Faculty/Staff nor the Student severity ratings yielded statistically significant correlations, although there were several large effects in the Student ratings: $r(35) = 0.78$, $p = .069$ for bullying; and $r(34) = 0.58$, $p = .228$ for violent threats.

Correlation of respondent ratings of *likelihood* of potential threats to Table 4 data yielded even smaller effects than did the *severity* correlations. There were no statistically significant results; in fact, the only comparison to attain a large effect was the Parent/Guardian rating for the likelihood of gang activity, $r(55) = -0.51$, $p = .131$. Faculty/Staff perceptions bore weak

relationships for nearly all potential threats. Finally, student responses for all 12 potential threats

displayed only weak to slightly moderate correlations, and only one was a positive relationship.

In short, participants across all three subgroups appear to have largely disagreed with the

risk assessments derived from federal and state school safety laws and incident statistics. By

converting the respondent means in accordance with Table 5 guidelines and following the ORM

matrix process detailed in Chapter Two, respondent RAC were compared to the pre-determined

RAC from review of federal and state school safety laws and incident statistics (Table 4). The

comparisons are displayed in Table 10 (below):

Table 10: *Risk Assessment Code (RAC) comparisons*

Threat	*Parent/Guardian* *RAC*	*Faculty/Staff* *RAC*	*Student* *RAC*	*Laws/statistics* *RAC*
Bullying	3	3	3	4
Assault/ threats	4	4	4	3
Shooting (intruder)	3	3	4	2
Weapons (student)	3	4	4	3
Hate speech	4	4	4	4
Sexual harassment	3	2	3	5
Drugs on campus	3	4	4	3
Gang activity	4	4	4	3
Cyber-bullying	3	3	3	4

Table 11: *RAC inputs derived from respondent ratings*

Threat	Parent/Guardian		Faculty/Staff		Student		Laws/statistics	
	Severity	*Likelihood*	*Severity*	*Likelihood*	*Severity*	*Likelihood*	*Severity*	*Likelihood*
Bullying	2	3	2	3	2	3	3	3
Assault/ threats	2	4	2	4	2	4	2	2
Shooting (intruder)	1	4	1	4	2	4	1	3
Weapons (student)	1	4	2	4	2	4	1	2
Hate speech	2	4	2	4	2	4	3	3
Sexual harassment	1	4	1	3	2	3	3	4
Drugs on campus	1	4	2	4	2	4	3	2
Gang activity	2[1]	4	2[1]	4	2[1]	4	2	2
Cyber-bullying	2	3	2	3	2	3	3	3

Note: No question concerning the severity of a potential *gang activity* threat was presented to respondents. *Severity* rating for *gang activity* is based upon combined means of *drugs*, *threats*, and *weapon possession* item responses.

In comparison, parents/guardians rated six of the nine potential threats as *moderate* (RAC=3) and the other three as *minor* (RAC=4); faculty and staff rated one threat as *serious* (RAC=2), three as *moderate*, and the other five as *minor*. Students rated only three threats as *moderate* and the rest as *minor*. The largest disagreement between respondent RAC and the legal/statistical ratings was on the topic of *sexual harassment*, which was rated *negligible* in

Table 4 (RAC=5) but *serious* (faculty/staff) and *moderate* (parent/guardian, student) by

participants. All three subgroups, however, indicated a lower perception of risk for *mass violence*

(armed intruder) than the Table 4 determination of *serious*—parents/guardians and faculty/staff

rated the threat as *moderate* and students thought it was of *minor* concern. Finally, all three

respondent groups rated *cyberbullying* and *bullying* as *moderate* risks, as opposed to the *minor*

rating determined from federal and state laws in Table 4.

In addition to survey items concerning perceived severity and likelihood of specific

potential threats to school safety, participants were asked a series of questions to indicate their

general feelings of safety. The items were primarily focused upon respondent agreement with

three primary statements concerning feeling safe, feeling respected, and feeling listened to—the

three items were reverse-scored and followed with more detailed negatively worded statements

related to the main concept. Results of the *feelings of safety* items are in Table 12 (below).

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Table 12: *Mean respondent ratings for general feelings of safety items*

Statement	Parent/Guardian	Faculty/Staff	Student
Feel safe at school	88.89	87.63	77.48
N	70	38	40
Fears physical violence at school	13.34	18.53	20.49
N	67	38	39
Stayed home because afraid	7.21	13.00	9.46
N	67	38	39
Treated with respect at school	83.50	75.87	74.28
N	68	38	39
Fear of personal offense/hate speech	13.64	18.79	19.85
N	58	38	39
Fear for personal property theft/vandalism	13.93	16.03	18.87
N	67	38	39
Administration takes action on reports	80.24	60.74	64.94
N	50	38	33
Armed intruder drills done at school	51.59	42.26	50.63
N	51	38	38
Student belongings searched at school	24.56	9.78	22.87
N	39	37	31

The information in Table 12 (above) suggests that a large majority of respondents feel confident in the overall safety of their school environment; that faculty and students generally treat one another with mutual respect; and, that school administrators are attentive and appropriately responsive to safety concerns.

Chapter Four Summary

The planned method for evaluating the congruence between the school safety risk factors' Risk Assessment Codes (RAC) as determined from federal and state school safety laws and incident statistics and the RAC determined from the parents/guardians, faculty/staff, and high school students in Florida private schools that exclusively serve exceptional students was to conduct a factor analysis of respondent data. However, the results of Principal Components Analysis from SPSS were not conducive to conducting such a comparison. Instead, the Pearson correlation coefficients of participant responses to the previously determined ORM data were calculated, and results suggested that the participant subgroups disagreed with the priority of potential threats to school safety indicated by the aforementioned laws. Conversion of participants' perceptions of *severity* and *likelihood* of identified school safety risks resulted in considerably different RAC that indicated what the respondent subgroups believed to be the most serious risks.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which school safety legislative priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of school administrators, faculty and staff, students, and families in private schools for exceptional students. Within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Ecological Systems Theory, risks to safety at school represent *proximal processes* that traverse students' spheres of individual and collective learning (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The following key questions guided the research process:

1. What are the most prominently addressed risks—in terms of severity and likelihood of occurrence--to school safety for general population public school students, exceptional students, and private school exceptional students, as indicated by federal and state school safety laws in the state of Florida?

2. What are the perceived priority factors of school safety, according to administrators, faculty, staff, students, and families of Florida private school students with learning exceptionalities?

3. What is the congruence between the risks identified by federal/state school safety laws and the safety concerns of stakeholders in Florida private schools for students with learning exceptionalities?

Regarding the first question, an examination of federal and state (Florida) school safety laws and incident statistics from the most recent NCES and CDC school crime and youth behavior studies provided the necessary information to compile a list of identified risks to school

safety and to determine the perceived severity of their impact upon school safety, as well as the likelihood of their occurrence in any given school. The U.S. Navy's Operational Risk Management (ORM) procedure was utilized to convert the legal and statistical data to an initial Risk Assessment Code (RAC) for each identified threat to school safety, which resulted in the determination that five types of incidents warranted a RAC=2 (serious): 1) students bringing weapons to school; 2) violent threats/physical assault at school; 3) illegal drugs available on campus; 4) gang activity on campus; and, 5) attack by an armed intruder. Three other incident types—bullying, cyberbullying, and hate speech—warranted a RAC=3 (moderate), and three others—sexual harassment, destructive weather events, and fires—were rated RAC=4 (minor). Mitigating measures, such as punitive laws, educational policies, and administrative practices, lowered the RAC for each incident type by one category and were detailed in Table 4.

To determine the perceptions of the targeted population referenced in question two, participants were recruited in four Florida private schools that exclusively serve exceptional students. Parents/guardians, faculty and staff, and high school students completed online surveys that asked respondents how severely each of the previously identified safety incidents would impact their perceptions of being safe at school, in addition to how likely they thought each incident would be to occur at their school. Application of the ORM process to the participant responses generated considerably different RAC from those detailed in the paragraph above; specifically, respondents indicated that the potential threats that most concerned them were sexual harassment, bullying, and cyberbullying.

The third key question—the congruence between risk assessments based upon the laws and incident statistics and the assessments of stakeholders in the targeted population—yielded a

less than definitive answer. Large differences exist between the baseline ORM RAC and participant responses-derived RAC and the differences were relatively consistent for all three respondent subgroups, but the potential reasons for these differences warrant more detailed discussion and further study.

Discussion

There are several important questions to discuss concerning the mismatched perceptions of risk assessments regarding school safety factors. First, the identification of *bullying* and *cyberbullying* as two of the top three threat factors for all three participant subgroups is worthy of further discussion. Chapter Two (Review of Literature) alluded to studies of bullying victimization that identified higher rates of exceptional students as victims of such behaviors. Very little research, however, has been conducted on the same topic with exceptional students in an exclusive educational setting like the schools that participated in this study.

Parents of exceptional students often rate concern for the physical and emotional safety of their children as one of the main reasons they choose private schools designed for their type of student (DiPerna, Shaw, & Catt, 2017; Goldring & Rowley, 2006). Given that many of their children likely experienced significant victimization in traditional/general population educational settings (Blake, Lunk, Zhou, Kwok, & Benz, 2012; Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012; Carter, 2009; Schroeder, Cappadocia, Bebko, Pepler, & Weiss, 2014) and the increased likelihood of prolonged negative affects upon exceptional students when compared to their neuro-typical peers (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012; Kowalski & Fedina, 2011; Shtayermman, 2007; Zablotsky, Bradshaw, Anderson, & Law, 2013), it is not surprising that the potential for bullying behavior is

near the top of parent/guardian concerns in the risk management assessment conducted in this study.

For faculty and staff of exceptional students, the challenge of curtailing and preventing bullying behaviors is daunting. Because many of their students struggle not only with specified learning differences, but also with difficulties in reading social cues and navigating basic social situations—especially personal relationships (American Psychological Association, 2013; Cummings, Pepler, Mishna, & Craig, 2006; Wiener & Mak, 2009), the rate of bullying victimization between exceptional students can sometimes approach that in inclusive schools (Kowalski & Fedina, 2011; Little, 2001; Schroeder, Cappadocia, Bebko, Pepler, & Weiss, 2014). The impact, however, is intensified and more prolonged, because many exceptional students may not understand that they are "bullying" another, nor understand when they are being bullied themselves (Carrington, et al., 2017; van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010). Therefore, a bullying incident in a school that exclusively serves exceptional students can potentially consume a copious amount of time to sort out and correct, and often must be revisited multiple times to resolve. Exceptional students would understandably have similar concerns or fears as their teachers and parents, because many of them have had extremely negative experiences in previous schools or have friends/acquaintances that have been victimized (Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok, & Benz, 2012; Taylor, Saylor, Twyman, & Macias, 2010; van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010). Some students may also be concerned about bullying because they are struggling with the effects of bullying behaviors that occurred off-campus, which are more difficult for schools to combat (Abrams, 2011; Notor & Padgett, 2013).

Cyberbullying, on the other hand, is a unique problem that no one in school environment appears to have a clear understanding of how to combat its impact. Regulating students' off-campus or non-school-related behaviors is handled quite differently (and inconsistently) from school district to private schools to state legislatures, with some choosing to refuse to regulate such behavior because of a lack of legal authority and others risking going too far in violating students' Fourth and First Amendment rights concerning searches and freedoms of expression, respectively (see Chapter Two; Campbell & Zavrsnik, 2013; Evans, 2012; Shipley, 2011; Stewart & Fritsch, 2011). For purposes of this study, the prominence of concern about cyberbullying may simply be partnered with respondents' concerns about bullying in general. Had the study population been limited to students diagnosed on the autism spectrum, rather than those within the broader definition of *exceptional students* applied in Chapter Two, some additional explanation of the results of this study would potentially be available. Several scholars have examined the unique social challenges presented by cyber communication for exceptional students who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum because many of the social cues they often struggle to decipher—such as tone, affect, expression, posture, etc.—are absent from internet communications altogether (Millea, Shea, & Diehl, 2013; Zeedyk, Rodriguez, Tipton, Baker, & Blacher, 2014). Sarcasm, intended to be humorous, is often misinterpreted in verbal form by autistic students; in written form, their translation of a comment has potential for highly damaging psychological, emotional, and mental health effects (Beer, Hallett, Hawkins, & Hewitson, 2017; Didden, et al., 2009; Hu, Chou, & Yen, 2016). The sample population for this study included exceptional students with a potentially wide variety of learning difficulties, and respondents were not asked to identify their individual diagnoses; therefore, the information

concerning cyberbullying's increased impact upon autistic students requires further study with a more highly specified sample.

Concern about sexual harassment, however, represented the largest discrepancy between the pre-determined RAC (rated RAC=4, "minor" before mitigation factors reduced it to RAC=5, "negligible") and respondent-generated RAC (calculated RAC=2, "serious" by faculty and staff; RAC=3, "moderate" by parents/guardians and students). There are several possible explanations for the inclusion of sexual harassment as one of the top concerns for parents, faculty, and students in this study. For parents and guardians of exceptional students, the understanding that their children are potentially more vulnerable to predatory sexual behaviors (Vissera, et al., 2017) is a key point of discussion. Exceptional students are more likely to be concerned because of the highly social nature of sexual behavior—and although the difficulties that many exceptional students face in grasping complex social situations has been described in this study, their parents are far less likely to have detailed discussions with them about the relationship between social pressure, power, and sexual relationships (Holmes, Himle, & Strassberg, 2016). For faculty and staff, however, the survey instrument for this study asked about their own safety—not just about their students—so the results suggest that administrators, teachers, and staff in Florida private schools that serve exceptional students are *most* concerned about the impact of possible sexual harassment upon their own safety.

Another likely interpretation of the results of this study concerning the threat of sexual harassment at school, however, is the high profile that the topic holds in the public discourse over the past several months. During the data collection period, in early October 2017, the myriad of accusations of sexual assault, harassment, and misconduct that were leveled against

prominent film mogul Harvey Weinstein were the headline stories of broadcast and print news across the United States; in the weeks that followed, allegation after allegation were made public against a large number of powerful and publicly well-known individuals in a variety of industries (Cooney, 2017). A call for awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment behaviors became an international movement literally overnight due to the use of the "hashtag" #MeToo on the popular social media applications Twitter and Facebook, which reported over 1.7 million unique reports by Twitter users and over 12 million related posts on Facebook within the first 24 hours (Park, 2017).

In the discussion of *diffusion* in Chapter Two, the impact that prolonged and prominently featured media coverage of any given issue upon public estimation of the prevalence of the issue explained a theory of why federal and state resources seemed to focus upon mass violence/school shootings as a primary threat, despite the extremely low rate of occurrence. Respondents to the surveys in this study were asked to rate how often they consumed news: the parents/guardians and faculty/staff subgroup respondents indicated that they do so on a daily basis (parent/guardian mean response 88.45; faculty/staff 88.16, equivalent rating of "every day"), while students consumed news products "a few times a week" (mean rating 56.21). During the data collection period for this study (September 16 to November 8, 2017), nearly 30 public figures, politicians, entertainers, and high-profile businessmen were publicly disgraced and fired, resigned, or demoted in their careers (Park, 2017) because of sexual misconduct allegations. Accusations of sexual harassment against President Trump of the United States were added during the same time period to the many that had already been made against him during the previous year's election campaign (Jamieson, Jeffery, & Puglise, 2016). It would be unwise to discount the potential

impact upon this study's respondents and their likelihood to rate their fears of sexual harassment higher than they might actually feel on an average day, and the results of this study concerning fears of sexual harassment must therefore be interpreted with caution, although the consistency of results across respondent subgroups is a key point of interest.

The tendency of respondents to this study to similarly relate the potential severity of nearly all the identified possible threats to school safety may be attributed to some of the same characteristics of exceptional students that were described in the above paragraphs. There was little differentiation between threat severity ratings across all three respondent subgroups (see Table 8), which suggests that participants viewed each threat as near equal impact in magnitude. Coupling the severity results with the comparatively low estimations of likelihood for most of the same threats (see Table 9) and high ratings of personal feelings of safety (see Table 12) offers the explanation that in the participating schools, very few of the identified threats occur regularly, and therefore participants viewed the majority of potential incidents as equally bad because they all generally feel safe, respected, and protected in their school environments.

Limitations of the Study

Consent forms that were sent to potential participants strongly emphasized potential for emotional distress due to the subject matter of some of the questions (e.g., asking for the participant's estimation of the severity and likelihood of a mass shooting at their school), and it is probable that many parents did not want to give consent for their children to participate because the "topic [is] a little scary" (J. Barnes, personal communication, October 10, 2017). Consequently, only 46 students responded to the survey after parental consent was granted; overall effect size, when compared against results from the Parent/Guardian subgroup, was

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r=0.1929 (small) (Cohen, 1988). Student results should be interpreted with caution and treated as suggestive that additional study may be warranted. Widening the targeted population to include smaller schools may have yielded a greater number of results, but would have required far more lengthy collection period and presented less potential for a representative sample. Adjustment of the language used in the informed parental consent form may have increased the potential for a larger student sample, but the tendency of parents of exceptional students to aggressively protect or shield their children from any perceived risk of harm (Chang, Chiu, Wu, & Gau, 2013; Clarke, Cooper, & Cresswell, 2013; Gau & Chang, 2013; Sanders, 2006; Taub, 2006) complicates such a prediction.

The measurement instruments included only 30 items, which resulted in only one or two items to measure the perceptions of some of the identified risks, such as gang activity. Lengthier surveys with multiple items for each potential risk event in each section (*severity*, *likelihood*, and *general feelings of safety*) may have generated more definitive results; however, additional question items would also have increased the number of participants that did not complete the entire survey. Additionally, mitigating factors for potential threats—e.g., specific disciplinary policies that are unique to the type of schools, availability of mental health counselor(s) and/or training in mental health issues for faculty to alleviate socio-emotional impacts of safety concerns, etc., were not specifically addressed in the measurement instruments for this study. An additional section to determine such factors and their perceived effectiveness in mitigating the identified and assessed risks in the targeted population may have yielded significant results and identified important areas for further study.

Finally, use of the ORM process is, by design, a subjective model that depends upon the experience and judgement of the decision-maker to appropriately assess the potential severity and likelihood of the identified risks. It is possible that other researchers would determine different RAC values for the risks identified from the federal and state school safety laws and incident statistics based upon their own background experiences, or by attempting to replicate the ORM process in this study for a state other than Florida.

Significant Implications

One of the more interesting results of this study was the tendency of all three respondent subgroups to similarly rate the severity of nearly all the identified potential threats to their safety, with seemingly little differentiation between their perception of the most severe threat and the least. Viewed in isolation, the severity perception results might be interpreted by some as indicative that the parents, faculty, and students are perhaps fearful of everything—yet the same participants affirmed that they perceive their school environments as very safe, respectful, and responsible and that most of the identified threats are rather unlikely to ever occur in their schools. The combination of results described above suggests a potential theory that for exceptional students, their parents/guardians, and the faculty/staff of private schools for exceptional students, a school climate which focuses upon mutual respect may be a key determinant of overall feelings of safety. Alternatively, the question of whether exceptional students' emotional maturity levels and social difficulties cause them to view all negative circumstances as "equally bad," and how such a perception might influence the views of their parents and teachers, may be derived from the results of the *severity* measurements in this study.

Further research is warranted in several areas, based upon the results of this study. First, not enough research exists in the extant literature concerning cyberbullying behaviors and their impact upon the exceptional student community. Given the difficulty many exceptional students have in making critical interpretations of external stimuli like news media and internet communications, more insight into the students' electronic interactions and habits is needed. Second, the apparent influence of media reports of high-profile sexual harassment allegations upon the responses of participants in this study suggests that additional research into the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of incident prevalence—specifically for stakeholders in exceptional student education—could contribute greater understanding of how the targeted population processes external stimuli in relation to their everyday environments. Finally, as the previous paragraph suggested, the theory of character education as a foundation for school safety should be explored further.

Likewise, the results of this study suggest that in practice, kindness and mutual respect are key philosophical, instructional, and policy bases to alleviate concerns and to promote feelings of safety, respect, and responsibility for the needs of others. The direct comparison, in this study, of the same identified threats between the general education population and a population exclusively of exceptional students also suggests that character-based education could positively impact *any* school climate.

Faculty and staff who educate exceptional students, regardless of whether the students are in an exclusive setting or in an inclusive school, need to be trained to recognize the unique responses to negative stimuli that many exceptional students experience. In other words, using the same disciplinary approach in the classroom for all students, without considering the unique

personalities and perceptions of the individual student, is not the most beneficial or productive practice for all students. Relationships matter, and the more teaching faculty know their individual students, the safer the students, teachers, and families may perceive the school environment to be.

Finally, educational policy may be more effective if it is responsive to the concerns of stakeholders, rather than reactionary. *Policy learning*, as described and discussed in Chapter Two of this study, requires diligent study and analysis of events and incidents to make appropriate policy and budgetary decisions that are more likely to achieve positive results for the greatest number of students, families, and individual schools. Specifically, federal and state school safety laws focus heavily upon physical security and crime prevention measures in schools, and education funding has followed that emphasis without regard to whether such measures actually improve safety, or negatively impact the educational environment and erode student confidence and well-being (Gardella, Tanner-Smith, & Fisher, 2016; Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2013; Simmons, 2015). Although mass shootings and students bringing weapons to school are frightening concepts, the statistical occurrence of such threats--as detailed in this study and many others--shows that schools are by far the safest places in the United States. However, states, districts, and individual schools are spending nearly $1 billion on physical security measures like advanced surveillance systems—money that could be used to train expert educators, fund schools' arts programs, mental health support services, or a myriad of other positive aspects directly related to improving education (Abramsky, 2016; DeAngelis, Brent, & Ianni, 2011; Nagel, 2014; Porter, 2015; Sulkowski & Lazarus, 2017).

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Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which school safety legislative priorities in the state of Florida align with the perceived school safety needs of school administrators, faculty and staff, students, and families in private schools for exceptional students. Stakeholders—parents/guardian, faculty and staff, and high school students—in Florida private schools that exclusively serve exceptional students do not perceive school safety threat factors with the same priority as that indicated by federal and state school safety laws and incident statistics. Specifically, the most pressing threats to school safety for the general population appear to be those related to violent crime and weapons, whereas respondents in this study focused upon more socio-emotional impacts as their primary concerns. Parents/guardians of exceptional students consider educational expertise that meets their children's unique learning needs, the physical security that small, private campuses may more easily offer, and the emotional support of the specialty-trained faculty and staff of Florida private schools that exclusively serve exceptional students—and they appear to be pleased with their choices for their children, although they indicated concerns that may be related to past experiences with previous schools. The students attending the participating schools appear to agree with their parents' assessments of their school environments and mirror their concerns, while the faculty and staff seem attuned to both student needs and parental priorities. Results of this study suggest that respondents' perceptions may be generalizable to the targeted population, but a larger sample is necessary to support such a conclusion for the student subgroup.

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Chapter Five Summary

Parents/guardians, faculty/staff, and high school students in Florida private schools that exclusively serve exceptional students generally feel quite safe in their educational environments, feel respected by peers and authority figures, and feel that their concerns receive appropriate attention in most cases. Their primary concerns regarding threats to those feelings of safety are bullying and cyberbullying behaviors and sexual harassment, primarily, which may have been named because of past negative experiences in other environments, the difficulty of clear definition and mitigation measures for the potential threats in question, and/or the prominence of media coverage of such incidents external to the respondents' school environments. The results of this study suggest that exceptional students in Florida may view safety factors quite differently than their peers in general education settings do, and that the overall environments of private schools that exclusively serve exceptional students may heavily influence those feelings of safety. Further and more detailed study of the unique nature of the social-emotional responses of exceptional students to potentially dangerous stimuli could lend greater power to the conclusions drawn in this study.

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EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Appendix A: Consent/Assent Forms

A.1 Parental Consent for minor to Participate in a Research Study

Message to Parent(s)/Guardian(s):
We are conducting research that involves minors. Since minors are not legally able to consent to be research subjects, your permission is required along with the minor's agreement to participate. Detailed information about the research project is presented below in question and answer format. Please read this information and ensure your child understands the research activities before agreeing to participate. If you give permission, and if your child agrees, please sign in the appropriate places on the last page.
Thank you for your consideration of this request.

What Is the Research About?
Your child is being invited to take part in a research study about school safety in Florida. There will be about 200 participants in this study.

Who Is Doing the Study?
The person in charge of this study is doctoral student Anthony Mortimer of the University of North Florida, and he will be gathering and analyzing the information for the study.

Do Any of the Researchers Stand to Gain Financially or Personally from This Research?
None of the researchers participating in this study stand to gain financially or personally. This study is being conducted to fulfill graduation requirements for the primary researcher's doctoral degree.

What is the Purpose of This Study?
The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions concerning school safety of education stakeholders in Florida private schools serving students with exceptionalities.
By doing this study we hope to learn whether or not current school safety laws in Florida adequately address the safety concerns of administrators, faculty and staff, parents, and students in Florida private schools for students with learning exceptionalities.

Where Is the Study Going to Take Place and How Long Will It Last?
The research procedures will be conducted online. Your child's participation in the study will involve no face-to-face contact with the researcher and will consist of a brief online survey that should take approximately 30 minutes of their time. They will complete the survey at school so that their teacher(s) are available to facilitate.

What Are the Possible Risks and Discomforts?
Although we have made every effort to minimize all risks, your child may find some of the questions we ask to be upsetting or stressful. If so, we can tell you about some people who may be able to help your child with these feelings. One such resource is the United Way, which you may access by dialing 2-1-1 on your cellular phone to be connected with an appropriate counselor. Callers may also dial 1-904-632-0600 to access a United Way 2-1-1 call center specialist. If you are unable to access 2-1-1 in your county, please dial the number that's appropriate to your county listed below:
• Duval County: Dial 2-1-1 or 1-904-632-0600
• Jacksonville calling area: Dial 2-1-1 or 1-904-632-0600

• All other counties: Dial 2-1-1 or 1-904-632-0600
• Hearing Impaired: Dial 1-904-330-3989 (TTY)

Will My Child Benefit from Taking Part in This Study?
Your child will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

Does My Child Have to Take Part in This Study?
If your child decides to take part in the study, it should be because he or she really wants to volunteer. There will be no penalty and if your child chooses not to volunteer he or she will not lose any normal benefits or rights. No one on the research team will behave any differently toward your child if he or she chooses not to participate in the study. Your child can stop at any time during the study and still keep the same benefits and rights.

What Will It Cost for My Child to Participate?
There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Will My Child Receive Any Payment or Reward for Taking Part in This Study?
Your child will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study.

Who Will See the Information My Child Gives?
Your child's information will be combined with information from others taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information. Your child will not be identified in these written materials.
This study is confidential. That means that your child's name will be stored only on a master list of participants, which will reside on a secure server at the University of North Florida for the duration of the study. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your child's information to other people. We may be required to show information that identifies your child to people who need to be sure that we have done the research correctly, such as the UNF Institutional Review Board. Moreover, the law may require us to show your child's information in court or to tell authorities if the information indicates child abuse or danger to your child or others. All personal information will be permanently destroyed upon verification of completion of the study.

Can My Child's Taking Part in The Study End Early?
If your child decides to take part in the study, he or she still has the right to decide at any time to stop. There will be no penalty and no loss of benefits or rights if your child stops participating in the study. No one on the research team will behave any differently toward your child if he or she decides to stop participating in the study.

What If I Have Questions or My Child Has Questions?
Before you decide whether or not to give permission for your child to take part in the study, please ask any questions that come to mind. You can contact the primary researcher, Anthony Mortimer, at   or via email,   If you have any questions about your child's rights or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Florida, (904)620-2498.

What Else Do I Need to Know?
You have the right to inspect the survey instrument prior to your child's participation, in accordance with the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA). If you wish to view the survey instrument, you may receive a copy by contacting the primary researcher with your request.
I am required by federal law to provide you with a copy of this permission/assent form.

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Parental Permission and Signature:
I give permission for my child to participate in this research.

_____   _____
Signature of parent or legal guardian giving permission   Date
for the minor to take part in the study

_____
Printed name of parent or legal guardian giving permission for the minor to take part in the study

_____
Printed name of the minor for whom you are giving permission to participate in the study

*Please have your child review the "Informed Assent for Minors" document and if they would like to participate, please have them sign the document.

*Please return signed copies of BOTH documents (Parental Consent and Minor Assent) in the self-addressed stamped envelope included in your packet.
THANK YOU!

A.2 Informed Assent for minor to Participate in a Research Study

Message to Potential Research Participant: You are being asked to help with a research project conducted by individuals at the University of North Florida. The research activities were explained in detail for your parent(s), who have given their permission for you to participate in this research. However, although you are too young to give legal consent, you have the right to agree or disagree to participating in the research. Agreement by a minor to participate in research is called "assent".

If you do not want to participate in the research, your parent(s) cannot make you participate. Also, if you begin to participate but then decide you don't want to do it, you can stop at any time and no one will get mad or behave any differently toward you.

Please read the information below. If you agree to help with this research, please sign on the last page.

Thank you for thinking about helping with this research.

What is the research about?
You are being invited to take part in a research study about school safety in Florida. There will be about 200 participants in this study.

Who is doing the study?
The person in charge of this study is doctoral student Anthony Mortimer of the University of North Florida, and he will be gathering and analyzing the information for the study.

What do the Researchers gain if I participate?
None of the researchers get paid or rewarded for your participation. Mr. Mortimer is doing this study because it is required for him to graduate.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to see how the opinions of students like you compare to what the law says about safety.

Where would I participate, and how long will it take?
The research involves a survey that you can take on the computer in your classroom at school. It should take you about 30 minutes to complete.

What risks will I encounter if I participate?
We have been careful to ask questions that do not create risk or discomfort for you. Some questions may be upsetting to you; if you are upset and need to speak with your teacher about a question, they can help you understand that the question is simply asking about your opinion.

Do I have to participate in the study?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You have the right to choose not to participate, and no one will treat you any differently. If you decide to participate, you are also allowed to stop at any time during the study.

What do I get if I participate in the study?
You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study, but your opinions are valuable to the researcher's goal in completing this study.

Who will see the information I give?
When we write up our report of the study results, your information is combined with everyone else's who participated in the study. You will not be named or identified in the results.

This study is confidential. That means that only the members of the research team will be allowed to see your name, and no one else will know that the information you gave came specifically from you. We may be required to show information that identifies you to people who need to be sure that we have done the research correctly, such as the UNF Institutional Review Board. The only other time we would show your information to anyone is if the information indicates child abuse or danger to yourself or others—then we are required to tell law enforcement authorities.

What if I have questions?
Before you agree to participate in the study, please ask any questions that you can think of. You may ask your parent/guardian to contact the researcher, Anthony Mortimer, at   or via email,   . If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may ask your parent/guardian, teacher, or administrator to contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Florida, (904)620-2498.

What else do I need to know?
I am required by federal law to provide you with a copy of this permission/assent form.

Research Participant Statement and Signature
I understand that my participation in this research study is entirely my decision. I may refuse to participate without any consequences. I may also stop participating at any time without any consequences. I have been informed that I can print a copy of this assent form to keep.

I wish to participate in this research.

_____   _____
Signature of individual assenting to participate in the study   Date

_____
Printed name of individual assenting to participate in the study
Please have your parent/guardian return signed copy in the self-addressed stamped envelope included in the packet.

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Appendix B: Copies of Survey Questionnaires

B.1 Student Survey

Q1.1
Message to Research Participant:
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research! A few weeks ago, you and your parent/guardian each signed a form giving permission for me to ask you to participate.

If you would still like to participate, please select "Yes" below. If you have changed your mind and do not wish to participate, please select "No" below. You have the right to refuse to participate without any consequences. You also have the right to stop participating at any time during this survey, without any consequences.

Thank you again for your time and for your opinions!

(PLEASE SELECT YOUR RESPONSE BELOW)

○ YES, I would like to participate in this research.

○ NO, I do not want to participate in this research.

If NO, I do not want to participate Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Personal feelings of safety (responses via sliding scale indicating *frequency*)
Q2.1
I feel safe when I am at school.
Q2.2
Students and teachers at my school treat each other with respect.
Q2.3
Students and teachers at my school tease others about their race, sexual orientation, or religion.
Q2.4
I have seen or heard about physical fights between students at my school.
Q2.5
My property or another student's property has been stolen or destroyed at my school.
Q2.6
I refuse to come to school because I am afraid of another student.
Q2.7
At my school, we practice what we should do if an intruder came into the school with a weapon.
Q2.8
When I report another student's dangerous behavior to my teachers or administration, they do something about it.
Q2.9
School administrators or teachers search students' belongings for weapons.

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Q3.1
Students and teachers at my school say or write language that is offensive to people of other races.
Q3.2
Students threaten me or others with physical violence.
Q3.3
Mass violence (such as a school shooting) may happen at my school.
Q3.4
Drugs are available at my school.
Q3.5
Students bring weapons to my school.
Q3.6
Students bully other students at my school.
Q3.7
Students and teachers at my school say or write language that is offensive to people of other religions.
Q3.8
Students or teachers at my school may have used drugs or alcohol while at school.
Q3.9
Students or teachers at my school make sexual jokes or try to touch other students inappropriately without their permission.
Q3.10
There are students at my school who might be members of gangs.
Q3.11
Students at my school bully other students on the internet.
Q3.12
Police officers have come to my school because of a student's behavior.

Severity of possible events at your school (responses via sliding scale indicating *potential severity*)
Q4.1
Persistent verbal bullying between students.
Q4.2
Physical fights between students.
Q4.3
An intruder entering the school with a weapon.
Q4.4
Hearing hateful comments about someone's race, religion, or sexual orientation.
Q4.5
A student bringing a weapon to school.
Q4.6
Being bullied by another student online by social media, email, text messages, etc.
Q4.7
Threats of physical violence between students.
Q4.8
Sexual harassment between students or by a teacher.

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Q4.9
Presence of illegal drugs on campus.

Demographics (THESE QUESTIONS ARE OPTIONAL and your responses remain ANONYMOUS)
Q5.1
What is your grade level?

○ 9th

○ 10th

○ 11th

○ 12th

○ I prefer not to answer.
Q5.2
What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ I prefer to self-describe.

○ I prefer not to answer.

Q38
What is your ethnicity?

○ Caucasian/Non-Hispanic White

○ Hispanic

○ African-American/Black

○ Asian/Pacific Islander

○ Other/Mixed
Q37
What is your typical academic performance in school? (response via sliding scale indicating *average letter grade*)
Q5.3
How often do you watch the news on television or read news stories on the internet? (response via sliding scale indicating *weekly frequency*)

B.2 Parent / Guardian Survey

Q1.1

Message to Potential Research Participant: This is an electronic copy of the information document you received in your recruitment packet. Please verify below that you intend to participate.

You are being asked to help with a research project conducted by individuals at the University of North Florida. The research activities are explained in detail below.

If you do not want to participate in the research, no one can make you participate. Also, if you decide you no longer want to participate, you can stop at any time and no one will get mad or behave any differently toward you.

Please read the information presented below. If you agree to help with this research, please indicate so at the end of this information.

Thank you for thinking about helping with this research.

 What Is the Research About?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about school safety in Florida. There will be about 200 participants in this study.

Who Is Doing the Study?

The person in charge of this study is doctoral student Anthony Mortimer of the University of North Florida, and he will be gathering and analyzing the information for the study. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

 Do Any of the Researchers Stand to Gain Financially or Personally from This Research?

None of the researchers participating in this study stand to gain financially or personally. This study is being conducted to fulfill graduation requirements for the primary researcher's doctoral degree.

What is the Purpose of This Study?

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions concerning school safety of education stakeholders in Florida private schools serving students with exceptionalities.

By doing this study we hope to learn whether or not current school safety laws in Florida adequately address the safety concerns of administrators, faculty and staff, parents, and students in Florida private schools for students with learning exceptionalities.

Where Is the Study Going to Take Place and How Long Will It Last?

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

The research procedures will be conducted online. Your participation in the study will involve no face-to-face contact with the researcher and will consist of a brief online survey that should take approximately 30 minutes of your time.

What Are the Possible Risks and Discomforts?

Although we have made every effort to minimize all risks, you may find some of the questions we ask to be upsetting or stressful. If so, we can tell you about some people who may be able to help you with these feelings.

Will I Benefit from Taking Part in This Study?

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study, but the information you provide would be extremely helpful to the researcher's study.

Do I Have to Take Part in This Study?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. There will be no penalty and if you choose not to volunteer you will not lose any normal benefits or rights. No one on the research team will behave any differently toward you if you choose not to participate in the study. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the same benefits and rights.

Will I Receive Any Payment or Reward for Taking Part in This Study?

You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study, but your opinions are valuable to the researcher's goal in completing this study.

Who Will See the Information I Give?

Your information will be combined with information from others taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information. You will not be identified in these written materials.

This study is anonymous. That means that no one, not even members of the research team, will know that the information you gave came specifically from you.

However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people.   We may be required to show information that identifies you to people who need to be sure that we have done the research correctly, such as the UNF Institutional Review Board. Moreover, the law may require us to show your information in court or to tell authorities if the information indicates child abuse or danger to yourself or others.

Can My Taking Part in The Study End Early?

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time to stop. There will be no penalty and no loss of benefits or rights if you stop participating in the study. No one on the research team will behave any differently toward you if you decide to stop participating in the study.

What If I Have Questions?

Before you agree to participate in the study, please ask any questions that come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Anthony Mortimer, at   or via email,   . If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Florida, (904)620-2498.

What Else Do I Need to Know?

I am required by federal law to provide you with a copy of this permission/assent form.

Research Participant Statement and Signature

I understand that my participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. I may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. I may also stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. I have been informed that I can print a copy of this consent form to keep.

(PLEASE SELECT YOUR RESPONSE BELOW)

○ YES, I would like to participate in this research.

○ NO, I do not want to participate in this research.

If NO, I do not want to participate Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Personal feelings of safety (response via sliding scale indicating *frequency*)
Q2.1
I feel that my child is safe when they are at school.
Q2.2

Students and teachers at my child's school treat each other with respect.
Q2.3
Students or teachers at my child's school tease others about their race, sexual orientation, or religion.
Q2.4
Physical fights between students occur at my child's school.
Q2.5
My child's property or another student's property has been stolen or destroyed at school.
Q2.6
I have kept my child home from school because they were afraid of another student.

Q2.7
My child's school practices what they should do if an intruder came into the school with a weapon.
Q2.8
When I report another student's dangerous behavior to my child's teachers or administration, they do something about it.
Q2.9
School administrators or teachers search students' belongings for weapons.

Likelihood of possible events at your child's school (response via sliding scale)
Q3.1
Students or teachers at my child's school say or write language that is offensive to people of other races.
Q3.2
Visitors to my child's school are able to enter the school without being confronted by a security device (e.g., locked doors, camera) or security personnel.
Q3.3
Mass violence (such as a school shooting) may happen at my child's school.
Q3.4
Drugs may be available at my child's school.
Q3.5
Students may bring weapons to my child's school.
Q3.6
Students bully other students at my child's school.
Q3.7
Students or teachers at my child's school say or write language that is offensive to people of other religions.
Q3.8
Students or teachers at my child's school may have used drugs or alcohol while at school.
Q3.9
Students or teachers at my child's school make sexual jokes or try to touch other students inappropriately without their permission.
Q3.10
There are students at my child's school who might be members of gangs.
Q3.11
Students at my child's school bully other students on the internet.
Q3.12
Police officers have come to my child's school because of a student's behavior.

Severity of possible events at your child's school (responses via sliding scale indicating *potential*)
Q4.1
Persistent verbal bullying between students.
Q4.2
Physical fights between students.
Q4.3
An intruder entering the school with a weapon.
Q4.4

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Hearing hateful comments about someone's race, religion, or sexual orientation.
Q4.5
A student bringing a weapon to school.
Q4.6
Students bullying one another on the internet or by text messages.
Q4.7
Threats of physical violence between students.
Q4.8
Sexual harassment between students or by a teacher.
Q4.9
Presence of illegal drugs on campus.

Demographics (THESE QUESTIONS ARE OPTIONAL and your responses remain ANONYMOUS)
Q5.1
What is your child's grade level?

O 9th

O 10th

O 11th

O 12th

O I prefer not to answer.
Q5.2
What is your highest level of education?

O Graduated high school or equivalent (e.g., GED, vocational diploma).

O Some college.

O Technical/Trade Certificate.

O Associate's Degree.

O Bachelor's Degree.

O Graduate Degree.

O I prefer not to answer.
Q5.3
What is your gender?

O Female

O Male

O I prefer to self-describe.

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

○ I prefer not to answer.

Q36

What is your ethnicity?

○ Caucasian/Non-Hispanic White

○ Hispanic

○ African-American/Black

○ Asian/Pacific Islander

○ Other/Mixed

Q37

What is your child's typical academic performance? (response via sliding scale indicating average letter grade)

Q5.4

How often do you watch the news on television or read news stories on the internet? (response via sliding scale indicating *weekly frequency*)

B. 3 Administration, Faculty, Staff Survey

Q1.1

Message to Potential Research Participant: This is an electronic copy of the information document you received in your recruitment package. Please verify below that you intend to participate.

You are being asked to help with a research project conducted by individuals at the University of North Florida. The research activities are explained in detail below.

If you do not want to participate in the research, no one can make you participate. Also, if you decide you would like to help with this research, you can stop at any time and no one will get mad or behave any differently toward you.

Please read the information presented below. If you agree to help with this research, please indicate so at the end of this information.

Thank you for thinking about helping with this research.

What Is the Research About?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about school safety in Florida. There will be about 200 participants in this study.

Who Is Doing the Study?

The person in charge of this study is doctoral student Anthony Mortimer of the University of North Florida, and he will be gathering and analyzing the information for the study. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

Do Any of the Researchers Stand to Gain Financially or Personally from This Research?

None of the researchers participating in this study stand to gain financially or personally. This study is being conducted to fulfill graduation requirements for the primary researcher's doctoral degree.

What is the Purpose of This Study?

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions concerning school safety of education stakeholders in Florida private schools serving students with exceptionalities.

By doing this study we hope to learn whether or not current school safety laws in Florida adequately address the safety concerns of administrators, faculty and staff, parents, and students in Florida private schools for students with learning exceptionalities.

Where Is the Study Going to Take Place and How Long Will It Last?

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

The research procedures will be conducted online. Your participation in the study will involve no face-to-face contact with the researcher and will consist of a brief online survey that should take approximately 30 minutes of your time.

What Are the Possible Risks and Discomforts?

Although we have made every effort to minimize all risks, you may find some of the questions we ask to be upsetting or stressful. If so, we can tell you about some people who may be able to help you with these feelings.

Will I Benefit from Taking Part in This Study?

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study, but the information you provide would be extremely helpful to the researcher's study.

Do I Have to Take Part in This Study?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. There will be no penalty and if you choose not to volunteer you will not lose any normal benefits or rights. No one on the research team will behave any differently toward you if you choose not to participate in the study. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the same benefits and rights.

Will I Receive Any Payment or Reward for Taking Part in This Study?

You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study, but your opinions are valuable to the researcher's goal in completing this study.

Who Will See the Information I Give?

Your information will be combined with information from others taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information. You will not be identified in these written materials.

This study is anonymous. That means that no one, not even members of the research team, will know that the information you gave came specifically from you.

However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. We may be required to show information that identifies you to people who need to be sure that we have done the research correctly, such as the UNF Institutional Review Board. Moreover, the law may require us to show your information in court or to tell authorities if the information indicates child abuse or danger to yourself or others.

Can My Taking Part in The Study End Early?

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time to stop. There will be no penalty and no loss of benefits or rights if you stop participating in the study. No one on the research team will behave any differently toward you if you decide to stop participating in the study.

What If I Have Questions?

Before you agree to participate in the study, please ask any questions that come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Anthony Mortimer, at   or via email,   . If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Florida, (904)620-2498.

What Else Do I Need to Know?

I am required by federal law to provide you with a copy of this permission/assent form.

Research Participant Statement and Signature

I understand that my participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. I may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. I may also stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. I have been informed that I can print a copy of this consent form to keep.

(PLEASE SELECT YOUR RESPONSE BELOW)

○ YES, I would like to participate in this research.

○ NO, I do not want to participate in this research.

If NO, I do not want to participate Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Personal feelings of safety (responses via sliding scale indicating *frequency*)
Q2.1
I feel safe when I am at school, and my students are safe.
Q2.2
Students or teachers at my school say or write language that is offensive to people of other races, sexual orientations, or religions.
Q2.3
Students and teachers at my school treat each other with respect.
Q2.4
Physical fights between students occur at my school.
Q2.5
School property or other students' property is stolen or destroyed at my school.
Q2.6
I have stayed home from work because I was threatened or was afraid.
Q2.7

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

We practice what we should do if an intruder came into our school with a weapon.
Q2.8
School administrators or teachers search students' belongings for weapons.
Q2.9
Administrators and faculty actively discuss responsibilities for safety in the school.

Likelihood of possible events at your school (responses via sliding scale indicating *likelihood*)
Q3.1
There are students at my school who may be members of gangs.
Q3.2
Students or teachers could be using drugs or alcohol while at school.
Q3.3
Students or teachers make sexual jokes or try to touch students inappropriately without their permission.
Q3.4
Students at my school bully other students on the internet.
Q3.5
Students or teachers are threatened with violence by a student at my school.
Q3.6
Students or teachers at my school tease others about their race.
Q3.7
Mass violence (e.g., school shooting) may occur at my school.
Q3.8
Drugs may be available at my school.
Q3.9
Students might have weapons at my school.
Q3.10
Students bully others at my school.
Q3.11
Students or teachers at my school say or write language that is offensive to people of other religions.
Q3.12
Police officers have come to my school because of a student's behavior.

Severity of possible events at your child's school (responses via sliding scale indicating *potential*)
Q4.1
Persistent verbal bullying between students.
Q4.2
Physical fights between students.
Q4.3
An intruder entering the school with a weapon.
Q4.4
Hearing hateful comments about someone's race, religion, or sexual orientation.
Q4.5
A student bringing a weapon to school.
Q4.6
Bullying of students or staff on the internet.

Q4.7
Threats of physical violence between students or against a staff member.
Q4.8
Sexual harassment between students and/or staff.
Q4.9
Presence of illegal drugs on campus.

Demographics (THESE QUESTIONS ARE OPTIONAL and your responses remain ANONYMOUS)
Q5.1
What grade level do you teach (if multiple grade levels, select the one with whom you spend most of your day)?

○ 9th

○ 10th

○ 11th

○ 12th

○ I prefer not to answer.

○ I am not a classroom teacher.

Q5.2
What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ I prefer to self-describe.

○ I prefer not to answer.

Q5.4
What is your highest completed level of education?

○ Graduated from high school or equivalent (e.g., GED, vocational certificate).

○ Some college.

○ Technical or Trade Certificate.

○ Associate's Degree.

○ Bachelor's Degree.

○ Graduate Degree.

Q36

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

What is your ethnicity?

○ Caucasian/Non-Hispanic White

○ Hispanic

○ African-American/Black

○ Asian/Pacific Islander

○ Other/Mixed

Q5.3

How often do you watch the news on television or read news stories on the internet?

Appendix C: Recruitment Materials

C.1: Initial Inquiry Letter to Potential Participant Schools

Date

(Administrator Name)
(Administrator Title)
(School Mailing Address)

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear (Administrator Name):

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at your institution. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, FL, and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled Priorities for School Safety, and I am examining the alignment of applicable school safety legislation to the perceptions of educational stakeholders in Florida private schools that serve exceptional students. The topic is of both personal and professional interest to me because of my current position as an administrator at Greenwood School of Jacksonville; we have similar student populations, missions, and approaches to education, and I appreciate the work your school is doing!

I hope that the school administration will allow me to recruit students in grades 9-12 for a brief, anonymous questionnaire (draft copy enclosed). Due to the nature of the study, I also hope to recruit the parents/guardians of these students, as well as the school's administration, faculty, and staff for a similar anonymous questionnaire (draft copy enclosed). All participants who volunteer will be a consent form to be signed (student forms include parental/guardian consent; copy enclosed).

With your approval, participants will complete an electronic survey that should take no longer than 30 minutes. The survey results will be pooled for the dissertation and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only pooled results will be documented. No costs will be incurred by either your school or by the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I will follow up with a telephone call next week and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at that time. You may contact me at my email address: mortimer.anthonyd@gmail.com.

If you agree, kindly return a signed acknowledgement letter (sample draft enclosed for your convenience) in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. Thank you for your consideration.

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Sincerely,

Anthony Mortimer

Enclosures:
    (1) Sample permission acknowledgement letter
    (2) Sample assent/permission form for participants
    (3) Sample survey questionnaires for adult and student participants

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Enclosure (1): Sample school permission acknowledgement letter (2 pages)

<Needs to be on school letterhead, please>

SCHOOL PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Date
Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give Anthony Mortimer permission to conduct the research titled "Priorities for school safety: The alignment between federal and state school safety legislation and safety needs as perceived by education stakeholders in Florida private schools for exceptional students" at Atlantis Academy, Coral Springs. The scope of this research applies to the following:

Students in grades 9-12, their parents/guardians, school administration, faculty, and staff.

The duration of this project will be approximately one month, dependent upon rate of return of distributed surveys.

This also serves as assurance that this school complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. A brief description of those rights is described in the second page of this letter.

Sincerely,

(Administrator Name)
(Administrator's Title/Position)

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

FERPA/PPRA Requirements:

- The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, a survey created by a third party before the survey is administered or distributed by a school to a student. Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to such survey within a reasonable period after the request is received.

- Arrangements to protect student privacy that are provided by the researcher in the event of the administration or distribution of a survey to a student containing one or more of the following items (including the right of a parent of a student to inspect, or opt-out of upon the request of the parent, any survey containing one or more of such items): Political affiliations or beliefs of the student or the student's parent. Mental or psychological problems of the student or the student's family. Sex behavior or attitudes, illegal, anti-social, self-incriminating, or demeaning behavior. Critical appraisals of other individuals with whom respondents have close family relationships. Legally recognized privileged or analogous relationships, such as those of lawyers, physicians, and ministers. Religious practices, affiliations, or beliefs of the student or the student's parent. Income (other than that required by law to determine eligibility for participation in a program or for receiving financial assistance under such program).

- The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, any instructional material used as part of the educational curriculum for the student. Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to instructional material received.

- The school must have policies regarding the administration of physical examinations or screenings that the school may administer to students.

- Arrangements to protect study privacy in the event the collection, disclosure, or use of personal information collected from students for the purpose of marketing or for selling that information (or otherwise providing that information to others for that purpose), including arrangements to protect student privacy that are provided by the agency in the event of such collection, disclosure, or use.

- The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, any instrument used in the collection of personal information before the instrument is administered or distributed to a student. Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to such instrument within a reasonable period of time after the request is received.

C.2 Administrators, Faculty, Staff Recruitment Letter

Research Participant Information Sheet (School Administration, Faculty, and Staff members)

Dear Prospective Participant:

You are receiving the enclosed materials because your school has agreed to participate in a research study that I am conducting. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, FL, and am in the process of writing my dissertation.

The study is entitled <u>Priorities for School Safety</u>, and I am examining the alignment of applicable school safety legislation to the perceptions of educational stakeholders in Florida private schools that serve exceptional students.

Your school's Director/Principal has granted me permission to recruit you for participation in this study; however, you have the right to be fully informed and to decide for yourself whether or not you would like to take part. Please read through the following information; if you decide that you would like to participate, then please follow the instructions provided to access the survey. The initial screen of the survey will repeat the information in this packet and ask for your electronic signature as consent to continue.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration, and I hope that you will decide to take part in my work.

Respectfully,

Anthony Mortimer

Enclosure (1): Informed Consent Document (Research Study Information)

Enclosure (2): Survey Access Instructions

C.3 Parent/Guardian Recruitment Letter

Research Participant Information Sheet (Parents and Guardians of High School Students)

Dear Prospective Participant:

You are receiving the enclosed materials because your child's school has agreed to participate in a research study that I am conducting. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, FL, and am in the process of writing my dissertation.

The study is entitled <u>Priorities for School Safety</u>, and I am examining the alignment of applicable school safety legislation to the perceptions of educational stakeholders in Florida private schools that serve exceptional students.

Your school's Director/Principal has granted me permission to recruit you for participation in this study; however, you have the right to be fully informed and to decide for yourself whether or not you would like to take part, and whether or not you would like for your child to take part.

- For your survey--please read through the information on the next page; if you decide that you would like to participate, then please follow the instructions provided to access the survey. The initial screen of the survey will repeat the information in this packet and ask for your electronic signature as consent to continue.
- For your child's survey (High School Students only)
  - Please review and sign the Parental Consent form in this packet.
  - Please discuss with your child and ask them to sign the Informed Assent for Minors form in this packet
  - IMPORTANT: Please return BOTH signed forms, using the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope, as soon as possible. A survey packet WILL NOT be sent to your child unless I have received these signed permissions to do so.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration, and I hope that you will decide to take part in my work.

Respectfully,

Anthony Mortimer
Enclosure (1): Informed Consent Document (Research Study Information)
Enclosure (2): Parental Consent Document
Enclosure (3): Minor Informed Assent Document

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

C.4 Student Recruitment Letter

Enclosure (4): Survey Access Instructions

Research Participant Information Sheet (High School Students)

Dear Prospective Participant:

You are receiving the enclosed materials because your school has agreed to participate in a research study that I am conducting and because you have returned a signed Parental Consent form and a signed Minor Assent form to indicate you would like to participate.

I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, FL, and am in the process of writing my dissertation.

The study is entitled <u>Priorities for School Safety</u>, and I am examining how well state and federal laws about school safety represent your opinions about school safety.

Your school's Director/Principal has granted me permission to recruit you for participation in this study; however, you have the right to be fully informed and to decide for yourself whether or not you would like to take part. Please follow the instructions provided to access the survey. The initial screen of the survey will remind you of the information in this packet and ask for your electronic signature as consent to continue.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration, and I hope that you will decide to take part in my work.

Respectfully,

Anthony Mortimer

Enclosure (1): Informed Consent Document (Research Study Information)

Enclosure (2): Survey Access Instructions

EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS' SAFETY PERCEPTIONS

Appendix D: List of Tables and Figures

Table   **Page Number**