A Document Analysis on Bullying Policies and Procedures at

the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board

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Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

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Abstract

This study examined bullying within schools and school bullying policies with a focus on the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB). Conducting a critical policy and document analysis of eight documents on the HWCDSB website, this study sought to answer the following research questions: How does HWCDSB board policy contribute to how bullying is understood and addressed in HWCDSB schools? How does HWCDSB's bullying policy compare to the best practices identified in the literature? Working within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, four themes emerged. The themes were analyzed to explore how bullying policy acts as an intervention within schools. This MRP adds to the body of work surrounding critical policy and document analysis, and school bullying policy. Recommendations for improving HWCDSB policies and recommendations for future research were presented. This research can inspire and promote an ecological approach to policy implementation and management of bullying behaviour.

Acknowledgements

Several people supported me throughout this research, and I would like to thank them. My supervisor, Dr. Michael Savage, showed me tremendous support and unwavering patience as I worked to complete this paper; thank you for having confidence in my work from start to finish. Dr. Catherine Hands, thank you for generously agreeing to be my second reader. Your time and feedback were tremendously valuable and appreciated. I would also like to acknowledge and thank my proofreader, Mark Poulin, for professionally reading and editing my work in adherence to the MRP format.

To my parents, Patricia and Roman Spytkowsky, my sisters, Ariana and Aliya, and my dog Simba, for putting up with me throughout this lengthy process. Thank you for celebrating with me when things went well and comforting me when I needed the extra support. You gave me the strength to persevere and complete this paper. Mama, by completing this paper and degree, I can finally say I am as smart as you—at least on paper, since we both have our Master's degrees now. I hope I have made you proud and thank you for being my role model throughout this process.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

From the ages of 5 to 18, a child will spend more time in school and in a classroom than they will at home. They may see their peers, teachers, and other educators more than they see some family members. Thus, it is important for educators to cultivate and nurture a safe environment both physically, mentally, and with regards to Catholic school boards, spiritually for children (Thapa et al., 2013). If issues do arise, there needs to be adequate policies and protocols to help restore the environment to a safe space as well as help rebuild the trust that may have been lost due to an incident (Thapa et al., 2013).

Bullying is a behaviour that has a presence within school environments. It can affect the culture of the school (Coyle, 2008); victims of bullying may not want to come to school due to feeling unsafe and they may feel that the school does not have their best interest at heart (Nurlia & Suardiman, 2020; Rigby, 2020). Educators, guardians, and students have long been concerned with not only the causes and effects of bullying but also the prevention and management of bullying (Hong et al., 2018). According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), 23% of Ontario students reported being bullied at school and 22% of Ontario students reported being bullied over the internet (Government of Ontario, 2022a). In the *Education Act* (1990), the term bullying is defined as:

> aggressive and typically repeated behaviour by a pupil where, (a) the behaviour is intended by the pupil to have the effect of, or the pupil ought to know that the behaviour would be likely to have the effect of, (i) causing harm, fear or distress to another individual, including physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to the individual's reputation or harm to the individual's property, or (ii) creating a negative environment at a school for another individual, and (b) the behaviour occurs in a context

where there is a real or perceived power imbalance between the pupil and the individual

based on factors such as size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic

status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances,

gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special

education; ("intimidation"). (Interpretation and Other General Matters, 1 (1))

Initiatives from both the Ontario Ministry of Education (the Ministry) and specific school boards

have been introduced to try and assist in the prevention and management of bullying

(Government of Ontario, 2021). On this account, it is critical that bullying be addressed within

schools because every student has the right to feel safe and accepted on school property

(Accepting Schools Act, 2012).

This critical document and policy analysis will investigate and analyze the policies and

procedures the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board (HWCDSB) has in place to

address and discipline bullying. It will compare the policies and procedures of the HWCDSB

with the best practices for bullying prevention identified in the literature. Recommendations for

policy reform and further research will be provided.

The following introductory section will discuss the background, purpose, and focus of the

study, a statement of the problem, as well as an expansion of the rationale of the study. Research

questions that guide the critical document and policy analysis and theoretical framework will

follow. Finally, an explanation of the scope and limitation of the study as well as an outline for

the remainder of the project will be provided.

Background

According to CAMH, one in five Ontario students reported being bullied in school (Boak

et al., 2020). In the past, society has viewed bullying as a natural occurrence for children to

experience (Barone, 1995; Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020; Secunda, 2005). Studies have now found that there are long lasting consequences of bullying (Camodeca & Nava, 2022; Wolke & Lereya, 2015) many of which are not physically visible as they can affect one's mental health (Michiels et al., 2008; Murray-Close et al., 2007; Rubin et al., 2006). This can make bullying difficult to prove and make it hard for schools to take it seriously (Michiels et al., 2008; Murray-Close et al., 2007; Rubin et al., 2006). Often, until there is physical evidence, or the bullying act is directly witnessed, bullying and bullying prevention will not receive the attention it deserves (Evans et al., 2019). An example of this is the case of Devan Bracci-Selvey.

On October 7, 2019, in Hamilton, Ontario, a student by the name of Devan Bracci-Selvey was stabbed to death in front of his mother at Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School, which is part of the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB). He was 14 years old. The person who stabbed Devan was another student at the school (Taekema, 2019a). Devan's family and friends attributed the attack to bullying (HWDSB Safe Schools Bullying Prevention and Intervention Panel [HWDSB Safe Schools], 2021). According to a social media post by his mother, Devan was apparently accosted by a group of children earlier that year and had his bicycle stolen. At the time of the incident, police would not confirm if the attack was connected to bullying but stated they "had a pretty good picture" of what was going on between the two individuals. They also stated that there was a "relationship" between the victim and the accused (Taekema, 2019a). Later when a report reviewing HWDSB's bullying policy and handling of the situation was released, it was stated that although Devon's family and friends did maintain that their son was a victim of bullying, reports were conflicting (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021).

An investigation ensued, and another teen would eventually plead guilty to the crime (Polewski, 2022). The teen's identity would be protected due to a court ordered publication ban;

however, it was established that the youth had a troubled childhood, where trauma and instability were present. The teen also grew up around violence, crime, and drugs. The crown attorney gave a statement outlining that the youth was clearly at risk.

Devan's mother has been adamant that both the school and board were aware of the bullying since the beginning of the school year but did little to stop it. The school board and Hamilton police also confirmed that they were notified of bullying incidents prior to Devon's death. The police stated that two reports were made involving the victim, one in 2018 and one when his bicycle was stolen (Taekema, 2019a).

After the incident occurred and the criminal investigation was complete, the HWDSB launched an investigation into its own policies (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). A formal review of the board's safe school practices as well as bullying prevention and intervention practices was conducted. A school-level investigation was also carried out by board staff (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). The investigation examined how the students were handled after the arrest as initially more than one person was arrested. Their behaviour was also assessed (Taekema, 2019b).

Hamilton Wentworth District School Board Investigation

The Safe Schools: Bullying Prevention and Intervention Review Panel gathered qualitative and quantitative community feedback, examined the literature surrounding bullying, and delivered recommendations to school board trustees on how HWDSB can better prevent and address bullying. On January 25, 2021, the Board of Trustees approved the final report (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021).

The panel heard from more than 10,000 people, ranging from students, parents, guardians, caregivers, community groups, service providers, school staff, board representatives,

and concerned Hamiltonians. The panel put forth 11 recommendations as well as actions that the

HWDSB, the Hamilton community, and the Province of Ontario should take to address bullying

(HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). While this is an extreme example of bullying, it does illustrate

that there are gaps in policy and practice. The school knew of the bullying, yet the behaviour was

still escalating. The school was not a safe environment. It was not until Devan passed away that

that a review of policy was deemed necessary.

HWCDSB Data Collection Inconsistency

While the HWDSB has garnered more spotlight due to the death of Devan Bracci-Selvey,

its coterminous board HWCDSB also has a prevalence of bullying which has required attention

over the past few years. Following the incident of Devan Bracci-Selvey, Hamiltonians also

looked towards the Catholic board and asked to know how they dealt with bullying (Clarke,

2019). In the 2018–2019 school year the HWCDSB had about 29,300 students enrolled (Clarke,

2019). Out of that population, a total of 2,204 students were suspended in that year for various

infractions (Clarke, 2019). Out of that number, 242 students were suspended for violence and 34

for verbal abuse (Clarke, 2019). Thirty one students were suspended for bullying; however, the

HWCDSB admitted the number could be much higher because principals in the HWCDSB are

able to categorize the same infractions differently (Clarke, 2019). Thus, suspensions that were

classified as violence or verbal abuse could have been suspensions for bullying. This revelation

came when the board reviewed their suspension data. Therefore, an inconsistent practice had

developed.

Due to this inconsistency, HWCDSB administrators cannot accurately spot trends within

their schools (Clarke, 2019). To rectify this issue, the board administrators created a suspension-

coding committee, whose purpose is to establish a consistent practice of coding infractions

(Clarke, 2019). This would not only help to better analyze the data for patterns and trends but also help inform the board to implement better practices for safe schools (Clarke, 2019). Will consistently coding infractions be enough? Will the HWCDSB policy be able to identify bullying accurately?

HWCDSB Bullying and Racism

Not only does HWCDSB have an inconsistency with how bullying is labeled with regards of the suspension of students, but recent events have also illustrated how there is an inconsistency in following the bullying policies as well as challenges in creating safe spaces for students within the schools. In 2022, the family of a 14-year-old female student attending a Catholic high school in Stoney Creek (east Hamilton) stated that the school was insufficient in addressing abuse allegations and failed to address their concerns of anti-Back racism towards the student (Hristova, 2022). The father of the student said that 7 months into the school year, his then Grade 9 daughter is scared to leave her home and is experiencing suicidal thoughts due to the violence and racism she experienced at the school (Hristova, 2022). He alleged that bullies began targeting his daughter 1 month into the school year; people posted photos of her online, were calling her by a racist name and made derogatory comments about her appearance (Hristova, 2022). He expressed that he went to the school with his concerns and was told that they would investigate. He did not know the results of the investigation nor who made the social media posts (Hristova, 2022).

Following that, on December 6, 2022, the student was in the washroom when two other students attacked her and spit on her (Hristova, 2022). The incident was recorded and shared on social media (Hristova, 2022). Following the attack, the student told school personnel about the attack, and that she did not feel well and had a headache (Hristova, 2022). The school personnel

took her to the hospital where she was diagnosed with a concussion (Hristova, 2022). As per the Ministry of Education mandate, a school principal must call the police if a student assaults someone badly enough in which medical treatment is required (HWCDSB, 2022b). The school did not contact the police; the father had to do it himself. Upon CBC interviewing the school, HWCDSB did acknowledge that the father called the police himself but would not respond when asked why the school or the board did not make the call (Hristova, 2022). On December 6, Hamilton police charged two youths with assault causing bodily harm, but no evidence of a hate crime was found (Hristova, 2022).

On December 14, HWCDSB said that communication between the families occurred through the parents' portal and that administration was investigating and consequences would be given, however they would not be commenting on specific disciplinary matters (Hristova, 2022). A safety plan was put into place: The victim could only enter and exit the school through a specified single door, had to avoid communication with the other students, and leave school as quickly as possible after her classes ended (Hristova, 2022). The victim's father stated that this was not much of a plan and was very restrictive to his daughter. He stated that the school did not follow the required concussion protocol for students. The CBC also asked board members about this, and they refused to comment (Hristova, 2022). The bullying continued and proceeded to get worse. This prompted the daughter to stay home from school, which, the father says, has impacted her grades and mental health (Hristova, 2022).

The family of the victim stated that the HWCDSB was not properly addressing the concerns of the family which led him to work with community advocacy groups (Hristova, 2022). A 5-hour meeting between the family, school board, and community groups occurred.

The father doubts that a meeting would have occurred if advocacy groups were not involved. The media was not allowed to be present during the meeting (Hristova, 2022).

After hearing about this case, it is evident that the bullying policies are ineffective and not properly implemented throughout all levels of the HWCDSB. At the meeting between the board and the family, it was discovered that the board's equity officer did not know of the incident, and only found out during the meeting (Hristova, 2022). Pat Daly, chairperson of the HWCDSB, who was not present at the meeting, stated that a review of their processes and practices at the school and at the systems level would occur. It was unclear what the review found (Hristova, 2022). Additionally, as of 2023, no additional updated information examining what the board found has been published. There have been no follow-ups in the news either. Thus, it would be beneficial to review the HWCDSB bullying policies and supplemental documents to determine what they cover. Within the school, the bullying policy should be the first step of intervention. It can outline how to rectify issues and future steps that need to be taken to resolve, manage and prevent bullying. Are the policies providing opportunities to address the issues of bullying from elementary school to high school and stop the behaviour from occurring? Or simply put, are they just a band-aid on a larger problem and not providing guidelines about how to address the root causes of bullying? If there is so much room for objectivity within the HWCDSB's policy, then the policy structure and template may not be fully reflective of best practices regarding bullying intervention and prevention. The issue appears to be that the policy is too broad, leading to principals being able to make assumptions about bullying and whether certain instances are even considered to be bullying instances. Therefore, it would be beneficial to assess the actual policy to establish whether a standard practice should occur and can even occur across the schools within the boards.

Purpose and Focus of the Study

The purpose of this study was to conduct a critical document and policy analysis of the HWCDSB's policies and supporting documents with respect to bullying, including the procedure for reporting bullying in schools. The objective of the study was to analyze the current policies of HWCDSB to better understand how they address bullying, how bullying is influenced by policy and the environment the policy exists in, current literature surrounding bullying prevention and intervention, and how the policies reflect current best practices as identified in the literature.

Statement of the Problem

The term bullying can be applied broadly. It can encompass many different things and be paired with different behaviours such as aggression and violence. Dan Olweus, a pioneer of research on bullying, defined bullying as "when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself" (Olweus, 2007, p. 1).

While Olweus's (1994) definition of bullying is the definition most literature references, the Ontario Ministry of Education created their own definition. This definition is outlined in the *Education Act* (1990) and is the definition every school, educator, administrators, and other personnel follow. The definition is as follows:

> aggressive and typically repeated behaviour by a pupil where, (a) the behaviour is intended by the pupil to have the effect of, or the pupil ought to know that the behaviour would be likely to have the effect of, (i) causing harm, fear or distress to another individual, including physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to the individual's reputation or harm to the individual's property, or (ii) creating a negative

environment at a school for another individual, and (b) the behaviour occurs in a context

where there is a real or perceived power imbalance between the pupil and the individual

based on factors such as size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic

status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances,

gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special

education; ("intimidation"). (Interpretation and Other General Matters, 1 (1))

The definition does differ from Olweus's (1994) definition. According to Vaillancourt et

al. (2020), Olweus's (1994) definition does not consider decisive incidences that bring out fear in

victims of bullying. It is further stated that the perpetrators' impression of the victim is at the

core of them creating a power imbalance over the victim (Vaillancourt et al., 2020). It is not only

physical strength that can create an imbalance but social status as well (Vaillancourt et al., 2008).

Looking back at the Ministry of Education's definition, Vaillancourt et al. (2020) argue their

definition of bullying is the best in the world because it includes more "critical incidents" than

Olweus's definition. The Ministry's definition includes both intentional and perceived power

imbalance and types of harm bullying can cause (Education Act, 1990; Vaillancourt et al., 2020).

The definition also specifies that there are different types of bullying, which include: physical,

verbal, social, written and cyberbullying (Education Act, 1990; Vaillancourt et al., 2020).

The Education Act's definition of bullying forms the foundation of HWCDSB policies.

This study will use the *Ontario Education Act* (1990) definition, as it is the standard to which all

policies in Ontario's schools and school boards must adhere. While I will use bullying as the

main terminology, the HWCDSB in some of its documents and policies has also included

harassment as a component of bullying. The definition of harassment is taken from the *Ontario*

Human Rights Code (1990). This study will use both terms as they are connected in policy; however, they will not be used interchangeably.

It is important to note there are different types of bullying identified in the literature. It is not only done on a physical level, but there is also verbal, indirect/relational bullying, cyberbullying, and bullying that occurs through sexual gestures and/or words (Olweus et al., 2019). Bullying is a behaviour that happens in instances of power imbalance (Olweus et al., 2019). While the definition of what a power imbalance is may vary, they all revolve around the perpetrators' use of personal or situational strengths to dominate the victims' behaviour (Oblath et al., 2020). The characteristics can be physical, material, psychological, or social. These characteristics cause the victim to not be able to defend themselves against the said behaviour (Oblath et al., 2020). Additionally, research has not yet developed an answer to give reason as to why victims think they cannot defend themselves against their perpetrator (Oblath et al., 2020). Bullying is more than just conflict between individuals, who have a difference of opinion (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). A person is exerting power and control over another, which can have lasting and damaging effects on the individual (Oblath et al., 2020).

To understand the significance of bullying and why it is important to prevent it, it is important to examine the prevalence of it. A UNICEF Office of Research (2017) report found that more than one in 10 children aged 11 to 15 years in Western countries had experienced bullying in the prior month. Looking at Canada specifically, it ranks in the top 50% of countries with regards to prevalence of bullying across multiple measures. In a study conducted by Boak (2016), 24% of Ontario students in Grades 7 to 12 reported being bullied at school. This equates to about 231,000 students. Furthermore, 13% of students said they had bullied others at school, while 20% of students reported being cyberbullied at least once in that past year (Boak, 2016).

The concern with bullying occurring in schools is not new. Over the past few years, however, there have been increased efforts to raise awareness about the issue and more of a focus on trying to prevent incidents from occurring. This can be attributed to the fact that studies are finding that the effects of bullying can present themselves in adulthood (Armitage et al., 2021; Latham et al., 2023; Lee, 2021). Studies have found that bullying can be linked to adult obesity (Baldwin et al., 2016; Mamun et al., 2013; Takizawa et al., 2015; Vamosi et al., 2012), crime (Ganesan, 2021; Kallman et al., 2021; Olweus, 2011), and other mental health disorders (McKay et al., 2021; Sweeting et al., 2020; Takizawa et al., 2014). Effects of bullying also present themselves while children are in schools causing students' learning to be affected (Halliday et al., 2020; Hidayati et al., 2021; Yu & Zhao, 2021). For example, bullying can negatively impact school culture and environment (Konold et al., 2017; Teng et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020) and affect attendance (Dunne et al., 2013; Feldman et al., 2014; Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022) and academic performance (Alotaibi, 2019; Huang, 2022; Kim et al., 2020).

The Ontario Ministry of Education has implemented a Bullying Prevention Week and the Ontario Government has pledged to invest money in bullying prevention initiatives (Government of Ontario, 2021, 2022a). While this top-down approach is necessary and appreciated, there are 72 school boards in Ontario, all varying in size, student population, and school size (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018). Smaller boards and schools will not necessarily have the same resources as large boards and schools. Furthermore, each school board is different. Each school can be understood as its own community, with school board having their own policy and documentation. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important for there to not only be policies and procedures put into place at a provincial and board level, but to also examine policies and

procedures at a board level to make sure they are in accordance with ministry and mandates and reflect the needs of the community and the environment the board is situated in.

It is important to analyze the HWCDSB's bullying policies and procedures as they set the parameters and expectations around bullying and document the prevention and intervention methods the board has chosen to implement. It is through the HWCDSB's policies that students understand the standard of behaviour and conduct they must adhere to. Clear policies and documents communicate obligations to provide a safe environment and how those obligations are enacted within the environment (Harrison et al., 2020; Richard et al., 2012). Policies also keep administration, teachers, and students accountable. For example, there are certain protocols that need to be completed before a student is suspended for behaviour. Policies also help administration justify their actions and responses to situations, let students know where they can turn to for help and outline the procedures that need to be followed (Harrison et al., 2020).

By analyzing the policies set out by HWCDSB, using a critical document and policy analysis approach, and referencing the literature, it can be better understood what the policies are and where improvements can be made. With this understanding, policy makers can update their policies to better prevent, and intervene in, instances of bullying.

Rationale for the Study

Those who experience bullying can experience many different negative effects ranging from physical injury, anxiety, depression, rejection, helplessness, and humiliation (Hall, 2017; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2009; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Additionally, there are also mental health and behavioural problems that can occur to both victim and perpetrators, including: depression, anxiety, having low self-esteem, conduct problems, psychotic symptoms, and physical illness (Arseneault et al., 2010; Hall, 2017; Reijntjes et al., 2011). Furthermore, those students who have

been bullied may start to feel unsafe at school (Arseneault et al., 2006; Buhs et al., 2006; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). This can cause their academics and attendance to suffer but they can also withdraw from the social aspect of school (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Glew et al., 2005; Hall, 2017). They may start to feel like they are not part of the school community (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Glew et al., 2005; Hall, 2017). On the other hand, those students who are bullying are also more likely to have their academics suffer, as well as skip school and have a higher potential of dropping out (Hall, 2017; Jankauskiene et al., 2008; Ma et al., 2009).

When looking at preventing and managing bullying, there is a lot of focus put on the victim and perpetrator of bullying when analyzing the effects of bullying (Arslan et al., 2021; Eyuboglu et al., 2021; Finne et al., 2018). Bystanders can also be affected by witnessing bullying (Barhight et al., 2013; Janson & Hazler, 2004). Studies have found that those who witness bullying have reported having emotional distress, increased heart rate, as well as increased levels of anger, fear, and sadness especially when remembering occurrences of bullying (Barhight et al., 2013; Janson & Hazler, 2004). Therefore, bullying can affect a wide variety of people within one school community.

In terms of best intervention practices to prevent and manage bullying, perspectives vary. Some research supports zero tolerance policies (suspending or expelling bullies) (Boylan & Weiser, 2002; Burke & Herbert, 1996; Litke, 1996), while other research argues it is ineffective (Berlowitz et al., 2017; Borgwald & Theixos, 2013; Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015). Other research supports focusing more on the teacher and their role in bullying prevention (Bradshaw et al., 2011; Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Yoon & Bauman, 2014), yet other research advocates for better policies (Cornell & Limber, 2015; Hall, 2017; Roberge, 2012).

Using policy as a step of intervention for bullying can influence the behaviour of the student and educators as well as school organizational practices (Hall, 2017). When looking at school policies many of them state that certain behaviours are prohibited; for example, bullying and harassing behaviours (Nurhayati et al., 2020; Roberge, 2012). Policies can also require behaviours such as bullying and harassment to be reported if witnessed or experienced (Roberge, 2012); further, policies can promote or discourage behaviours (Foody et al., 2018). Looking from an administration/school wide perspective, policies establish reporting procedures and school-safety plans (Cornell & Limber, 2015; Foody et al., 2018). Thus, policies are not only used to influence individual behaviour but also organizational behaviours (Hall, 2017).

It is important to note, policies can be broad; they can be used as a systems-level intervention that in most cases would also require more specific intervention programs and services at the organization, group, and individual level (Hall, 2017; McKinlay, 1998; Salimi, 2021). Hence, policy is the foundation for which more specific intervention can build on (Salimi, 2021). Thus, the policy schools implement need to be evidence based (Cornell & Limber, 2015). This study examines how HWCDSB's policy acts as an intervention for bullying as well as how reflective the policies are in comparison to the best practices identified in the literature.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research for this paper:

1. How does board policy contribute to how bullying is understood and addressed in HWCDSB schools?

2. How does HWCDSB's bullying policy compare to the best practices identified in the literature?

Theoretical Framework

The critical document and policy analysis is informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. The theory focuses on how social environments affect children's development. Applying this theory to bullying recognizes that bullying is a complex phenomenon with multiple influences, causes, and correlations that lead to the existence of it (Atlas & Pepler, 1998, as cited in Mishna et al., 2010; Winton & Tuters, 2015). Bronfenbrenner (1979) outlined five systems that shape a child. The first system is the microsystem. The microsystem is the environment a child has direct contact with, such as a school, their peers, family, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Walker et al., 2019), and their immediate surroundings (Mc Guckin & Minton, 2014). A mesosystem is composed of the connections between the different microsystems of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Walker et al., 2019). For example, the relationships between the community and the child's family or the relationship between the parents of a child and their teacher (Espelage, 2014). The exosystem includes environmental elements that the child does not have direct contact with but affects the child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mc Guckin & Minton, 2014). It is the social constructs that surround the child, for example, educator's perceptions of the school environment or even professional development opportunities associated with bullying (Espelage, 2014). The macrosystem is comprised of social values and norms that influence the child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mc Guckin & Minton, 2014). These contexts dictate societal structures and actions in the different systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Walker et al., 2019). Different contexts include social, cultural, organizational, and political contexts (Espelage, 2014). A school bullying policy falls into this system. The final system of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework is the chronosystem. This system refers to change or the uniformity of the child and

their environment through the course of their life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mc Guckin & Minton, 2014). This would include significant life events such as death or alternating family structure (Espelage, 2014).

A school bullying policy acts at the level of the macrosystem, as there are different social, political, and cultural factors that influence the creation of it (Pennell et al., 2020). The policies that are created at the macro level influence different systems the students find themselves in (Toney et al., 2022). To shift behaviour, the policy would need to target different systems, as different factors and characteristics can affect the behaviour of a child (Divecha & Bracket, 2020). This study aims to analyze policy documents developed by the HWCDSB that were designed to prevent and manage bullying to explore if they fit best practices with regards to the literature, and to examine whether they address the complexities of bullying.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope of the study is restricted to focusing on policies of the HWCDSB. In Canada, education is not controlled by the federal government (Robson, 2013). Canadian education is decentralized (Robson, 2013). Each province has its own governing body that sets out policies and laws that govern education. In Ontario, while each school board answers to and follows mandates set out by the Ontario Ministry of Education, each school board has their own policy for bullying that they develop independently and internally. The HWCDSB has its own policy on bullying that students, administrators, and teachers follow. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized outside of this one school board's policy context.

The documents and policy from HWCDSB apply the term bullying broadly with the understanding that there are different types of bullying. This study will follow a broad definition unless specific examples are given. As a result, it is not possible to identify or analyze specific

policies that relate to specific forms of bullying. Some policies that are used to manage and intervene in bullying are also grouped with policies on harassment. Therefore, in those contexts, bullying and harassment had to be examined together.

Outline of the Remainder of the Document

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature related to bullying in schools, policy as an intervention for bulling, and policy development. The chapter also outlines the Ontario Ministry of Education documents that pertain to bullying, and the findings of the HWDSB review panel on bullying as this was relevant to what the Hamilton community specifically expressed they wanted with regards to bullying policy within their community.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology and design used to conduct the study. This chapter gives insight into how the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory fit the methodology and design of the study. Ethical considerations for data collection and analysis are outlined.

Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the critical policy and document analysis. It outlines and justifies the four themes which emerged from analyzing the different HWCDSB bullying policy and policy documents.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research conducted and explains why the research is beneficial. It includes a discussion and recommendations for HWCDSB policies and future research as well as concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter, the literature focusing on bullying in schools, bullying interventions, and bullying policy and policy development are reviewed. The literature review will focus on exploring bullying in schools in an Ontario context. Connections between bullying in schools and schools using policy as an intervention for bullying are explored.

Bullying Definition

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (1989), every child has the right to feel safe at home, at school, and within a community. Bullying can prevent this from occurring. While there are instances where disagreements and conflicts occur within a school, and sometimes these incidents result in a physical altercation, especially when dealing with younger children, bullying is different (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Bullying goes beyond a singular altercation. Bullying is a form of aggression, which is carried out or directed to a person over a period of time (Olweus, 2007; Smith, 2016), with the intent to cause harm (Gaffney et al., 2019). There is a power imbalance between the person carrying out the behaviour versus the person towards whom the behaviour is directed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1991). There are different forms of bullying in schools. Physical bullying can range from hitting, shoving, stealing, or damaging property. Verbal bullying can include name calling, mocking, or making derogatory comments. Social bullying can involve exclusion from groups, spreading rumours. Cyberbullying may use technology like social media, cell phones, and laptops to spread rumours or publish information or pictures about a person without their consent (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). According to some literature, bullying is seen as the most common type of violence in a school setting (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017).

Ecological Systems Theory in Relation to Bullying

Within a school environment, a bullying policy is intended to manage and stop bullying; however, as this literature review will illustrate, bullying is a complex issue. To understand how bullying presents itself and how to properly intervene, manage and prevent it in a school environment, one must examine the intricate inter-relationships between a child and their environment (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Mishna et al., 2021; Mishna et al., 2022). Adopting Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a lens allows the researcher to understand how the individual characteristics of a child interact with the environmental context they are in (the systems) to either advance or avert victimization and/or perpetration of bullying (Espelage, 2012; Hong & Espelage, 2012). The individual child, whether it be the victim, or the perpetrator, are at the centre of their system, but will then move out of the centre to different systems that shape them (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In his theory, Bronfenbrenner (1994) outlines five systems.

The Ecological Systems Theory and Bullying Prevention

Studies that have adopted the ecological systems theory lens have found that children who are affected by bullying either as a victim or perpetrator encounter issues in different areas such as family (Analisah & Indartono, 2018; Low & Espelage, 2014), peers (Bagwell & Schmit, 2011; Smokowski & Evans, 2019), school environment (Day et al., 2018; Eugene et al., 2021), and community environment (Dragone et al., 2019; Katz-Wise et al., 2022). All these factors influence the way a child acts, both positively and negatively. They can be risk factors that lead to bullying or protective factors that prevent bullying (Miranda et al., 2019). However, what is important to note is that all these elements and characteristics exist within or are part of the five different systems (Miranda et al., 2019).

Different socio-demographic characteristics are oftentimes studied to examine and find predictors of bullying behaviour within schools (Qui, 2021). Socio-demographic characteristics

such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, health status, psychological functioning or learning disabilities, poverty, and status are all part of a child's microsystem (Espelage, 2014). The microsystem has direct influence on bullying behaviour (Qui, 2021). Besides socio-demographic characteristics, individuals or groups of people within that student's immediate environment in their home or school can also have a direct influence on a child. The intersectionality between these different groups can lead to bullying behaviour. This includes family characteristics such as inter-parental violence and parent and child relationships (Chesworth et al., 2019), as well as peers of students and their relationships with them (Saarento et al., 2015). This literature review will examine many of these characteristics, factors, and relationships as different studies have found that depending on what factors are present or absent within the system of a child this can prevent bullying and victimization from happening or put a child at risk of participating in bullying behaviour either as a victim or a perpetrator (Halliday et al., 2021; Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020; Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

The mesosystem comprises the affiliation between two or more microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The interactions are between the family, peers, and schools (Divecha & Bracket, 2020). It becomes clear within this system that affinity between students, teachers, and school administrators are important (Espelage, 2014). The staff within a school can also influence students' perceptions of the school environment and the relationships students have with their peers (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Depending on the relationships and connectedness a student feels within a school, they may become more likely to seek help when conflict and bullying occurs (Aceves et al., 2009).

Additionally, teachers can be a big risk factor for bullying being present within a school (Camodeca & Coppola, 2019). This is attributed to the fact that teachers are the staff with whom students interact most often during a school day (Pianta, 1994; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Teachers'

attitudes and willingness to intervene in peer conflict can influence if bullying is reported or even intervened upon (Cuesta et al., 2021; Espelage et al., 2014). Teachers' perceptions and responses to bullying are discussed later in this literature review.

The exosystem refers to the interacting of two or more settings, but unlike the mesosystem, the child is only present within one setting, not both (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Events and circumstances from the setting in which the child is not present affect the student (Lee, 2011). For example, schools exist within a neighbourhood. The school population is made up of people living within that specific neighbourhood. If a neighbourhood has a high rate of violence, this can influence bullying behaviour (Azeredo et al., 2022). Thus, when planning bullying interventions, it may be beneficial to look at the neighbourhood in which the school is situated (Azeredo et al., 2022). However, there is a gap in this research; more studies need to further examine the relationship between a neighbourhood environment and bullying (Espelage, 2014; Hong & Espelage, 2012).

The macrosystem frames which social structures and activities appear in the actual system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Cultural beliefs, opportunity structures, and hazards can affect conditions and processes that arise in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hong & Espelage, 2014). Behaviour of individuals and among groups of people is rooted within the culture of a society (House, 2019). Therefore, it is important to look not only at the individual to determine why bullying is happening, but also at an organization or structure as a whole (Cushman & Clelland, 2011). The norms present within a school or school boards can maintain certain behaviours and allow bullying to continue occurring or it can prevent it from occurring (Cushman & Clelland, 2011). School norms can bolster inequality and power imbalances among students (Thornberg & Delby, 2019), which can lead to bullying (Oblath et al., 2020).

A school bullying policy is influenced by the macrosystem (Pennell et al., 2020). The policy a schoolboard and school create is reflective of societal norms and laws within that society (Pennell et al., 2020). As societal norms evolve, so do policies and laws (Jayachandran, 2021). For example, prior to the 2000s there were no policies regarding cyberbullying as this type of behaviour did not come about until the creation of the internet and social media (Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act, 2014). While bullying has been around for generations, social norms have shifted over the years; as such, behaviour and language that used to be acceptable no longer is, meaning bullying policy has evolved to reflect this change (Allanson et al., 2015). For example, for a time, bullying was considered a normal and acceptable part of childhood/development (Allanson et al., 2015).

As new research is conducted, and new findings are presented, the bullying policies that are in place within schools need to be reflective of best practices and be evidence based (Divecha & Brackett, 2020). What worked once to prevent, manage, and intervene in bullying may not be effective anymore due to societal evolution. An example of this is corporal punishment. This practice was one accepted by society but is now an outdated practice (Gradinger, 2005). Moreover, when new laws within a society are created and new policies are developed within schools, research must also be conducted to determine their effectiveness in bullying intervention, prevention, and management (Bullock et al., 2001; Chin et al., 2022). If not, these policies can be ineffective and cause more harm than good (Chin et al., 2022).

The chronosystem is the last level of the ecological framework. This system encompasses the consistency or change of a person and their environment over the course of their lifetime (Gonzales, 2021). An example of this is that studies have found that children of divorce can have

higher levels of aggression, inappropriate classroom conduct, and have a decreased level of self-regulation (Hetherington & Elmore, 2003).

The Ecological Systems Theory and the School Board Bullying Policy

To effectively prevent and manage bullying, intervention strategies must require targeting different and/or multiple factors in the child's life that influence and perpetrate bullying and victimization in schools (Downes & Cefai, 2019; Espelage & Horne, 2008; Limber, 2006). When creating policies for bullying within a school environment, it may be important that school-based intervention be reflective of the complexity of the ecology of bullying and peer victimization (Benbenishty & Astor, 2019).

It is not enough to just focus on the characteristics and factors within a microsystem to stop bullying; other systems need to be considered (Downes & Cefai, 2019). While it may be beneficial to understand why behaviour is occurring, it is just as important to understand why a behaviour is not stopping. An effective bullying policy, under an ecological systems lens would need to not just focus on punishment but would also need to incorporate and assert peer- and school-level intervention (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). To adequately prevent, manage, and intervene in instances where a student has been bullied, a shift in all the child's ecological systems would need to occur (Lee, 2011). Intervention needs to target not only individual characteristics but also consider recognize the relationships and intersectionality between different systems to stop behaviour from occurring (Downes & Cefai, 2019).

Examining school bullying policies falls under the macrosystem, because examining the policy will help illustrate a school board's commitment and willingness to contribute to healthy development of children within their schools (Divecha & Bracket, 2020). Examining the policies also influences the mesosystem level as this can help determine if further investment in training

educators within schools is needed to help shift the child's ecosystem and prevent bullying (Divecha & Bracket, 2020). Finally, examining bullying policies at a macrosystems level will influence the child's microsystem as it will also illustrate if children's individual needs can be or are addressed within the policy or if further implementation is needed (Divecha & Bracket, 2020). It is not only the perpetrator needs that need to be taken into account but also the needs of victims and bystanders to bullying behaviour (Divecha & Bracket, 2020).

Prevalence of Bullying

Population based studies have found that 10% of students are bullied on a regular basis while 30% are bullied on an occasional basis (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; Turner et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2019; Vaillancourt, Trinh, et al., 2010). When looking at highest bullying victimization rates Canada is in the top five of 31 economically advanced countries (UNICEF, 2017; Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Research has shown that when analyzing the distribution for bullying victimization, Canada has been at the top of the distribution for more than three decades (Molcho et al., 2009; UNICEF, 2019). Canadian rates of bullying have increased from 2006 to 2014, while many other countries have reported a decline in bullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2020).

Vaillancourt, Trinh, et al. (2010) conducted a two-part screening procedure to focus on school age children's experience with bullying. The first part of the procedure included 16,799 children in Grades 4 to 12 from Southern Ontario. They were given the definition of bullying and two questions from Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (1996); they were then asked about their experiences with bullying. In the second part of the study, students were asked about specific types of bullying such as physical, verbal, and social. Results of the first part showed that 37.6% of students reported being bullied and 31.7% reported that they bullied others (Vaillancourt, Trinh, et al., 2010). Results of the second part showed, that prevalence was even higher when

students were asked about specific types of bullying, with 48.9% of students reporting bullying others and 63.1% students reporting being bullied (Vaillancourt, Trinh, et al., 2010).

A study conducted by Vaillancourt, Brittain, et al. (2010) examined chronic bullying, in which a person was being bullied or bullying others more than two or three times per month. Participants of the study included 1,152 children from Grades 4 to 12, from Southern Ontario. Students completed a Safe Schools Survey online. The results showed that 12.3% of students identified as being targets of bullying, 5.3% identified as perpetrators, and 4.0% identified as bullying others and as having been bullied themselves. Results also showed that girls were slightly more likely than boys to be classified as targets, however, boys were more likely to be classified as bullies and be classified as students who are bullied and who bully others (Vaillancourt, Brittain, et al., 2010). The study showed that elementary school students were identified as targets more so than secondary school students, whereas secondary school students were identified as perpetrators more so than elementary school students (Vaillancourt, Brittain, et al., 2010).

In response to the death of student Devan Bracci-Selvey in Hamilton, Ontario, the HWDSB Safe Schools: Bullying Prevention and Intervention Review Panel conducted a survey which found that in the HWDSB, 59.8% of students reported being bullied by others and 19.7% of students reported being bullied frequently (Vaillancourt et al., 2020). The study found that the rates of bullying were high in the HWDSB board (Vaillancourt et al., 2020). This is consistent with data found in a previous study conducted by Vaillancourt, Trinh, et al. (2010) on bullying prevalence and how it is rising in Canada (Vaillancourt et al., 2020).

It is interesting to note, that over the past 2 years, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the way children have been going to school and learning; instead of in-person learning, classes were put online. Vaillancourt et al. (2021) aimed to examine if COVID-19 impacted prevalence

rates of bullying. Using a sample of 6,578 students from Grades 4 to 12 in the HWDSB, results showed that prior to the pandemic, students disclosed higher rates of physical, social, verbal, and general bullying before the pandemic than during the pandemic. Cyberbullying rates, however, were only slightly higher pre pandemic than during the pandemic (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). This could be attributed to teacher and parent supervision of the children while they were online (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Vaillancourt et al. (2021) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic may have reduced rates of bullying, which should lead to an examination of changes to learning that occurred during COVID-19 to see if these changes can promote healthy relationship building among the students. Cultivating positive relationships have been found to be a protective factor of healthy development (Marín-Lopez et al., 2020; Rubin et al., 2008; Victor et al., 2019). Research has also illustrated that bullying can hinder these relationships from happening (deLara, 2019; Pells et al., 2016; Vaillancourt et al., 2021).

Research has shown that bullying has a disproportionate impact on males and females (Gage et al., 2021), individuals with special needs (Gage et al., 2021), and sexual minority youth (Smith & Reidy, 2021). With regards to gender, studies have found that males are more likely to be involved in direct bullying, whereas females are more likely to be involved in indirect bullying (Aviles-Dorantes et al., 2012; Iossi et al., 2013; Olweus, 1994; Varjas et al., 2009). Studies have found that children can be bullied due to their gender presentation or perceived sexuality (Kosciw et al., 2011; Martin-Storey & August, 2016). Increases in bullying victimization also has been attributed to different factors such as being from a minority race, having lower socio-economic status, being overweight, having refugee status, or being a recent immigrant, or one's sexual orientation or disability (Bucchianeri et al., 2013, Connolly et al., 2015; Goldweber et al., 2012, Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020, Newman & Fantus, 2015; Pottie et al., 2014; Rosenthal et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2012).

Cyberbullying

With the further evolution of technology and the rise of social media, cyberbullying is occurring more often (Nazir & Thabassum, 2021). Cyberbullying incidents are bullying/aggressive behaviour that occurs through electronic or digital media. It can be done by one person or a group of people (Kowalski et al., 2014; Tokunaga, 2010). Unlike traditional bullying, there does not need to be face-to-face contact, the perpetrator can remain anonymous (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). This lack of face-to-face contact can result in more psychological stress and benefit the perpetrator more so than traditional bullying (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2014). Furthermore, since cyberbullying can occur at any time and the perpetrator can remain anonymous, it can be hard to manage and intervene. Therefore, intervention strategies need to not only target traditional bullying but cyberbullying as well (Eyuboglu et al., 2021).

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Impacts of Bullying

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Studies have shown that bullying can be looked at as a matter of public health, since both the bully's and victims' life and health can be impacted (Arseneault et al., 2010; Masiello & Schroeder, 2014; Ttofi et al., 2012). Effects can present themselves while a child is still being bullied or can come about later in life (Zych et al., 2016).

Impacts of Bullying on a Victim

Studies have found that there are negative effects that occur when an individual is bullied (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Dune et al., 2010; Halliday et al., 2021). Some of these effects are long-lasting (Takizawa et al., 2014; Ttofi et al., 2011a). Victims of bullies have been found to have low self-esteem and experience loneliness (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), depression (Ttofi et al., 2011b), risk of suicide (Holt et al., 2015), psychotic symptoms (van Dam et al., 2012), trouble sleeping (van Geel et al., 2015), anxiety (Romano et al., 2020), eating disorders (Lee &

Vaillancourt, 2019), and physical health problems (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Moore et al., 2017).

Bullying also affects the victims' cognitive processes; for example, their memory and ability to pay attention (Vaillancourt & Palamarchuk, 2021). These effects can impede their learning in school (Schwartz et al., 2005) and result in poor academic achievement (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). Being bullied can cause victims to not feel safe within the school environment (Vaillancourt, Brittain, et al., 2010) which can cause their attendance to be affected as they can resist or avoid coming to school (Dunne et al., 2010). By not coming to school, the students hope to prevent themselves from being bullied (Hutzell & Payne, 2012).

Another effect is the victim's relationship with peers (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). An important part of healthy development is the ability to develop healthy relationships with peers (Pepler & Bierman, 2018). Being a victim of bullying can negatively affect these relationships from happening, which puts the child at risk for future deviant behaviours and other physical and mental difficulties (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). School bullying incidences are occurring in a developmental stage where being accepted by peers and "fitting in" is crucial to healthy development (Orben et al., 2020). When a child is bullied, they are being singled out and not accepted by peers. This disrupts peer relationships and can lead to peer rejection and depression (Arseneault, 2018; Orben et al., 2020; Platt et al., 2013). Past research has found that having friends and being liked by peers can act as a protective factor of bullying victimization (Hodges et al., 1999; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Studies have found that adults who were bullied as children are still experiencing the effects of it in adulthood (deLara, 2019; Kokko & Pörhölä, 2009). Ellen deLara (2019) found that some consequences of being bullied in childhood include having difficulties with relationships, finding it difficult to trust others, having lower physical

and psychological well-being, having issues with eating disorders, difficulty maintaining a healthy weight, and body image issues.

A 14-year longitudinal research project conducted by Gattario et al. (2019) looked at the relationship between childhood bullying, body image development, and disordered eating in emerging childhood. Results showed that bullied children not only experienced more body dissatisfaction but also they maintained this negative view in adulthood. Results also showed that at age 10, childhood bullying would predict negative body image in adolescence, which by age 24 predicted more disordered eating. This is important to consider as often the victim's body and appearance tend to be what is focused on by a bully (Berne et al., 2014). Thus, when a bully judges a victim's body negatively, this can lead a victim to also judge their own body negatively (Berne et al., 2014; Gattario et al., 2019). Therefore, it would be beneficial to have early and effective interventions while the child is still in school as this can help curb the view of negative body image (Gattario et al., 2019).

There is growing literature that argues bullying victimization is a form of trauma, due to its long-lasting consequences (Gilbert et al., 2009; Idsoe, et al., 2021; Strøm et al., 2018). A study conducted by Strøm et al. (2018) examined the role of shame in the relationship between bully victimization and psychological adjustment. The sample size included interviews with 681 people from ages 19 to 27 (Strøm et al., 2018). The results of the study showed that in young adulthood, bully victimization and severe violence was strongly associated with psychological distress, impaired functioning, and served as barrier to social support (Strøm et al., 2018). This shows that even though a person is not being bullied anymore they are still living with and experiencing the effects of being bullied in childhood (Strøm et al., 2018).

Impacts of Bullying on a Perpetrator

The perpetrators of bullying can also be at-risk for adverse outcomes. Perpetrators can experience mental health and physical health issues, delinquency, issues with adjustment in schools, and employment challenges (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Looking more specifically, bullying perpetration has been connected to suicidal thinking and suicidal attempts (Holt et al., 2015), carrying weapons (Valdebenito et al., 2017; van Geel et al., 2014), drug use (Ttofi et al., 2016), and violence and offending in adulthood (Farrington et al., 2012; Ttofi et al., 2011a; Ttofi et al., 2012). That is not to say that bullying will cause this to happen, but it has been shown there is a correlation between the two (Arseneault et al., 2010).

A longitudinal study conducted by Humphrey and Vaillancourt (2020) examined Canadian adolescents from ages 10 to 19 who were assessed annually. Results found that those who carry out the behaviour of bullying at age 10 for a prolonged period, are more likely to sexually harass their peers, use homophobic language and insults, and be aggressive in dating relationships at age 19 (Humphrey & Vaillancourt, 2020). Looking further at bullying and its connection to violence, a meta-analytic review conducted by Ttofi et al. (2011a), examining links between bullying and criminal offending, found that there was a significantly higher chance of bullies to offend later in life than non-bullies. Another meta-analysis conducted by Ttofi et al. (2012) found that being a perpetrator of bullying in school was a strong predictor of violence later in life.

As stated earlier, there are not only perpetrators of bullying but there are also students who are perpetrators of bullying and are also bullied themselves. A study conducted by Barker et al. (2008) examined bullying and victimization in adolescence. A total of 3,932 adolescents from ages 12 to 17 were assessed. Barker at al. (2008) found that over time bullying victimization

increased the probability of partaking in bullying more strongly than bullying increased the probability of victimization. Therefore, a connection between victimized youth and bullying was found since being a victim could pose as a risk factor for victims to become a perpetrator of bullying and start to victimize others (Barker et al., 2008). Additional studies have found that there are many situations where there is an overlap of perpetrators and victims of bullying (Gottfredson 1986; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2000). Often, victims become perpetrators of bullying or perpetrations become victims of bullying (Gottfredson, 1986; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2000). Hindelang et al. (1978) argue that the victim-perpetration occurs because victims and perpetrators of bullying have shared characteristics which makes them more susceptible to evolve into both a victim and perpetrator. Being a victim of bullying can further spread bullying and victimization throughout a school (Barker et al., 2008; Choi & Park, 2018). It is important to note that not all victims will become perpetrators; however, there is an increased risk that they could (Marsh et al., 2004).

Olweus (2013) stated there is a power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim that can allow for bullying to happen. In many instances bullying can occur while others are present and even observing the incident (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Olweus, 2013). One way a perpetrator can exhibit their power and status is by bullying others. They are demonstrating they have power over peers they view as weaker than themselves (Vaillancourt et al., 2003). When a person is bullied, depending on their self-esteem, they may start to feel threatened (Hunter et al., 2007) and they may also seek ways to restore their self-esteem (Choi & Park, 2018). Students who have favourable self-esteem prior to the bullying may start to bully others to show they still have a presence in the peer hierarchy (Baumeister et al., 1996). If a victim already has low self-esteem, engaging in bullying behaviours themselves would not be considered as those individuals already feel they have no social status or power, thus they will not necessarily retaliate (Baumeister et

al., 1996). A study conducted by Choi and Park (2018) further illustrated this theory. A longitudinal study with a sample size of 3,660 Korean students found that there is strong connection between bullying victimization and self-esteem in Grade 7 and bullying perpetration in Grade 8 (Choi & Park, 2018). Choi and Park (2018) found that in response to being a victim of bullying, students who had higher self-esteem were more likely to partake in bullying perpetration as a response to being bullying. Alternatively, if the students have lower self-esteem, there was less probability of them partaking in perpetration of bullying as a response to being a victim (Choi & Park, 2018). Therefore, when providing intervention, the self-esteem of the perpetrator and victim need to be considered as the intervention may differ depending on the relationship with their self-esteem (Choi & Park, 2018).

A study conducted by Piggott et al. (2018), analyzed a sample of 5,403 students who participated in the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey. Their goal was to assess the possibility that students with different risk profiles were both victims and perpetrators of bullying and violence. Alcohol use, drug use, traumatic brain injury, and problem video game play were some of the risk factors examined (Piggott et al., 2018). The results of the study found that students who were both victims and preparators had a particular set of characteristics. This group reported the highest risk rates of the risk factors examined in the study (Piggott et al., 2018). The study found an overlap, as many of the risk factors were more dominant among both victim and perpetrator (Piggott et al., 2018). Therefore, it may be beneficial to have target interventions that help prevent and manage bullying and violence with victim perpetrators to better prevent health issues from arising later in life (Piggott et al., 2018).

Social Characteristics

Family dysfunction can contribute to school disruption. Carless (2014) found students who experience family dysfunction tend to be more disengaged than their peers. The type of

family relationship a student experiences can also compromise a student's peer relationships (Auerbach et al., 2014), which can then put them at a higher risk for partaking in or experiencing bullying and victimization (Ward et al., 2018).

A school environment where bullying exists creates a higher prevalence of troublesome relationships among not only students but school personnel (Carroll, 2011). This can cause students to stop coming to school (Carroll, 2011). A study conducted by Sun et al. (2021) examined risk factors that can predict school disruption in children and youth. The study consisted of 1,241 students from ages 4 to 18 living in Ontario, Canada. Sun et al. (2021) found that students with family dysfunction were 85% more likely to experience school disruption than those without. This echoed a previous study conducted by Stubbs and Maynard (2017) which found that family cohesion is a protective factor for decreased school engagement. Further Sun et al. (2021) found that victims of bullying were 48% more likely to experience school disruption than those students who were not bullied. This can be attributed to the fact that bullying victimization can be associated with low perceptions of safety (Vaillancourt, Brittain, et al., 2010). Therefore, if a child feels unsafe in their school environment, they are less inclined to go to school (Egger et al., 2003; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Vaillancourt et al., 2013).

Not feeling safe in school can also cause lower academic achievement (Eisenberg et al., 2003; Vaillancourt et al., 2013). Studies conducted by Buhs et al. (2006, 2010) found that in grades as low as kindergarten, children were not only experiencing exclusion and victimization, but for some children the victimization and exclusion would continue into later grades. Additionally, the children who were victimized and excluded were less likely to (a) attend school, (b) be accepted by peers, and (c) take part in classroom activities (Buhs et al., 2006, 2010). Additionally due to all this the students had lower academic performance than their peers (Buhs et al., 2006, 2010).

The school environment needs to be safe, engaging, and inclusive for learning and healthy development to take place (Wang et al., 2014). Studies have found that feeling safe within a school is correlated with less peer victimization and bulling within the school (Vaillancourt, Brittain, et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2021). There are many different factors that are associated with a positive school climate; for example, collective beliefs, values, and attitudes that are present in the school (Cohen, 2009; Koth et al., 2008; Modin & Östberg, 2009). Studies have also found that students who are victims of bullying hold negative views of their school climate (Gage et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2010; Mischel & Kitsantas, 2020).

Additionally, looking through an ecological framework, the staff of a school belong to a level within the school's ecology, thus teachers' attitudes regarding bullying have a significant impact on the prevalence of bullying within that school (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Mazzone et al., 2021; Kollerová et al., 2021). A teacher's attitude towards bullying can play a role in bullying behaviour continuing or stopping within a classroom. If a teacher does not view a behaviour as serious enough, they may not take measures to stop the behaviour from further occurring within their classroom, which can cause the environment to become unsafe for a student and affect their learning (Veenstra et al., 2014). Therefore, teachers need to not only understand the seriousness of bullying behaviour but also receive proper training to help ensure that their attitudes and responses reflect the seriousness of bullying (Demol et al., 2020). When teachers take bullying seriously and view it as a behaviour that is intolerable, it can better the climate of the school, leading to a change in the microsystem (Demol et al., 2020).

A study conducted by Wang et al. (2014) looked at school climate and its connection to self-reported peer victimization and teacher rated academic achievements. Participants were 1,023 Grade 5 students from 50 Ontario schools. The results found that peer victimization was

negatively associated with GPA and negative perception of school climate was also associated with a lower GPA. Therefore, a positive school climate is an important component of academic success (Wang et al., 2014). If a student does not feel safe in their school environment, their academics can be affected (Wang et al., 2014). One of the ways children do not feel safe in schools is due to bullying (Vaillancourt, Brittain, et al., 2010).

Bullying and Morality

Many adolescents would indicate that bullying is not a behaviour students should try to emulate (Runions et al., 2019). Yet, bullying is a prevalent issue in schools. A study conducted by Runions et al. (2019) examined moral disengagement and youth. Moral disengagement is defined as partaking in behaviour that is known to be morally wrong; however, the person engaging in the behaviour feels no remorse or guilt about engaging in the behaviour (Bandura et al., 1996). Looking at a sample of 1,895 Australian students from Grades 7–9, Runions and colleagues (2019) found that bullies and bully-victims (individuals who are both bullies and the victims of bullying) used moral disengagement mechanisms (moral justification, displacement of responsibility, distortion of consequences and victims blaming) to justify bullying more so than students who are only victims or who are not involved in bullying. A study conducted by Bjärehed et al. (2019) that examined 1,577 Grade 5 students from Sweden found that bullying perpetration was positively associated with moral disengagement within a child. The results of these studies illustrate that when creating interventions for bullying and bullying prevention, a focus on moral disengagement may be beneficial (Bjärehed et al., 2019; Runions et al., 2019).

Research has also analyzed empathy in relation to bullying. Studies have found that there is a connection between low empathy and being a perpetrator of bullying (Nickerson et al., 2015; Zych et al., 2019; Zych et al., 2016). A study conducted by Farrell et al. (2020) examined

empathy, exploitation, and bullying and a possible link to social-ecological factors. A sample of 531 adolescents from Southern Ontario, were examined for 3 years from Grade 9 to Grade 11 (Farrell et al., 2020). The results were surprising in that it was found that exploitation had simultaneous and longitudinal affiliation with bullying (Farrell et al., 2020). Empathy on the other had only had concurrent associations with bullying (Farrell et al., 2020). There was no longitudinal connection (Farrell et al., 2020). Further, exploitation was found to be what incidentally linked self-perceived social resources to bullying perpetration (Farrell et al., 2020). However, empathy did not show a similar effect (Farrell et al., 2020). Overall, the study showed that with regards to social ecology, having a lack of empathy may correspond to bullying within each year of high school (Farrell et al., 2020). Moreover, having exploitive tendences can be a significant predictor of bullying in high school (Farrell et al., 2020).

A study conducted by Zych and Llorent (2019) examined if there was a relationship between empathy and moral disengagement and bullying perpetration. Zych and Llorent (2019) had 904 participants answer a questionnaire. Results showed that high affective empathy (the ability to understand other's emotions and respond accordingly) predicted lower bullying perpetration (Zych & Llorent, 2019). It was also found that moral-disengagement mechanism was connected to higher bullying perpetration, while low affective empathy also related to high perpetration (Zych & Llorent, 2019). This is important to consider with regards to school bullying because one of the key components of bullying harming another person (Smith et al., 2002). Taking into considerations the findings, perpetrators of bullying who employ moral-disengagement mechanism, think that hurting others is not a serious issue, due to their low empathy (Zych & Llorent, 2019). Therefore, it may be beneficial for policies to promote empathy while also confronting moral disengagement (Zych & Llorent, 2019).

Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Bullying

A study conducted by Mishna, Sanders, et al. (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with students in an Ontario school district in Grades 4, 7, and 10. The students were diverse in their ethnicity, their school needs, in their involvement with bullying and their gender. Mishna, Sanders, et al. (2020) wanted to analyze the students', teachers', and parents' perspectives on bullying and cyberbullying. The results illustrated two key themes: characteristics of bullying and responsibility for bullying (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). With regards to characteristics of bullying and cyberbullying it was understood that it is common to be exposed to both (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Participants used bullying and cyberbullying interchangeably (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). However, some parents and teachers in the study thought that bullying was not as problematics as children think it is (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Many thought that it was normal and potentially a beneficial part of growing up (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Thus, bullying in some instances has become normalized (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Some participants, mostly teachers and parents, discussed positives to being a victim of bullying (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). They believed being a victim can create resilience and make the child stronger (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). However, research has shown that victimization does not help foster resilience but instead can have detrimental effects on a child (Fredrick & Demaray, 2018; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Troop-Gordon et al., 2015).

Further, students, parents, and teachers specified that bullying is related to being different (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Race, ethnicity, religion, language, class, and sexual orientation are all factors than can classify a person as different (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Participants specified that the victims of bullying are often singled out because they do not fully align with

norms or what is socially dominant (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Participants of the study did not always link this difference to larger systems of inequality but rather as the acceptance of social norms and those who reinforce these norms (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). When a child is being bullied because they differ from societal norms in some way (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) those norms are reinforced and the larger systems of inequality are perpetuated (Walton, 2005). This furthers the "kids will be kids" narrative (Mishna, Schwan, et al., 2020). Interventions need to address different levels of the ecological context, which will help children identify and dispute stereotypes and norms (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). The interventions need to challenge the social discourses that create and advance the normalization of bullying (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Further, Mishna, Sanders, et al. (2020) also state that more teacher training to identify and manage bullying is needed.

When discussing who is responsible for bullying, teacher and parents put the responsibility on the people who are involved in the bullying (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Mishna, Sanders, et al. (2020) some parents and teachers said that the victims can be easy targets, which puts some of the blame is on them. Many parents consider themselves responsible for preventing and intervening if their child is involved in bullying. Teachers also thought themselves to be responsible to educate about bullying; however, there were differentiating opinions of teachers' responsibility when it comes to bullying. For the most part, responsibility for bullying behaviour was placed on the individual, there was no focus on a systemic or social cause of bullying behaviour (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Research has found that a teacher's response to bullying is influenced by different factors (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Their response can be influenced by if they think the victim of bullying was responsible for the bullying, if the victim "looks" like a victim and/or if the teacher feels empathy for the victim (Mishna et al., 2005; Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020).

Interventions for Bullying

Research has found that schools play a role in children's development; consequently, schools can be important environments where bullying prevention, intervention, and management and the promotion of healthy development can occur (Jourdan et al., 2021; Kub & Feldman, 2015; Tang et al., 2009). A report conducted by the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology investigated the state of mental health in Canada (Kirby & Keon, 2006). The report discussed the potential school sites have in carrying out mental health prevention and identification of mental illness (Kirby & Keon, 2006). The committee suggested that teachers be trained so that they can be a part of the identification of mental health concerns of children in the school (Kirby & Keon, 2006). Teachers are aware that mental health difficulties exist within the classroom, as the effects are visible to them (Splett et al., 2019). Mental health can affect children's learning and development (Garcia-Carrión, 2019). Students who are struggling can display low academic achievement (Pascoe et al., 2019), poor relationships with peers (Orben et al., 2020), and issues with attendance (Finning et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important that teachers have the proper tools and strategies needed to not only recognize mental health concerns but also understand how to intervene in these situations (Meldrum et al., 2009). A study conducted the Canadian Teachers' Federation (Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012) found that 87% of teachers felt that they did not have sufficient training in dealing with mental illness within the classroom. In Ontario, there is a network of school boards, researchers, and community organizers that collaborate to give information and skills to educators to help them have the tools to teach students with mental health problems, like those that can be brought to surface from partaking or experiencing bullying (Whitley et al., 2018).

Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, influence from different systems, and their interactions from one another can either promote or prevent bullying and bullying victimization

from occurring (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Espelage, 2016). When creating policies aimed at

intervening, managing, and preventing bullying, it may be beneficial to have these policies

aimed at different levels of intervention (Swearer et al., 2010). Swearer et al. (2010) suggest that

a number of anti-bullying programs are not rooted in theoretical framework. Having this

involvement would help advise program development and assessment. A lot of these programs

are problem-specific solutions that do not guide intervention at a social ecological level. The

programs are not aimed towards factors that may be causing the bullying behaviour to manifest

and occur such as peers and families (Swearer et al., 2010).

Due to the serious long and short term effects of bullying, it is important that schools

implement strong interventions to help manage and prevent bullying (Ttofi, 2015). Not only does

bullying impact health, but academic performance (Strøm et al., 2012) and attendance of victims

and perpetrators of bullying can also be impacted (Gaffney et al., 2019; Gastic, 2008). Therefore,

having strong interventions can be beneficial for many (Gaffney et al., 2019). Research has

shown that there are different types of interventions and that some interventions work better than

others (Halladay et al., 2020; Pyne, 2019)

Educators' Roll in Bullying Intervention

It can be argued that the majority of bullying a child will experience will occur at school

(deLara, 2019). Thus, it is important that teachers, administrators, and other educators within the

school create a safe learning environment. A study conducted by deLara (2019) found that the

participants of their study voiced their displeasure that when it came to preventing bullying in

schools, they felt that adults did not do enough to stop it. A study conducted by Haataja et al.

(2016) found that only 24% of students who were victims of bullying received any type of care

from school personal. The study also found that students who had a reputation for being a

victims had a higher likelihood of having teacher intervention (Haataja et al., 2016). It is important to remember that there is a power imbalance when a student is a victim of bullying; therefore, a third party may be needed to help stop the bullying (Fischer et al., 2020). This third party may very well be teachers (Oldenburg et al., 2015; Saarento et al., 2015). deLara (2019) stated that there needs to be more focus in preventing bullying and intervening before incidences happen instead of a focusing on intervening after an incident has occurred and damage has been done.

A study conducted by Farley (2018) had middle school teachers complete an online survey to examine teachers how teachers identify and intervene in school bullying, as well as evaluate how administrators and other teachers can affect the response. Results of the study found that administrator support, and the teacher's peers had meaningful impact on a teacher's intervention regarding school bullying. This is important as teachers do have the authority to address unsuitable behaviour, and they also have an obligation to keep students physically and psychologically safe (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014; Farley, 2018). Yoon and Bauman (2014) found that the more teachers participate in the prevention, management, and intervention of bullying within a school, the less bullying there seems to be within the school (Gagnon, 2022). On the other hand, Farley (2018) states that the responsive action of not only the teacher but other educators within the school is reflective of different factors. The seriousness of the incident, the number of resources and time available, support from administrators and other teachers as well as the self-efficacy of the teacher can all determine how or if a teacher will respond to bullying (Farley, 2018; Gagnon et al., 2022).

Students are encouraged to disclose that they are being bullied, as this can help trigger processes and interventions to stop it from occurring further (Boulton et al., 2017). Yet, research

has shown that many students do not tell teachers and often "suffer in silence" (Boulton, 2005; Boulton et al., 2017; Cowie, 2000; Hunter et al., 2004; Smith & Shu, 2000; Smith et al., 2004). Therefore, there are barriers that exist which stop students from seeking help (Beckman & Svensson, 2015; Boulton et al., 2013). This can carry out into adulthood and prevent these people from seeking professional help to deal with the long-lasting effects of bullying (Strøm et al., 2018). A study conducted by Eliot et al. (2010) found that when high school students viewed educators within the school and school environment as supportive, they would be more inclined to seek help for bullying and violence. Further Gregory et al. (2010) established that fair and consistent discipline paired with a high availability of caring adults within a school can lower rates of bullying and victimization in the high school.

When it comes to mental health concerns, the earlier an intervention and treatment is implemented the better chance there is of diminishing the severity and steadfastness of the diseases in that person's lifetime (De Girolamo et al., 2012). In Ontario, research has shown that less than one-third of children and adolescents with a mental health challenge receive care (Georgiades et al., 2019). Schools are the most common places that children can have mental health-related contacts (Costello et al., 2014; Georgiades et al., 2019; Green et al., 2013; Merikangas et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2014). However, according to Halladay et al. (2020), little is known about interpersonal processes that take place within a school that can ease access to care.

Teachers may be the first people to observe early signs of mental health issues with children (Halladay et al., 2020). Their relationship with a student and/or their responsiveness to the concern can either foster or deter a student's help-seeking behaviour (Halladay et al., 2020). If a student has a positive, healthy relationship with their teacher who makes the student feel safe and provides a nurturing environment, a student may be more inclined to reach out to them for

help (Gulliver et al., 2010; Yap et al., 2013). The stigma, fear, and/or embarrassment in asking

for help may be minimized, which leads to overcoming barriers when seeking help (Gulliver et

al., 2010; Yap et al., 2013). Additionally, a teacher's strong ability to not only identify but also

engage with students about their emotional concerns can also help foster a connection where

students also feel safe to ask for mental health support (Halladay et al., 2020). Research has

shown that there is a positive correlation between a teacher's ability to identify students with

mental health considerations and the student engaging in mental health services (Gasquet et al.,

1999; Sourander et al., 2001; Wu et al., 1999; Zwaanswijk et al., 2005). A study conducted by

Eliot et al. (2010) found that in Grade 9, students who attended schools where a supportive

school climate existed, were more likely to seek help from teachers for bullying.

A study conducted by Halladay et al. (2020) aimed to examine the connection between

student–teacher relationships at school, a classroom and a student seeking out help/support for

mental health. A cross-sectional survey consisting of 31,120 students in Grades 6–12 attending

248 schools in Ontario was conducted (Halladay et al., 2020). Students' aim to seek help at

school for mental health and students' mental health-related service use was examined (Halladay

et al., 2020). Results showed that the relationship quality between teacher and students, and

teacher responsiveness, was positively linked to a student motivation to seek help at school

(Halladay et al., 2020). This applied to both elementary and secondary students (Halladay et al.,

2020). Therefore, there may be benefits to having teacher training on how to identify and

respond to students exhibiting mental health issues within their classroom (Halladay et al., 2020).

By not only having teachers be mental health literate, but also have all educators and

administrators within the school being mental health literate, can help students feel safe to reach

out for help (Kutcher et al., 2016; Kutcher et al., 2013). Being mental health literate can assist

school psychologists, social workers, or other mental health personnel (Halladay et al., 2020), as the teachers can also consult and provide insight about the student that the mental health professionals otherwise would not know (Halladay et al., 2020). For these reasons, implementing strategies that allow for different levels of support and different personnel to be involved in the intervention can be beneficial as all these different components are necessary when trying to shift a behaviour from occurring.

Multi-Tiered System of Support

A Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is an approach that allows schools to create and provide systems and practices of support for students to attain good outcomes in school. This approach encompasses school-based interventions aimed at different levels of support to help address the different learning, mental health, emotional, and behavioural needs of a student (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011; Njelesani et al., 2020; Wexler, 2018). MTSS is aimed not only towards those who are bullied and the bullies themselves but can also be aimed towards bystanders (Njelesani et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2011). This approach is not only individually based, but also an integrated, school-wide approach, as it aims to promote policy, practice, and ideology at the whole-school level for a feasible positive change in thinking (Bazyk et al., 2003; Njelesani et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2011). MTSS intervention outlines structures that all teachers, administrators, and other school staff can implement to create strategies to prevent, manage and address bullying (Njelesani et al., 2020; Stoiber, 2014). The intervention focuses on the school as a system and its progress in reforming thinking in preventing bullying and not just on the progress of a student (Stoiber, 2014).

MTSS intervention is a three-tiered approach. The first tier consists of instruction and support for all students (Njelesani et al., 2020). No matter how much a single child or school

community is at risk, everyone receives the same support and instruction (Njelesani et al., 2020).

An evidence-based approach is used (Stoiber, 2014). This is important, as mental health concerns

are under-identified within schools (Njelesani et al., 2020). Tier 1 establishes that every student

will have mental health services they can access (Njelesani et al., 2020). This includes universal

programs, practices, policies, and training that influences both students and staff which can

nurture a safer school climate (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023); for example, school-wide behavioural

expectations, implementing social emotional learning in the classroom, training for staff, and

referring and recognizing students who may need additional professional help (Bohnenkamp et

al., 2023)

The second tier encompasses selective prevention. This is where further support is given

to those who's needs for the support are higher (Njelesani et al., 2020). For example, the students

who are showing signs of being at risk of mental health concerns (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023).

Tier 2 provides specific intervention by staff to students at high risk of bullying (Njelesani et al.,

2020). This tier recognizes that some students need more extensive help, such as social skills

training (Njelesani et al., 2020).

The third tier offers individualized and explicit intervention for a person (Njelesani et al.,

2020). The support acknowledges mental health concerns, the behaviour of the student, and their

academics (Njelesani et al., 2020; Wexler; 2018). Tier 3 goes a step further and does not only

focus to help the individual, but also teaches people who have a direct impact on the students

such as family and friends, so they too know how they can help and influence the student

(Njelesani et al., 2020). An example of this would be communication intervention (Njelesani et

al., 2020). Specific therapies are part if this tier as well (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023).

Interprofessional Collaboration

Teachers hold a lot of responsibility throughout the year (Borg & Drange, 2019). They are responsible for teaching students, demonstrating how students have developed academically throughout the year, lesson planning, marking/assessing students work, building positive relationships with the students, and being responsible for the well-being of students both physically and mentally (Borg & Drange, 2019; Studer & Mynatt, 2015). Additionally, teachers have themselves and their families that they need to take care of. This can cause burnout and overwhelming feelings, especially for teachers just getting into the profession as there are only a certain number of hours in a day and resources available. This can also make it difficult for teachers to attend and manage different students' needs (Ekornes, 2015; Hornby & Atkinson, 2003), which can lead teachers to overlook or miss incidents that occur within their classrooms, especially if the issues are non-academic (Studer & Mynatt, 2015). One of the things that can be overlooked is bullying, especially when it is not physical, as it can be difficult to prove if it is occurring and who is involved (Michiels et al., 2008; Murray-Close et al., 2007; Rubin et al., 2006). On the occasion it is identified, bullying and its effects fall into the realm of mental health. Teachers can find themselves unequipped to deal with it as they do not have the training nor the confidence to deal with mental health issues (Reinke et al., 2011). Thus, it can be beneficial for teachers to collaborate with mental health professionals when it comes to intervening, managing, and dealing with bullying (Studer & Mynatt, 2015).

Having interprofessional collaboration adds different levels and fields of expertise which help bolster and enhance intervention and assistance for students who need additional support (McClain et al., 2022; Welch et al., 1992). Examples of these supports are mental health services or counselling (McClain et al., 2022; Welch et al., 1992). Students can have complex needs that

require more assistance than a teacher can give them (Borg & Drange, 2019). Teachers can only manage situations, they cannot treat or diagnose students (Borg & Drange, 2019). If there are psychological reasons or trauma that is causing a bully and victims of bullying to act a certain way or if there are further mental health concerns that are affecting them, having professionals help treat the situation can have enormous effects (Borg & Drange, 2019; Njelesani et al., 2022; Yates et al., 2018), especially because bullying can have long-lasting debilitating consequences (Beduna & Perrone-McGovern, 2019; Graff, 2020; Sweeting et al., 2020). By collaborating, varied perspectives can be discussed which can lead to positive changes within the school environment (Hindin et al., 2007; Levine & Marcus, 2007; Meirink et al., 2007; Stoll, 2009). Fostering collaboration, however, is complex because there are different perspectives and agencies that need to be considered (Ertesvåg, 2014; Scruggs et al., 2007; Young Buckley, 2005). Adding to the challenge of effective collaboration is the fact that mental health services are not easily accessed by everyone in Canada (CAMH, 2023a, 2023b).

Most psychiatric disorders emerge in adolescence (Leitch, 2007). In Canada, people from the age of 15–24 are at a higher risk of experiences mental health issues, than other age groups (CAMH, 2023b). It has been found that only one in five children with a mental health disorder in Canada receive treatment (UNICEF Canada, 2007). However, just because they are getting treatment does not mean it is adequate. Research has shown that there is an insufficient number of qualified professionals, inadequate funding, and long wait times to receive care (Reid & Brown, 2008; Sterling et al., 2010). Individual and community barrier for care also exist. This can include socioeconomic status, stigma, and family health (Kutcher & McDougall, 2009; Mukolo et al., 2010; Reid & Brown, 2008). Thus, interprofessional collaboration at school is ideal because children spend most of their time in school. Having services come to them in schools, where students legally need to be, can be more cost effective and beneficial than trying

to get the student and their family to come to a professionals' offices for treatment (Mellin, 2009; Porter et al., 2000; Welch et al., 1992; Winitzky et al., 1995).

Collaboration within the school environment does not only benefit bullying intervention, but it can affect the rates of bullying within a school. Ertesvåg and Roland (2015) hypothesized that the collaboration among the school staff can be related to the rates of bullying. A survey was conducted with a sample of 18,767 students and 1,932 teachers from 85 Norwegian schools, from Grades 3 to 10. Results showed that teachers in schools with high rates of bullying reported weaker leadership, teacher collaborative activity and teacher affiliation than schools with low bullying (Ertesvåg & Roland, 2015).

While teachers are often the first point of contact when it comes to bullying, other school staff can also play a role when it comes to the existence of bullying within a school (Brown et al., 2022; Erling & Galloway, 2004). A study conducted by Erling and Galloway (2004) found that the rate of bullying among the students is related to the school's professional culture such as leadership and collective activity.

The school leadership, which is often the school's principal plays a key factor in a school's professional culture (Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Goddard et al., 2015). Bush and Glover (2003) found that the leadership can socially influence the prevention and reduction of student bullying. School principals also play a role in the implementation of school policies and anti-bullying efforts (Brown et al., 2022). Their leadership can determine how a bullying situation is delt with, how staff should respond to bullying incidents, and how bullying should be addressed within the school (Brown et al., 2022; Li et al., 2017).

Engaging Families

Since studies have acknowledged that parents play a significant role in the development of their children (Fredriksen, 2019; Gunderson et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2009), parents can also

influence school bullying (Ashrafi et al., 2020; Burkhart et al., 2013). Parenting style has been found to influence a child's engagement with bullying. Studies have found that children who bully are more likely to have parents who are disengaged and unresponsive (Espelage et al., 2000; Georgiou, 2008). It has also been found that parents tend to underestimate their child's involvement in bullying as either a perpetrator or victim (Holt et al., 2009; Stockdale et al., 2002).

Research is now starting to show it may be beneficial to include parents in bullying prevention efforts (Gaffney et al., 2021; Holt et al., 2009;). A meta-analysis conducted by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found that when examining intervention schools versus control schools, having parent training/meetings was one component that helped reduce bullying victimization and bullying perpetration. Ttofi and Farrington (2011) also found that when information was provided to parents about bullying there was a decrease in bullying behaviours (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Similarly, Gaffney et al. (2021) in their meta-analysis found that when information was provided to parents about bullying it helped reduce the prevalence of bullying and victimization. Looking at a Canadian perspective, Ontario has developed a parent engagement policy that aims to support and enhance parent engagement within schools through the development of different initiatives and programs (Government of Ontario, 2022b).

Parents/caregivers can be valuable resources when trying to help children involved in bullying, as they may know the children involved in bullying best (Von Salisch, 2001). They can also have a strong influence over the child (van Niejenhuis & Veenstra, 2020). When trying to prevent certain behaviour from occurring, it is important that the school and parents express the same message to the child (Ostrander et al., 2018; Sheridan et al., 2004). Both the school and parents help prevent bullying and need to agree on how to deal with it when it comes to a specific child (van Niejenhuis & Veenstra, 2019). It is also important that both the parent and

school share information to help prevent bullying and stop further consequences of it from occurring (van Niejenhuis & Veenstra, 2019), as some children are more inclined to tell the school they are being bullied before they inform their parents, while others will tell their parents first (Fekkes et al., 2005; van Niejenhuis & Veenstra, 2019).

Zero Tolerance Policies

Zero tolerance policies are a form of discipline, where a student is suspended because of breaking a rule or displaying a certain behaviour within the school (Kodelja, 2019). The student is suspended regardless of the circumstances that lead to the event or the context of the situation (Stinchcomb et al., 2006; Teske, 2011). Zero tolerance acts as a punishment for the student to deter and prevent future undesirable behaviour (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force [APA ZT Task Force], 2008; Mallett 2016).

Research has found that the practice of zero tolerance to be ineffective (Kodelja, 2019; Smith et al., 2012; Welch & Payne, 2018). Students who are suspended multiple times are at an increased risk for low academic achievement, dropping out, and displaying antisocial behaviour (APA ZT Task Force, 2008; Lee et al., 2011; Pyne, 2019) and are more likely to be arrested and incarcerated as adults (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019). In schools where suspensions occur often, it is reported that school climate is poor (APA ZT Task Force, 2008; Gordon & Fefer, 2018; Lee et al., 2011; Pas et al., 2019; Peguero & Bracy, 2015) and using zero tolerance policies have not been found to improve school safety (APA ZT Task Force, 2008). Additionally, studies have shown that suspending students does little to diminish the problematic behaviours within a school (Fabelo et al., 2011; Hannigan, 2019; Irvin et al., 2004; Losen, 2011). Zero-tolerance policies can be discriminative, as they often disproportionately affect children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Morrison, 2007). The policies can be used to remove students the

school deems challenging (Henry et al., 2022). The definitions of zero-tolerance policies vary as do behaviours that are targeted and consequences that can be applied by schools (Henry et al., 2022). It is subjective, which is problematic as this can lead to the bias and or prejudice to be present when dealing with bullying/problematic behaviours (Henry et al., 2022). What one school views as problematic behaviour and worthy of a suspension and/or further investigation another school may not, due to the bias and prejudice of the people within the school (Henry et al., 2022). This may not even be done purposefully, but unconsciously (Henry et al., 2022).

Conflict Resolution

Some literature has suggested that conflict resolution skills can be an effective intervention for dealing with bullying victimization (Bickmore, 2010; Mura et al., 2010; Zapf & Gross, 2001). In contrast, other studies have shown that this conflict resolution is not beneficial, as bullying is not a simple conflict or disagreement amongst peers of equal power (Bauman, 2008; Gaffney et al., 2021). Conflict and bullying are not the same (Baillien et al., 2017). Bullying is not a 1-day incident, but a repeated act of aggression, where a power imbalance exists among parties involved and has been going on for a period of time (Olweus & Limber, 2010). There is an intent to cause harm (Gaffney et al., 2019). Whereas a conflict among peers can simply stem from an isolated incident (Einarsen et al., 2003). There is no power imbalance (Einarsen et al., 2003).

A study conducted by Burger (2022) examined possible connections between conflict, management styes, bullying victimization, and psychological adjustment in a school setting. It is important to note, that most studies looking at conflict resolution and bullying are conducted in a workplace setting (Valente et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zurlo et al., 2020). These studies are also aimed towards adults within the school and not students (Valente et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zurlo et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a gap in the research for how conflict resolution

interacts with school bullying victimization (Burger, 2022). While Burger's (2022) study examined university students, the results are still beneficial, as it can lead the way for future research in the elementary and secondary level. The results of the study found that none of the conflict management styles were connected to bullying victimization and that the styles were unsuccessful to hinder or boost the negative effect of victimization on school adjustment (Burger, 2022). This shows that school bullying is different from normal peer conflicts (Burger, 2022). Just because a student has good conflict management skills does not necessarily mean that they will be able to break out of the victim role and even the power imbalance toward their bully (Burger, 2022). Having a teacher acts as a third party may be beneficial as this can nullify the power imbalance (Burger et al., 2022; Elgoibar et al., 2012). Having teachers be able to recognize bullying and implement boundaries to stop the perpetrator from furthering them is important (Burger et al., 2015). Implementing a strategy that only looks to solve conflict would not be beneficial if the conflict that is trying to be resolved is bullying (Burger, 2022; Notelaers et al., 2018).

Teachers play a prominent role in managing and intervening within school bullying as they spend the most time with children of the school (Whitley et al., 2018). A teacher may be the first adult a student goes to when they are experiencing bullying (Wachs et al., 2019). Teachers also need to help students manage bullying because many students do not have the capabilities to deal with the power dynamics that are present when bullying occurs (PREVNet, 2017; Whitley et al., 2018). Bullies have power over their victims; thus, it can be difficult for a victim to rectify the situation themselves as they know that the bully has power over them (Rawlings, 2019; Whitley et al., 2018). Perpetrators of bullying know how to use power to their advantage, that is how they have become a perpetrator of bullying (Rawlings, 2019). A study conducted by Campaert et al. (2017) found that mediation does little to change a bully's behaviour.

Peer Support

Some literature suggests that peer support such as, presence of a bystander can act as a positive intervention for bullying (Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). Salmivalli and Poskiparta (2012) define peer support as an intervention when a discussion between the victim and bully occurs with the presence of a selected prosocial peer. That peer is charged with supporting the victimized party. However, this type of approach has been called into question regarding its effectiveness (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). Ttofi and Farrington (2012) found that while peer support can seem beneficial when surveys are conducted, the course of action is not connected to actual levels of bullying and victimization and can lead to an increase in bullying and victimization. Cowie et al. (2008) also examined working with peers and found that there was limited increase of perception of safety within schools when this intervention is used.

Studies have found that a social hierarchy exists among students (Ferguson & Ryan, 2019; Thornberg & Delby, 2019). Due to these hierarchies, students may not feel safe intervening or feel that they will suffer consequences for intervening as peer support for bullying (Bellmore et al., 2012; Thornberg, 2010). Looking at peer support from a child welfare and protection perspective, an effective intervention should not rely on what the bystander's response to the bullying situation is. A young person should not be the one providing support to a victim and perpetrator, especially since participating in bullying behaviours can have long lasting consequences (Downes & Cefai, 2019). This can put the bystander in harm's way, as the involvement of a bystander gives an additional target to the bully (Downes & Cefai, 2019). From a policy perspective, there can be psychological and legal consequences that arise from placing the responsibility and duty of support on a peer. Bullying is a complex issue; a peer may not have the capabilities to deal with the issue. They also do not necessarily have a duty of care to the victim or perpetrator, like a teacher does.

Policy as Intervention Through an Ecological Lens

Within an educational setting, policy has a large presence. Every decision, action or change that is implemented or adapted within a school board is dictated by a policy (Cardno, 2018). This is done either at a local level (specific school board) or a provincial level (Ministry of Education). Educators need to understand what a policy is and why it is relevant, but more importantly policy needs to be evaluated to determine if it is working to achieve the purpose it was created for or if changes need to be made (Cardno, 2018). Policy is defined as a technical tool that is created to solve specific problems. These problems can directly or indirectly affect societies through different periods of time or in different geographical spaces (Ruiz Estrada, 2011; Ruiz Estrada & Park, 2018). Policy acts as the guideline that establishes beliefs that are aligned with a specific set of values (Bell & Stephenson, 2006; Busher, 2006). These beliefs and values are often affiliated with specific political views or ideology (Bell & Stephenson, 2006; Busher, 2006).

Policy in education is important because that is what establishes the resources that are given for educational undertakings (Alexander, 2013; Razik & Swanson, 2001). It is important to note that when it comes to educational policy there are different stakeholders that can influence the framework and circumstances of the policy (Alexander, 2013). For example, these stakeholders could be classrooms teachers, principals of the schools, school board members, school trustees and at the provincial level, policymakers or other personal that work for the Ministry of Education (Alexander, 2013). Since everyone is affected by the policy, stakeholders need to be able to engage with the policies in a variety of ways (Cardno, 2018).

There are many different factors that go into the creation of educational policies. When creating policies that are aimed towards bettering a school, there can be a push to address education problems within the schools and propose solutions to these problems within the

schools themselves (Lenhoff et al., 2022). It can be argued that to improve schools, improvements surrounding what goes on within them needs to occur (Nation et al., 2020). However, this viewpoint overlooks important contexts and experiences that students go through that can influence their success in school (Berliner, 2006, 2013).

An ecological lens acknowledges that there are different factors that intersect and influence a person and their success in school (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Whipple et al., 2010). For example, when looking at the student's life outside of school, a student's social and economic advantages and disadvantages can influence their achievement in school (Carter, 2016: Whipple et al., 2010). The policies aimed at bettering schools can become complex, because for a policy to be effective once implemented, a lot of pieces need to come together and intersect in the right context (Lenhoff et al., 2022). When creating a policy, student experiences, characteristics, family circumstances, school factors, and out of school situations all play a part on the outcome and implementation of a policy (Lenhoff et al., 2022). Thus, policies need to consider the existing social, political, economic, and special conditions of the school (Coole, 2013; Rury & Mirel, 1997).

An ecological systems theory approach in the context of educational policy examines how the organization of the school, and desired results of schools are influenced by phenomenon and components occurring outside of the walls of a school and not just the dealings inside of a school (Lenhoff et al., 2022). Therefore, it is beneficial to look at evidence-based practice and research for bettering school environments and behaviours within schools. Looking at research from different domains such as the different systems that affect children would be beneficial, as this can bring about actual improvement and change within schools (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Farrell et al., 2019).

Anti-Bullying Policies

Students and school staff need adequate policies that not only provide information to identify bullying but to also report an incident and find extra support if needed (Eriksen, 2018; Faucher et al., 2015a). School bullying policies can be used as preventative measures or intervention strategies for bullying. The policies are preventative as they outline the mandates of the school that regulate conduct within the school (Faucher et al., 2015a). These mandates are outlined in documents, which provide important information on how to initiate the policy/processes (Vaill et al., 2020, 2021). Therefore, the document needs to be easy to find, easy to understand and informative as this will encourage the victims and people involved to report incidents of bullying (Vaill et al., 2020). This can really set the groundwork for prevention and intervention of bullying within a school (Vaill et al., 2020). Policies can also be intervention strategies as they can include support service information, information outing how to report incidents of bullying and who to talk to about bullying incidents (Faucher et al., 2015b). Students must be aware of the policies. To ensure effectiveness, policies should be written in easy-to-understand language (Vaill et al., 2020).

While the existence of a policy is important, the policy must also be promoted to establish validity (Vaill et al., 2020). Further, for a policy to be valid and well established, it is fundamental that a collaborative approach is taken when developing and implementing a policy (Vaill et al., 2020).

When responding to bullying behaviours, school staff often time focus on the unwanted behavior itself and individual responsibility rather than looking at bullying from a social or systemic standpoint (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). By looking at it individually, this may prevent the behaviour from stopping as there may be different factors that have intersected in the

child's life that caused them to act a certain way (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Therefore, policies need to address different factors that can lead to bullying to stop the behaviour (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Otherwise, the bullying behaviour may continue to present itself within the child's life (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020).

School bullying is a complex social phenomenon (Gaffney et al., 2021). Not only are bully and victim involved in the behaviour, but bystanders and peers also play a role in the existence, management, and intervention of bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996), as well as teachers and parents (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Anti-Bullying Policies' Effectiveness

When events involving students occur and the stories circulated through the media, attention is always brought to the school and the policies the school has in place to prevent certain events/situations from occurring. Usually when the event is tragic or has put the school, student, or an educator within the school in a negative light, a call for a review of policy will be made (Bailey, 2017). This can result in policies being changed or updated. A demand for change/action can from the community the school is situated in, the public or stakeholders (Bailey, 2017). It is important to note, that while the call to action and the desire to see results/changes can be good, often these changes do not address underlying systemic issues but yield more to the publics panic/push for results (Bailey, 2017). For example, zero-tolerance policies focus more on the bad behaviour of individual students (Shariff, 2008). The policy exempts staff within the school from their duty to address why the behaviour is occurring (Shariff, 2008). The policy is for individuals, not the whole school (Shariff, 2008). The policy focuses on punishment not prevention.

Consequences assigned to bullying are oftentimes punitive and do not do much to change or stop the actual behaviour from occurring in the future. For example, Rigby and Bagshaw (2003) found that teachers yell at bullies to try and stop them from continuing the unwanted behaviour. This is also technique used by bullies onto their victims, thus, authoritative behaviour can be reinforcing the same behaviour that the teacher wants them to stop (Lereya et al., 2013; Tatiani, 2021). When a policy is created to stop/punish unwanted behaviour, it is important that students know what behaviour is wanted as this can help bring about change to how they act (Colvin et al., 1998).

Studies have found that for bullying policies to be effective they need to contain explicit and clear guidelines and be implemented in an inclusive and developmental manner (Payne et al., 2006; Waasdorp et al., 2021). Payne et al. (2006) found that if a program is successful, the school will be able to adapt to change, have a welcoming school culture where positive behaviour is modeled by school staff, and have programs that are paired with individual counselling. They also found that when teachers were able to help create and implement the program there was higher chance of success rather than having a program implemented and selected by others and imposed on the teachers (Payne et al., 2006). Other studies have echoed this sentiment (Gottfredson et al., 1998).

Wassdorp et al. (2021) found that the existence of anti-bullying policies while beneficial, is not enough to shift/manage bullying behaviour. The study analyzed if the existence of school bullying related policies and/or policy training was connected to the ways school staff responded to bullying (Waasdorp et al., 2021). The results showed that the presence of the policies was partly responsible for the teachers' belief in their ability to intervene bullying, but there was no connection to increased responses to bullying (Waasdorp et al., 2021). Teachers and school staff need to be trained on their school's antibullying policy for it to be effective (Waasdorp et al.,

2021). Teachers also need to be able to discuss the incident with other school staff and if needed be able to refer the child for further help (Waasdorp et al., 2021). Thus, policy needs to include more involvement for teachers and school staff (Waasdorp et al., 2021).

Ontario Ministry of Education Documents

Bullying can affect the safety of students within schools. There is pressure for schools to develop policies to actively assist in intervening and managing bullying. Policy solutions have been implemented in Canadian schools to address bullying (Whitley et al., 2018). With regards to Ontario and HWCDSB there is legislation that all schools and school boards need to follow when it comes to bullying.

The Education Act

The *Education Act* (1990) is the main law that schools and school boards must follow in Ontario. The act outlines the duties and responsibilities of principals, teachers, superintendents, parents, students, and the Ministry of Education (Education Act, 1990). There are multiple sections that outline things from rules of attendance to delivering of curriculum, as well as rules regarding access to information and the privacy of a student (Education Act, 1990). Anything having to do with education must adhere to the *Education Act* (1990). As previously stated, the *Education Act* specifically addresses bullying within it. The definition the *Education Act* uses expands on Olweus's (1994) definition of bullying. Therefore, any anti-bullying policies that the HWCDSB creates need to align with what the *Education Act* says. Further, for a behaviour or incident to be classified as bullying, it needs to fall within the *Education Act*'s definition of bullying.

Safe Schools Act

The *Safe Schools Act* was introduced in April 2000, as an amendment to the *Education Act* (Bhattacharjee, 2003). This *Safe Schools Act* (2000) outlines offences that could trigger

suspension of a student. The *Safe Schools Act* (2000) gives more power to the principal and teachers when it comes to suspending and expelling students. The *Safe School Act* (2000) outlines policies that need to be followed when certain incidents occur. The *Safe Schools Act* (2000) also gives flexibility with how some of the policies can be applied. This created subjectivity where the application from board to board and even school to school is inconsistent (Bhattacharjee, 2003). Thus, depending on where the incident occurs and who the teachers, administration or trustees are, the policies can be applied differently.

The *Safe Schools Act* (2000) brought new responsibilities for the role of principals in schools. For example, principals need to investigate reported incidents, such as bullying, that could lead to a student being suspended or expelled (Safe Schools Act, 2000). While there are certain acts that will initiate a mandatory suspension, there are now caveats that can be implemented at the discretion of the school authority (Safe Schools Act, 2000). Therefore, suspension or expulsion does not become mandatory after a specific incident occurs if (a) the student was unable to control their behaviour at the time the incident occurred (b) the student does not comprehend the expected consequences for their behaviour (c) having the student stay in school does not constitute improper risk to the safety of others within the school (Safe Schools Act, 2000).

Further Policy Developments

In 2004 the Ministry of Education created the Safe Schools Action Team, whose purpose was to establish a way to deal with physical and social safety issues and bullying prevention in Ontario Schools (Safe Schools Action Team, 2005). After consulting with different entities, the team recommended that each school should develop their own bullying prevention policy and implement a bullying prevention program within the school (Safe Schools Action Team, 2005).

Additionally mandatory training or bullying prevention for all school staff needed to occur and the appointment of a Safe School coordinator and Safe Schools Implementation Coordinator needed to be made (Safe Schools Action Team, 2005). The Team also stated that more effort is required than just putting policies into place, a community wide model needed to be adapted where school-wide education was embedded into the curriculum (Safe Schools Action Team, 2005). A further recommendation of having routine interventions that would target the early stages of bullying, as well as having more demanding intervention strategies for those repeatedly involved in bullying and victimization would also be a good idea (Safe Schools Action Team, 2005).

In 2006, due to a Human Rights Complaint regarding zero tolerance, the Safe Schools Action Team reviewed the *Safe Schools Act* (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). The team stressed the importance of developing and fostering a positive school climate as this would help with safety within the school (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). Further, the team also suggested to move away from zero tolerance policies to more developmentally appropriate consequences (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). Suspending/expulsion should only be used as a last resort (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). Finally, the team clarified that incidents need to be fully investigated and relevant factors need to be considered to apply an appropriate consequence and not just suspend or expel a student (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006).

Accepting Schools Act, 2012

In 2012, the *Accepting Schools Act* (2012) was passed. The *Accepting Schools Act* (2012) made changes to the *Education Act* (2000). As a result of the act a better definition of bullying and cyberbullying was now included. Better prevention and intervention strategies for bullying, discrimination, and harassment were also added. Further changes to the *Education Act* (2000),

with specific regards to bullying, included: a requirement for school boards to provide professional development to students witnessing bullying with regards to bullying prevention, having school boards create and implement their own policies for bullying, having mandatory suspension for students who have previously been suspended for bullying or shown to be a risk for safety of another person (Accepting Schools Act, 2012). However, principals still can use their discretion when considering a mandatory suspension. Thus, a principal can determine not to suspend a student for bullying a second time (Accepting Schools Act, 2012). Other ways a principal's role changed after the *Accepting Schools Act* (2012) received assent was they no longer needed to notify parents of students who harmed another student by a behaviour if the behaviour could lead to a suspension; and they could invite parents of both parties to discuss supports that would be provided for the child who engaged in the bullying behaviour.

Schools are now required to administer school climate surveys every 2 years (Accepting Schools Act, 2012). These surveys provide schools with information to help shed light on bullying prevention and intervention strategies within the schools (Accepting Schools Act, 2012). Curriculum was revised to include further equity principles and psychoeducation about bullying (Accepting Schools Act, 2012). Finally, a Bullying Awareness and Prevention week would take place during the month of November throughout the province of Ontario (Accepting Schools Act, 2012). Other initiatives Boards would need to implement are a process for parents to follow if they are worried about the support their child is getting and have a process in place for people within the school and school community to safely report bullying (Safe Schools Act, 2012).

The *Accepting Schools Act* (2012) aimed to better support students by requiring schools to not only provide support to students who have displayed inappropriate behaviour, but also

provide support and interventions to students who are victims, perpetrators, or witnesses of bullying.

The *Accepting Schools Act* (2012) proposes implementing a whole school approach to assist in making the school climate a more positive one. By incorporating a whole school approach, this can help build stronger relationships throughout the whole school community. Further, this is the first step of the MTSS, which research has shown to be an effective adaptation into school society to manage bullying (Bohnenkamp, 2023; Hoover, 2019; VanLone, 2019). An Accepting Schools Expert Panel was also created to give schools resources and further advice to help implement strategies for a whole school approach to manage and intervene on bullying (Accepting Schools Act, 2012).

Ontario Code of Conduct (Part of Safe Schools Act)

The province of Ontario has created a *Code of Conduct* for the Ontario Educator sector that outlines standards of behaviour that each school board in Ontario must adhere to (Bhattacharjee, 2003). The *Code of Conduct* is located within the Education Act and was introduced with the *Safe Schools Act* as an amendment to the *Education Act* (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

When school boards create and implement their own code of conduct, that code must comply with the provincial *Code of Conduct* (Safe Schools Act, 2000). The *Code of Conduct* applies to students, parents/guardians, teachers, volunteers, and all other staff members within the school (Safe Schools Act, 2000). The code is not only applied on school property, but school buses, school related events, and any situations outside of school that if/when occurring can have an impact on a school's climate (Safe Schools Act, 2000).

Fundamental values of the code include that everyone within the school community must be aware of their rights; there is a duty of responsible citizenship. That it is everyone's responsibility to promote a safe school environment. That conflicts need to be resolved in a respectful and civil matter. That violence and physical aggression are not an acceptable way to resolve issues; and that everyone in the school community is to be treated with dignity and respect (Safe Schools Act, 2000).

Under the *Code of Conduct* school boards must review and communicate their school policies regularly with students, staff, parents, volunteers, and community members; boards must give opportunities for professional development of teachers to help them better promote a positive school climate; provide a competent method of intervention and response to all violations of the conduct that relate to respect, civility, responsible citizenship and safety within the school (Safe Schools Act, 2000).

Finally, the *Code of Conduct* outlines the role police can play within school communities to make them safe (Safe Schools Act, 2000). The Code states that police will investigate incidents using the protocol developed by the local school board (Safe Schools Act, 2000). The protocol should be influenced by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services Ministry of Education (Safe Schools Act, 2000).

HWDSB Safe Schools Review Panel

After the death of Devan Bracci-Selvey the HWDSB created the Safe Schools: Bullying Prevention and Intervention Review Panel (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). The panel gathered data, both qualitative and quantitative for not only the HWDSB, but the Hamilton community and government to address bullying (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). From February 12, 2020, to November 1, 2020, the panel conducted 11 public consultations (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021).

During the consultations Hamiltonians shared their experiences with bullying (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). The panel also met with nine groups affiliated with the HWDSB (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). Finally, the panel conducted an online survey of students from Grade 4 to Grade 12, parents/guardians/caregivers and staff members (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). The survey examined victimization, perpetration of bullying, witnessing bullying, safety at school (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). By November 1, the panel had heard from more than 10,000 people (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). About 9,400, people responded to the survey and over 1,000 people were community consultation participants (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021).

The report presented the following 10 findings (HWCDSB Safe Schools, 2021). Within the Hamilton community, bullying is a problem. Bullying not only effects students and their mental health and well-being but also educators, parents, guardians, and caregivers. Certain groups within the city of Hamilton experience bullying at higher rates. This shows a need for an intersectional approach to intervene and prevent bullying, which are sentiments outside studies have also echoed (Jackman et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022). In some situations, there is a culture of fear within the HWDSB that prevents people from reporting or trying to stop incidents of bullying. As stated in the report, a caring culture and positive school climate need to be established to help foster an environment that allows for people within the HWDSB (students, school staff, board members) to feel supported and accepted. This illustrates the importance of creating partnerships between parents, guardians, caregivers, experts, communities, and community groups. These partnerships help create a sense of belonging within the school community. Further, the Hamilton community wants to implement clear and transparent communication so that all voices are heard and valued within schools (HWCDSB Safe Schools, 2021). Strong, clear policies and procedures for bullying are wanted. These policies and

procedures need to not only be consistently followed by HWDSB but also monitored for effectiveness. This is important to note, because as stated earlier, the legislation that exists in the education sector which schools and school boards need to follow does leave room for subjectivity (Bailey, 2017). When applying the policies discretion can be used (Bailey, 2017). Additionally, schools and communities need to have high quality resources that are culturally appropriate and distributed equitably to assist in the mental health and well-being of not only children, but caregivers, teachers, and community members (HWCDSB Safe Schools, 2021). While many people who participated within the survey appreciated the steps HWDSB takes to prevent bullying, one-third of the people did not, illustrating that even further improvements can still be made. Finally, more accountability and transparency are wanted. This can be done through tracking and public reporting of data and statistics (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021).

Following these 10 findings, the panel made 11 recommendations aimed towards students, parents/guardians/caregivers, schools, the HWDSB organization at a system level, the Hamilton community, and Ministry of Education (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). While the report was created by the public board, many of the recommendations have been highlighted in research presented within this literature review and would be beneficial to be reflected within the HWCDSB bullying policy, as there is evidence-based research illustrating the effectiveness of these recommendations (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021).

Multi-tiered supports and programing need to be developed (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). MTSS is a multi-tiered strategy (Njelesani et al., 2020; Stoiber, 2014), with a framework that schools use to support students who are suffering with their behaviour (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2023). MTSS is an integrated, school-wide approach that helps provide support for all students (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2023). It is reflective of the ecological systems model as it considers that different students have different needs, and that some students need additional support due to the

circumstances they are in (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2023). This system of support would not only involve teachers but would also include parents, guardians, and caregivers (Karney & Childs, 2021). The inclusion of parents, guardians, and caregivers coincides with a recommendation made by HWDSB bullying review panel as they recognized that these people are an asset and should be used for bullying prevention and response (Safe Schools, 2021). Additionally, studies have shown the importance of engaging families to prevent and manage bullying (Divecha & Brackett, 2019; Holt et al., 2009; Leemis et al., 2019).

Another recommendation outlined that school boards need to better support their schools in establishing their own bullying prevention and intervention plans (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). Under Ontario legislation, each school should have a plan in place (Safe Schools, 2000). However, as this literature review has shown, that not all approaches schools have taken to manage and prevent bullying are as effective as others. While it is important to establish well developed policies and procedures, there needs to be a way to ensure that these policies and procedures are followed consistently (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). There is subjectivity with regards to the implementation of policies within schools (Bailey, 2017). How one school handles a bullying situation can be very different of how another school handles the situation (Bailey, 2017). This can be unfair for the victim. It would be very beneficial to have there be consistency so that every child receives the same level of help (Bailey, 2017).

Finally, school boards should work with a wide range of community partners and experts within the community (Safe Schools, 2021). Preventing, intervening, and managing bullying should not be a teacher's responsibility, as studies have shown, that many of them do not feel that they have adequate training to intervene and prevent it (Dawes et al., 2022; Migliaccio, 2015). Thus, it may be beneficial to bring in other community support to help with bullying for example, Parents of Black Children or PFLAG Canada Hamilton-Wentworth Chapter. Or experts

such as social workers, psychologists, and researchers as this can help ensure that the response to bullying is practice based and informed (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021).

Summary of the Literature

This literature review outlined crucial themes that need to be understood when examining the relationship between bullying and having policy as an intervention in the HWCDSB in connection to an ecological systems lens. An overview of the current state of bullying within Ontario schools was included, as well as an overview of important documents that helped shape HWCDSB's bullying policy. These key themes were present within the research questions and will be explained in the next section of the study. In the following chapter, the research methodology and the design of the study will be discussed.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The purpose of this MRP was to evaluate HWCDSB bullying policies and supplemental documents associated with the policies by conducting a critical document and policy analysis. This chapter provides the necessary background to understand the structure of this study and philosophies and techniques that have been implemented in this critical document and policy analysis.

The chapter begins with an explanation of what a critical document and policy analysis is and why it was chosen. It then transitions to a discussion of the study's methodology; it presents the research design, how data were collected and analyzed, methodological assumptions, limitations, and ethical considerations. A restatement of the area of study has also been included. Chapter 3 closes with a summary of the chapter.

Critical Policy and Document Analysis as a Research Method

Policy documents provide background knowledge needed to interpret educational problems in both research and practice (Cardno, 2018). The approach is a qualitative research method that explores the nature of a policy and policy document in the interest of investigating what lies underneath it and within it (Cardno, 2018).

At its basis, a policy analysis is a study of policy from three features: context, text, and consequences (Cardno, 2018). Taylor et al. (1997) proposed the conceptual framework that a policy analysis is structured upon. Further research has built off the initial ideas to expand the theory (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Busher, 2006). Policy context encompasses norms and values that have directed a policy to come to fruition (Cardno, 2018). This is illustrated through the socio-political environment and issues or events that created pressure for the policy to be created in the first place (Cardno, 2018). Policy text is the core focus of analysis research (Cardno, 2018). The essence of policy text is to question the text you are reading as you are searching for

meaning (Bell & Stevenson, 2006). Why are things framed in a particular way? What is the purpose? What values established the policy? One needs to look further than the words and draw inferences based on what is included and what is not (Cardno, 2018). Links to theory and theories can also be made (Bell & Stevenson, 2006). All three of these aspects are embedded within this MRP. Policy context was explored within the literature review. Policy text and policy consequences were examined in Chapters 4 and 5. The texts themselves yielded information regarding the interpretation and implementation of the policies (Cardno, 2018).

Atkinson and Coffey (2004) state there are a vast number of document types. Depending on the type of document the form and language can differ, making it possible to have different *genres* of documents, each with their own specific style and convention. Thus, when looking at educational policy documents it is beneficial to set apart distinctive features that pertain to this particular genre of documents (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). Educational policies are not created in a vacuum; there are many different disciplines that are present, such as history, political contexts, and social context (Cardno, 2018). With this specific MRP, connections to the ecological system's theory were made. This lens, at the macrosystem level, considers different environments and contexts that influence norms, which can influence policy which then influence children and their behaviour. Policy consequences are associated with how a policy is carried out. The practice is also influenced by how the users of the policy make sense of it (Ryan, 1994). With this aspect, it is important to consider obstacles for a policy being implemented (Kilmister, 1993).

Design of the Study

A critical policy and document analysis is rooted in the preceding understanding of the policy's environment (Cardno, 2018). The researcher must not only have a sense of the policy and the subsequent documents but also have a literature base that gives understanding about the

environment in which the policy exists (Cardno, 2018). Chapter 2 provided this knowledge as it was a literature review. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory, a theoretical framework, was explored for the theory informed the creation of the research questions that guided this critical policy and document analysis. While most school staff will not research policies and documents within their schools with this level of thoroughness, it is still vital that they are cognizant of the policy documents and their context (Cardno, 2018).

Using an ecological lens, the goal for this MRP was to analyze and critique existing documents that are meant to promote and explain HWCDSB's view and understanding of bullying as well as explore the documents that are used to illustrate how the HWCDSB is committed to addressing, managing, and intervening bullying. An ecological lens calls for the framing of questions and problems to contain considerations of the intersection of multiple systemic levels, factors, and the effects of these intersections (Levine & Breshears, 2019). This approach focuses on the environment and the effects it has on the developmental process (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In relation to a policy analysis, this approach investigates the policy and the interactions that are forged between the developing and active human organism, their immediate and further social context, and its direct and indirect influences on the policy (Petrogiannis, 2003). A policy analysis conducted through an ecological lens frames questions about policy by looking at the intersectionality of issues and if the policy reflects these multiple systems (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019). Questions and themes generated focus on the systemic and social responsibility to perpetuate change regarding bullying and bullying behaviour rather than on individual responsibility to stop the behaviour.

A critical document and policy analysis is a qualitative research method and has many advantages. A content analysis is an appropriate approach for this MRP because it is "epistemologically consistent with qualitative research values" (Cardno, 2018, p. 635). It is a

straightforward, manageable, and cost-effective qualitative research method (Cardno, 2018). A documentary analysis is non-reactive (Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2012). While the documents and policies analyzed in this MRP address child behaviour and analyzing why bullying behaviour is not stopping, there is no possibility that children will change their behaviour due to the presence of the researcher. The researcher can work behind the scenes to examine why a policy is working or not working and if changes need to be made (Cardno, 2018).

The context of the critical policy and document analysis for this MRP is limited to the HWCDSB bullying policy and supporting documents. However, when analyzing an organization's policies, there needs to be consideration of the circumstances that generated the policies (Cardno, 2018). There is no national education policy within Canada (Campbell, 2021). Each province has its own Ministry of Education, which is the highest level (Campbell, 2021). Municipalities then have their own school boards (Campbell, 2021). Every policy the HWCDSB creates and implements needs to align with the Ontario Ministry of Education mandates and policies (Bunce et al., 2020). Chapter 2 outlined important ministry documents and policy developments that need to be understood to properly analyze the HWCDSB bullying policies and bullying policy documents. These ministry documents, which exist on the strategic level, provided essential base knowledge needed to analyze specific HWCDSB bullying policies and documents.

Data Collection and Analysis

When conducting a critical document and policy analysis, a literature review must also be conducted. Chapter 2 served as this review to illustrate connection to theory and other empirical data/information. The information discussed within that chapter is used to help investigate not only the text but also its meaning (Scott, 1990; Silverman, 2006).

An effective document analysis will be able to identify what is described within the content and what is being inferred. This aligns well with the three features of a policy analysis: context, text, and consequences (Cardno, 2018). The critical document and policy analysis answered the research questions underpinning the MRP by referring to the actual text in the policy as well as referencing critical issues that have been discussed within the literature enclosing the policy.

Reports, documents, and policies surrounding bullying vary from one school to the next. Thus, the scope of the research focused on HWCDSB policies and supporting documents. Data collection began by using the HWCDSB website as an information centre. An advantage of a document analysis is the availability of the documents which act as data (Bowen, 2009). Documents that are needed to be analyzed are often available to the public with little to no cost to the researcher (Cardno, 2018). The documents analyzed for the MRP were all available on the HWCDSB website and are public domain. Permission was not needed to read them as these policies and documents are what students, parents and school staff need to follow to prevent, intervene, and manage school bullying within the HWCDSB. Ideally, everything a person wishes to know about the policies of bullying should be found on that website. This is beneficial for face validity, as the documents as data points already exist in this situation (Merriam, 2002; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013).

The content that these documents contain already exist in an everyday organic setting (Merriam, 2002; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). The creation and existence of the policies used in this MRP were not intended to serve as data. Documents are examples of social meaning-making as they can uncover what people did or did not do and what is valued (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). With specific regard to this MRP, the documents are examples of social

meaning-making as they are related to the notion that responses to school bullying result from the beliefs and values ingrained in the school board and Ontario Ministry of Education.

Data was collected by conducting a content analysis of the HWCDSB policy and policy documents. Eight HWCDSB documents were chosen to be analyzed:

1. The *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* is used to discuss prevention, intervention, and follow-up strategies to address bullying behaviours among students.

2. *Policy Manual – Students S. M. 15 – Bullying Prevention and Intervention* discusses bullying and bullying intervention among students.

3. *Students S. A. 15 – Bullying Prevention and Intervention* outlines bullying prevention and intervention strategies of HWCDSB.

4. The *HWCDSB Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* sets the tone for how the school board views positive and negative student behaviour.

5. *Policy Manual – Schools. S. M. 09 – Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* outlines appropriate and inappropriate conduct of students.

6. The *Bully and Harassment. Responding To Bullying Behaviour – A Family Guide* discusses how bullying will be addressed and what steps can be taken to manage and intervene with regards to bullying.

7. The *Bully and Harassment. Harassment – An Information Guide for Students* provides information on how to identify and deal with harassment.

8. *HWCDSB Anonymous Bullying Reporting Tool* is used to fill report incidences of bullying anonymously, which will be reported to each individual school principal directly.

These documents provided the data for analysis and critique to answer the research questions. Words, language, and/or text in policy and supplemental documents were analyzed (Bowen,

2009; Bryman, 2012). This MRP used a non-frequency content analysis as there was no quantitative or statistical data. Instead, inferences were made by examining the existence or absence of content characteristics or syndromes (George, 2009). To examine a policy and policy documents, the researcher must scrutinize what lies in a text, beneath a text, or around a text. Excerpts and quotations that answer or relate to the overarching research questions and purpose were extracted and coded. They were then organized into themes that emerged.

Coding information found from policies and documents is at the heart of a content analysis (Cardno, 2018). Coding is done to obtain categories or themes (Bowen, 2009; Cardno, 2018). A researcher will read the data and based on the traits of the data will perform coding and category construction (Bowen, 2009). This construction will help find themes in the data. Codes and themes can be used to merge data from different methods (Bowen, 2009). It is crucial that objectivity and sensitivity are applied when picking and examining data from documents (Bowen, 2009). For this critical document and policy analysis, a deductive approach to coding was taken. A deductive approach was taken as the researcher wanted to re-examine the policy and policy documents in a new context. An unconstrained categorization matrix was used to code the data. The matrix was based on earlier work examined in chapter two of the MRP. The literature review provided important information and established the theory that the MRP adopted as the theoretical framework. Therefore, broad categories that are relevant to the document analysis have already been established. These themes were used as a frame of reference when reading the documents and policies.

As stated in Chapter 1, the research questions this policy analysis looks to answer are: How does board policy contribute to how bullying is understood and addressed in HWCDSB schools? How does HWCDSB's bullying policy compare to the best practices identified in the

literature? To answer these questions, the HWCDSB bullying policy and supporting documents were read to extract categories and themes. The following questions, taken from Cardno (2018), were used as guiding questions to analyze the policy and policy documents and help code the findings.

1. What aspects (that you are looking for) are evident in the language of the policy?

2. Does the policy language refer to these aspects directly or indirectly?

3. What is specifically stated in the policy?

4. What is not stated in the policy?

5. How well does your local policy reflect national or international policy trends and purposes?

These questions are related back to Bronfenbrenner's systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's theory has five systems—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—and focuses on how social environments affect children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The HWCDSB bullying policies and supporting documents are part of the macrosystem, as they reflect social norms and laws within society. Cardno's (2018) questions were used to help determine if the policies are a good reflection of what the literature illustrates to be best practices for bullying intervention. The microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and chronosystem were also incorporated, as elements of those systems can play a role in why a child is acting and behaving the way they are (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). As stated in the literature review, bullying is a complex phenomenon (Marsh, 2004). There are many protective or risk factors that can influence bullying within a child's life (Miranda et al., 2019); for example, a child's socialization, exposure to violence, past trauma, teacher attitudes (Espelage, 2014). These factors can intersect in a multitude of ways which can result in a child to behave in a certain way

and be a perpetrator of bullying; to stop bullying and bullying behaviour from happening a shift in the behaviour needs to occur (Lee, 2011). Therefore, school bullying policy needs to address different systems for this shift to transpire; simply administering a consequence to the behaviour will not stop it from continuing as nothing in that child's environment has been altered (Downes & Cefai, 2019).

Language and wording of policies is important. The questions helped provide subheadings to see if there were repeated words or repeated word patterns, similar phrases and ideas, or an exclusion of words, phrases, or ideas which then helped recognize overarching themes and categories of the policies and supporting documents (Cardno, 2018). Cardno's (2018) questions assisted in demonstrating a connection between themes from the literature review and what the policy and supporting documents say. Do the policies adequately address the complexities of bullying and how to prevent and manage it?

While reading the policy and policy documents, patterns within the data that can be related to emerging themes were looked for so that data could be thematically analyzed. Once the analysis was complete a discussion surrounding the interpretation of the results in relation to the research question and purpose of the MRP was conducted. Implication of the findings and areas for future research were also explored.

Methodological Assumptions

The MRP examined eight documents created and implemented by HWCDSB. It was assumed that these documents were created with the institution in mind. Since the policies and supplementary documents are board-specific, the results of the MRP cannot be generalized across all Ontario school boards. However, it is the assumption that all school boards in Ontario promote their identities through their policies and documents. All the documents that were

analyzed are transitory and will likely be updated or replaced in the future, ergo there is an assumption that credible insight can be acquired from them.

It is not unusual to have document analysis be paired with other qualitative research methods and draw on multiple sources of evidence (Denzin, 1970). This document and policy analysis is not paired with another research method, due to the scope of the research. It is assumed that the research and resulting analysis will still give credibility for the topic.

Finally, while the documents being available electronically makes for easy access, it does also make it difficult to validate the authenticity of the documents. Just because a document is available for print or download does not mean it is the most up-to-date version. Thus, it is the assumption that all documents located on the HWCDSB website are the most current/up-to-date versions.

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Limitations

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There are no simple guidelines for data analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Each content analysis is different and unique as the researchers can have different views and different biases can be present.

Documents are not created with research purposes in mind. Data contained within the documents may not be fully explained. Detail may be lacking, which can cause limitations for research projects as the project is specifically relying on the documents as the sources of data for the project. Furthermore, while policies and policy documents are public record it can be difficult to determine the accuracy of the document. Biases can be built into the documents that the researcher may not even be aware of (Merriam, 1998).

Another limitation is bias selectivity (Yin, 1994). The collection of documents needed to examine policy may not be complete. Therefore, it is important for research to be aware of what

is available and what is not available and why that may be (Yin, 1994). Just as importantly, policies may also create complementing documents that connect to the implementation of the policies in organizations. These complementing documents can be procedures, regulations, and reports on activities or events which establish the essential policy documents that need to be put together to forge a complete compilation for analysis. All these documents must be included in policy reviews for them to be successful reviews. The eight documents analyzed are what the school board as a whole has implemented as a policy and supporting documents. Individual schools may have further supplementary documents/policies they use to respond to bullying and are not posted on the board website but the specific school website. While anything specific boards create need to derive from the overarching HWCDSB policies and documents, in some cases, depending on the school the documents analysed are incomplete.

Ethical Considerations

This MRP did not involve any participants. The documents analyzed can be found on the HWCDSB website. Thus, I did not need to seek clearance from the Brock University Research Ethics Board nor from the HWCDSB. The literature consulted can be found on various search engines, news websites, and in books both physical and electronic formats. The sources are all available publicly. To keep validity and integrity for this MRP, the documents were analyzed in their original format. The eight documents analyzed also do not have specific authors associated with them on the document itself or on the HWCDSB website. Therefore, no names of school staff or HWCDSB members and/or administrators were used.

There were no human participants needed for the critical document and policy analysis. Data is not collected from participants; no ethical approval of any kind is needed (Cardno, 2018). This can be seen as an advantage because this results in less delay or complications from needing to find participants or receive ethical approval from multiple levels (Cardno, 2018).

Restatement of the Area of Study

The document analysis for this MRP was used to determine if the bullying policies in the HWCDSB reflect the complexities of bullying. Many factors can determine if or why a child is partaking in or experiencing bullying behavior, as illustrated in Chapter 2. This MRP was designed to gain a deeper understanding of how the HWCDSB policies can influence how bullying is managed, intervened with, and the impact it can have on students within the HWCDSB.

A document and policy analysis of eight documents was conducted to analyze how bullying is handled in the HWCDSB. The specific documents and policies were selected to investigate the idea that a relationship between multiple contexts and their intersectionality and bullying and the creation of policy exists or should exist and how this relationship is reflected within the creation of bullying policies and procedures. The selected documents and policies were examined to determine what the HWCDSB stance and belief on bullying behaviour is, explain what the policies aim to do, determine if the policies are aimed at addressing interrelated issues surrounding bullying, and if they promote solutions for those involved.

Summary of Research Methodology and Design

Chapter 3 of the MRP outlined the research methodology and methods that were adopted in this study. The chapter outlined where the data was collected from, methodological assumptions, limitations, and ethical considerations related to the MRP. The following chapter will present the results of the document analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to conduct a critical document and policy analysis of the HWCDSB's policies and supporting documents with respect to bullying, including the procedure for reporting bullying in schools. In this chapter the eight documents selected as data sources— *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour*; *Policy Manual – Students. S. M. 15 – Bullying Prevention and Intervention*; *Students S. M. 15 – Bullying Prevention and Intervention*; *HWCDSB Code of Student Conduct and Discipline*; *Policy Manual – Schools. S.M. 09 – Code of Student Conduct and Discipline*; *Bullying and Harassment. Responding to Bullying Behaviour – A Family Guide*; *Bullying and Harassment. Harassment – An Information Guide for Students*; *Anonymous Bullying Reporting Tool*—are explored in the context of the four themes that appeared throughout the investigation. These themes address the two guiding questions of this study.

A critical document and policy analysis looks to examine a policy from three characteristics: context, text, and consequences (Cardno, 2018). When policies are created, often there are socio-political climate and/or issues or events influencing the construct of the policy (Cardno, 2018). Thus, when analyzing policy and policy documents this needs to be understood. I have framed my research and the following discussion to acknowledge that the HWCDSB bullying policies must provide clear messages relating to the definitions, consequences and/or appropriate remedies of bullying as it is understood in the HWCDSB. In the subsequent section, I use this perspective to expose and explain four major themes that emerged in the critical policy and document analysis.

Emerging Themes

This critical document and policy analysis was framed using Bronfenbrenner's (1999) ecological system's theory. The ecological systems theory focuses on the notion that social

environments affect children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory outlines five systems that shape a child: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The policies and supporting documents themselves are part of the macrosystem.

Bullying itself is a complex behaviour; there are numerous influences, causes, and correlations that can lead to the presence of it (Gaffney et al., 2021). These different influences can stem from the different system the child finds themselves in (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). A school's bullying policy is part of the macrosystem, as there are political, social, and cultural factors that will influence a policy being created and executed (Pennell et al., 2020). These policies can then influence the different systems of a child (Pennell et al., 2020). Since these systems can influence why a child is acting in a certain type of way, according to the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), a shift in the behaviour would need to occur (Lee, 2011). Thus, policies that are aimed at stopping a behaviour need to be targeted towards different systems (Downes & Cefai, 2019. The research questions of the study aimed to answer how bullying is understood and addressed in the HWCDSB, and how the bullying policy itself compares to best practices. Keeping these questions in mind and applying this lens of the ecological systems theory, the following major themes emerged from the data: (a) HWCDSB has a strong understanding of bullying; (b) the policies focus on band-aid solutions rather than shifting behaviour; (c) there is a connection between words and actions of the policies and documents; and (d) the policies include outdated and inconsistent information.

HWCDSB and Bullying Behaviour

After conducting a critical policy and document analysis of policy documents pertaining to the bullying policies and related documents of the HWCDSB, there is evidence to illustrate that the HWCDSB has a strong understanding of what bullying is.

Bullying as a Behaviour

The Responding to Bullying Behaviour (2012), *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013), *Policy Manual – Students.* (2022a), and the *Anonymous Bullying Tool* (2023c) all provide a consistent and clear definition of bullying. It is the same definition used in the *Education Act* (1990). The bullying definition uses broad language, which can be beneficial as this allows for many harmful instances and behaviours that need to be stopped to be included under the definition. The definition does not only include instances of physical behaviour but also includes behaviour that causes "harm, fear or distress to another individual, including physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to the individual's reputation or harm to the individual's property" (HWCDSB, 2013, 2022a, 2023c) as well as behaviour that creates a negative environment and behaviours that occurs within a context of a power imbalance. The definition provides specific instances where the power imbalance can occur from, "size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances, gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special education" (HWCDSB, 2012, 2022a). This specific and broad language is beneficial because as the literature review illustrated, different factors can increase a student's likelihood of being a victim of bullying (Bucchianeri et al., 2013; Connolly et al., 2015; Goldweber et al., 2012; Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020; Newman & Fantus, 2015; Pottie et al., 2014; Rosenthal et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2012). Therefore, by having policy documents acknowledge different factors that can cause a power imbalance which leads to bullying, the board is illustrating their knowledge of the complexities of bullying (HWCDSB, 2013, 2022a). The microsystem is the child's immediate surroundings, they are the groups and institutions the child is a part of (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The differences from the dominant culture a child is often bullied about (e.g., ethnicity, gender identity, disability, etc.) are all individual-level

factors. These individual-level factors shape the way a child behaves and exists within the different environments they are a part of, in this case their school environment. The way the individual-level factors interact with the classroom environment and its culture are part of the mesosystem. Thus, a child may be bullied because they are part of a group that is different from the culturally dominant group in some way (Walton, 2005).

Going further, when defining bullying behaviour, reference to the different type and ways the behaviour can manifest itself are made (HWCDSB, 2012, 2013, 2022a). Physical bullying is not solely focused on social aggression and relational aggression as discussed within *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a). *Responding to Bullying Behaviour* (2012) also references verbal, social, and electronic bullying—illustrating that bullying behaviour and its effects are not always physical. The inclusion of electronic means is important as it reflects the presence of technology and social media in children's lives and the dangers/consequences that come with it (Nazir & Thabassum, 2021). Separate and specific definitions for cyberbullying are also provided in *Responding to Bullying Behaviour* (2012) and *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a). *Harassment – An information Guide for Students* (2023b) provides a specific definition for harassment, however, the document's citation of where the definition comes from is incomplete. By providing a clear definition of what bullying, and harassment is helps illustrate guidelines for staff and students or parents to help realize that a child may be experiencing or partaking in bullying of some sort. Further, if a behaviour is identified as bullying the definition can be used to justify actions taken to intervene the bullying behaviour, as the definition clearly illustrates that the behaviour is not accepted.

The documents take a firm stance in specifying that bullying is an unwanted behaviour (HWCDSB, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2022a, 2022b, 2023c). It is stressed that every student within the board and the eyes of God deserves respect, that students have the right to feel safe within the

school and environment, and that students have a responsibility to help create and foster a positive school environment. The documents relay that the existence of bullying behaviour can affect the success of the student (HWCDSB, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2022a, 2022b, 2023c). The notion of showing respect and being respectful is directly present within most of the documents (HWCDSB, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2022a, 2022b, 2023b, 2023c). Both the *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and the *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) outline that respect is part of the students and staff standards of behaviour. It is a requirement of students to be responsible for their own actions. Every student has the right to be treated with respect, and the responsibility to show respect to others. If students do not do this and conduct themselves in an improper manner, the school climate can be affected, resulting in discipline and/or consequences. This also relates back to the microsystem and the mesosystem as the interaction between the systems is what creates the classroom climate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Added to this, the *Policy Manual - Students* (2022a) provides valuable information describing harm in the context of bullying. Harm is described in relation to different types of bullying. This is important information to include as it illustrates how victims of bullying can be affected by it. This was the only document to discuss harm, it would be beneficial to include this information in the *Harassment – An Information Guide for Students* (2023b) and the *Responding to Bullying Behaviour* (2012) document. The *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and the *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) documents could also benefit from the inclusion as it can help illustrate different reasons why a student is being disciplined for their actions when it comes to bullying behaviour.

The *Responding to Bullying Behaviour* (2012) document recognizes that bullying has long-lasting effects on bullies, victims, and bystanders, something the literature review stressed (Divecha & Bracket, 2020; Ttofi et al., 2016; Vaillancourt et al., 2021). The effects do not

necessarily present themselves while a child is in school but can come about later in life (deLara, 2019; Farrington et al., 2012). This is connected to the chronosystem, a system made up of events and experiences that have happened throughout an individual's life which have affected a person's behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The bullying a person has either experienced, taken part in, or witnessed can play a role in their behaviour later in their life.

Responding to Bullying Behaviour (2012) is the only document to specifically reference different roles of those involved in bullying behaviour. These roles are important because bullying includes more than just a victim and a perpetrator; bystanders and allies also play a part and can be affected (Downes & Cefai, 2018; Njelesani et al., 2020). Other documents only reference perpetrators and victims by role; allies and bystanders are references generally when discussing the investigation process of determining if bullying behaviour has occurred or when addressing that victim bullying and other students affected by bullying are able to receive additional support if needed (HWCDSB, 2012, 2023a). The fact that support and counselling is not only referenced but is extended to more than just the bully and the perpetrator illustrates that the HWCDSB has a deep understanding the effects and extent of bullying behaviour.

The HWCDSB uses an *Anonymous Bullying Reporting Tool (2023c)* that students of the HWCDSB, parents of HWCDSB students, and community members or members outside of the HWCDSB can use to anonymously report bullying (HWCDSB, 2023c). This tool is advantageous and is another way the HWCDSB is showing its deep understanding of bullying behaviour. The person reporting the bullying incident can choose to do so anonymously; a student does not need to worry about facing any retaliation for reporting what they either saw or went through. If the reporter wants a follow up, contact information can be left, resulting in the report not being anonymous anymore. The tool allows more than just students or parents to

report bullying; members of the community, concerned citizens, or even students from other schools can report an incident. The tool asks detailed questions about the location of the incident, time of day it happened, if the incident happened at school or in a different location, illustrating again that the board recognizing bullying incidents and incidents that affect school climate can occur outside of school hours. This is beneficial, because as the literature review outlined, may victims of bullying will not disclose to their teacher that they are being bullied; they will "suffer in silence" (Boulton, 2005; Boulton et al., 2017; Cowie, 2000; Hunter et al., 2004; Smith & Shu, 2000; Smith et al., 2004). Some victims feel weak if they report. Having an anonymous reporting tool can allow them to tell someone of incidents occurring without having to identify themselves. This can also be beneficial for if a student notices someone in their peer group is bullying, they can tell the school without their peer knowing.

School Climate

The literature review demonstrated that bullying affects school climate (Gage et al., 2014; Gregory et al., 2010; Mischel & Kitsantas, 2020). It is imperative that all students feel safe as this will better foster a positive school climate (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). The school environment a child is a part of is the mesosystem. When proper training or professional development—factors that exists within the exosystem—is available for staff, school climate can improve (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023), hence why it is important to foster and create whole school approaches to manage and prevent bullying as everyone can be affected by the negative behaviour (Bohnenkamp, 2023; Hoover, 2019; VanLone, 2019). A positive school climate helps promote academic success (Wang et al., 2014) and can influence the way a child behaves.

In connection to school climate, both the *Code of Student Conduct* (2016) and *The Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) make it clear that while school discipline will usually be associated

with incidents that occur in the school during school hours, this is not always the case. If the behaviour or incident that occurs while off school property and not during school hours but has an impact on school climate, a student can be disciplined. The climate as a whole does not need to be affected; the incident can affect just one person (HWCDSB, 2022a).

Having these inclusions of different environments is important because of the presence technology has on society (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017); the use of social media, the internet, and different devices allows for bullying, namely cyberbullying, to occur at any time and/or any place. The students do not necessarily have to be in the same room to experience bullying (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), but their microsystem will still be affected. Information and/or pictures can be shared amongst the school population or social media posts can be made that draw a large school audience very quickly. Therefore, it is good that the HWCDSB recognizes that bullying incidents which occur outside of school hour can affect school climate and/or student learning and that action can be taken against it. *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013) and *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) imitates these views by making clear that bullying is when a student creates a negative environment at school for students. Bullying is a behaviour a student can be suspended or expelled for, as the safety of individuals within the school board is a priority of the board (HWCDSB, 2016, 2022b).

As the policy documents state, students should not be put in danger due to another individual in the school (HWCDSB, 2012, 2016, 2022a, 2022b). Other unacceptable behaviours students can be suspended or expelled for (relating to bullying) include engaging in hate propaganda or behaviours motivated by hate (HWCDSB, 2016), and inflicting bodily harm (HWCDSB, 2022b), further illustrating the different ways bullying behaviour can be manifested, as illustrated in the literature review (Vaillancourt et al., 2020).

Learning Environments

Responding to Bullying Behaviour (2012) is the only document that outlines the mission and vision of the HWCDSB. *The Policy Manual – Students* (2022b) references it, but the specific wording is not provided. Within the mission statement, different environments a student learns are identified; the home and family life are specifically stated as the place were learning begins. The school community helps enhance learning. This indirectly references the ecological systems theory, as this theory believes that different environments influence the behaviour of a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem includes factors which directly influence a child— parents, siblings, teachers, and peers—are all part of this system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem includes the interactions between the students' parents and teacher. Therefore, it is important that a student not only be surrounded by people who have a positive impact on their development, but also that if/when these different people meet the relationships and interactions are positive, as this can also influence the behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This theme illustrated that the HWCDSB has a strong and thorough understanding of bullying behaviour. Information reflects data found in the literature regarding what bullying is and its effects. Thus, the way HWCDSB understands and addresses bullying behaviour is reflective of best practices.

Shifting Behaviours Versus Managing Them

The literature review outlined different intervention strategies, both ones that are beneficial (Borg & Drange, 2019; Gaffney et al., 2021; Njelesani et al., 2020) and ones that are not (Gaffney et al., 2021; Kodelja, 2019; Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). Implementing a successful anti-bullying strategy in the context of an ecological lens requires the strategy to be aimed towards different factors that are causing a behaviour (Lenhoff et al., 2022). These factors need

to be addressed for a behaviour to stop manifesting (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). Only having

consequences or disciplining a behaviour does not necessarily mean the child will stop partaking

in the behaviour (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). Something in the microsystem, mesosystem, or

exosystem needs to change. The school and the home of a child are different systems

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Sometimes behaviours expected of a child at school can be different

from what parents/guardians expect or allow from their child at home/outside of school (Beebe-

Frankenberger, 2005). This can make it difficult to stop certain behaviours at school as the

child's environments are not consistent (Ostrander et al., 2018; Sheridan et al., 2004). In cases

like these, it may be beneficial to have intervention strategies that incorporate the family to teach

them how to manage behaviour the school finds disruptive. Incorporating family and helping to

teach them how to shift behaviour that is undesirable as well as provide strategies or resources to

help is reflective of the MTSS approach (Njelesani et al., 2020).

Suspension

The *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *the Policy Manual – Schools*

(2022b) explore behaviours a principal can consider suspending a student for. Bullying is one of

these behaviours. Cyberbullying is not directly stated in the *Code of Student Conduct and*

Discipline (2016) document, but it is indirectly referenced in the suspendable behaviour section

of the *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b). The document discussed that suspendable conduct can

include possession/sharing inappropriate images and using social media negatively. A school

principal will consider suspensions not only for behaviours/incidents which manifest during

school hours while in a school building, but also during a school related activity, school buses or

even if the behaviour occurs outside of school/school hours but circumstances around it can

affect school climate (HWCDSB, 2016, 2022b).

The literature review outlined that zero-tolerance policies are ineffective (Kodelja, 2019; Smith et al., 2012; Welch & Payne, 2018). There was no mention of this policy in any of the documents, however suspension was mentioned as a "useful tool" the school board supports the use of. Within *Policy Against Student Bullying Behavior* (2013), *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a), *Student S.M.15* (2023d), *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016), and *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) the steps a principal can take to suspend a student who has been found to be partaking in bullying behaviour are outlined. As suspension is a serious and extreme response to bullying, it makes sense for the process to be deeply explained. While there may be instances which suspension can be applicable and have the intended result, when it comes to shifting a behaviour or stopping a behaviour from reoccurring in the future, the results are not positive (Hannigan, 2019). In the HWCDSB, a child may be suspended multiple times for bullying, yet studies have found that children who miss a lot of school due to suspension are at a high chance low academic achievement, dropping out, and displaying antisocial behaviour (APA ZT Task Force, 2008; Lee et al., 2011; Pyne, 2019). Students who are suspended are more likely to be arrested and incarcerated as adults (Bacher-Hicks, et al., 2019).

The *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and the *Policy Manual – Schools. S.M.09 – Code of Student Conduct* (2022b) outline the rules and available options to students once they have been suspended. Both documents state that if a child is suspended for more than 6 days they must be assigned into an alternative program for students (ASP). This program is only available to students who are given long suspensions. The *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) goes on to say that the ASP will contain both an academic and non-academic component. This non-academic component is not available for suspension 5 days and under. If a child is partaking in ASP, a student action plan (SAP) will be created. If the suspension is 6 to 10 days, SAP only

holds an academic component; if the suspension is 11 to 20 days, then both an academic and non-academic component will be included. The ASP is described as a program that supports a student to "re-integrate into the Catholic school community and help prevent recidivism" (HWCDSB, 2022b, p. 10). However, an explanation of an ASP's intention is not provided. A specific description of what a non-academic component entails or what a student is required to do is not given either. A specific description of what a non-academic component is would have been beneficial, especially for this study. This could have helped illustrate if this component can assist in shifting a behaviour from occurring in the future.

As per the policy, children cannot be forced to partake in ASPs (HWCDSB, 2016, 2022b). If the child is under 16 or 17, their guardian can choose to have them not participate (adult students can make the choice themselves). This further illustrates an ecological system lens, and how different factors can affect a child's behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). If a parent does not agree with the suspension or believes their child to be innocent, they can opt out of the program. The relationship between the parent and the teacher/school may be influencing the child to behave in a disruptive way within the classroom. It is therefore important that relevant stakeholders look at factors that are reinforcing the child's maladaptive behaviour. If suspending a student is not adequate, further incentives or strategies need to be applied. The policy clearly states that children can be suspended more than once for bullying. If they are suspended a second time, a shift in the ecological systems the child is part of has not occurred (Lee, 2011). Other factors in different systems such as the microsystem, may still be causing a child to partake in bullying (Divecha & Bracket, 2020). The suspension is only acting as a solution to stop the behaviour from occurring at that moment; the root cause of the behaviour is not being investigated. Therefore, it would be interesting to see if this happens often and perhaps examine

why a suspension did not work the first time. What other factors are causing a child to bully another student. Part of the MTSS approach is to include parents or people that have a direct influence/presence in a child's life and teach them how they can better help and influence the student (Njelesani et al., 2020). However, this can prove difficult if a parent themselves does not recognize nor consider the bullying behaviour to be wrong or in need of change.

Expulsion

Both the *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *the Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) outline expulsion. A principal can consider expulsion if a student is suspended, and their behaviour is extremely severe or if a principal believes the student is coming additional infractions. Both bullying and harassment are behaviours for which a principal can consider expulsion. If a student is expelled from a school, the board will find another school within the board to send the child . If the student is expelled from the board, they will be placed in an alternative program for expelled students. Just like a suspension, a parent of a student who is under the age of 16 or 17 (adult students can made the choice themselves) does not need to accept the different school placement or placement within the program.

The act of expelling a student may cause a behaviour to stop within the school itself but there is no guarantee the behaviour will not reoccur, especially if a parent is against the expulsion, again affecting the mesosystem of the child. If the behaviour does not stop, the student's behaviour can become a problem at a different school. It is therefore important to determine why a behaviour is occurring. Suspension and expulsions are serious consequences. If a behaviour is continuing to escalate to the point that this type of discipline is being considered, something in that student's life, either in school or outside within systems of which they are a part, may be triggering the behaviour. The different microsystems of the child and their

interactions with one another (mesosystem) need to shift. This further explains how intricate bullying behaviour is and how complicated it can be to stop the bullying from occurring (Gaffney et al., 2021). It is not an easy fix. Action may need to be taken at the macrosystem level to shift the ideology and culture within the school.

MTSS as an Effective Approach

As articulated within the literature review, the aim of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) approach is to change the ideology of thought at the school wide level to promote better practice and policy. The school is seen as a system. MTSS is never directly stated as an approach used by the HWCDSB, but elements of it are present within the policies and policy documents.

Tier 1 the MTSS approach is referenced when the *Policy Against Bullying Behavior* (2013), *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a), and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d) discuss how staff are expected to implement programs and strategies to prevent bullying. These act on the macrosystem level. The *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a), generally refers to proactive strategies being implemented, while *The Policy Against Student Bullying Behavior* (2013) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d) outline specific strategies and board approved programs. However, the information is not detailed. The strategies are broadly discussed with no explanation of how they can be applied. For example, one strategy suggests involving community/board mentoring, but what this is or how this can be implemented is not discussed. The board-approved programs are also only listed by name. By not illustrating how these programs can be implemented or even what they are can impact the effectiveness of the policy. Some of the initiatives which are included on the list such as mediation, were discussed in the literature review are not reflections of best practices, as they do little to change the actual bullying behaviour (Campaert et al., 2017; Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). Peer mentorship has been found to not be effective due to the fact

that, that students may not have the capabilities to shift behaviour and break out of a victim role themselves, additional assistance from an adult may be needed (PREVNet, 2017; Whitley et al., 2018). Further, hierarchy can exist among students, thus some students may not feel comfortable getting involved as they do not want to be retaliated against (Bellore et al., 2012; Thornberg, 2010). This can lead to more bullying in schools (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). Furthermore, some of the initiatives posted are only applicable to certain age groups; Roots of Empathy is a program that is only used in elementary schools (Roots of Empathy, 2023). Thus, these prevention strategies may not be as effective as the board may think

On a positive note, both the *Policy Against Student Bullying Behavior* (2013) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d) outlined that a focus on developing healthy social relationships with connection to the Religions Education Program of the board, is a good way to prevent bullying. The literature review outlined how important socialization/social relationships are (Marín-Lopez et al., 2020; Rubin et al., 2008; Victor et al., 2019). Studies have shown that having friends and being liked by peers can act as a protective factor against bullying (Hodges et al., 1999; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). There are many different factors that can influence a child's ability to create social relationships (Auerbach et al., 2014). From an ecological lens, these individual-level factors make up the child's microsystem. The way these different factors interact within the school classroom, which make up the mesosystem, can make it difficult for children to create strong bonds with their peers and adults (Carroll, 2011; Sun et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2018; Vaillancourt et al., 2013). A lack of positive social relationships can act as a risk factor for bullying (Auerbach et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2018). A study found that victims of bullying have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships (deLara, 2019). They can find it difficult to trust others (deLara, 2019). The types of social relationships a teacher makes with their students can

also influence bullying (Halladay et al., 2020); hence, it is important for all school staff to create a safe learning environment.

As the literature review outlined, if a student has a good relationship with their teacher they are more likely to disclose/report bullying and seek help versus suffering in silence (Halladay et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important that policies stress the importance of creating healthy social relationships as these relationships can be proactive in creating a good school climate which can make bullying less prominent (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023). Anti-bullying strategies that are most successful require a whole school approach (Accepting Safe Schools, 2012; Bohnenkamp, 2023; Hoover, 2019; VanLone, 2019). For example, MTSS is a good way schools can not only be proactive in bullying prevention but effectively manage and intervene bullying (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011; Njelesani et al., 2020). However, with the way the policy is worded in the *Policy Against Student Bullying Behavior* (2013) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d), it is unclear how many or how often the proactive whole school approach is used to prevent bullying.

The *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d) discuss how teachable moments, which are moments that require some coaching throughout the day, can help not only those students who are at risk for inappropriate behaviour learn social skills, but all students. This is also a reflection of the first tier of MTSS (Njelesani et al., 2020), as the intervention is being given to everyone. What is not stated is how many teachable movements occur before the behaviour needs to be reported.

The second and third tier of MTSS are referenced when discussing progressive discipline. Within the *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b)*,* specific steps that can be taken when implementing progressive discipline are outlined.

These steps are reflective of the macrosystem. Progressive discipline is used as the main practice when disciplining a child within the HWCDSB. Both the *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) outline what progressive discipline is and provide a list of steps that can be taken to implement this process within schools. Some steps within the list are not reflective of best practices as outlined in the literature; that is, peer mediation and suspension (Downes & Cefai, 2018; Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). Other steps listed include detention, withdrawal of privileges, and alternative placements. These can be seen as giving additional support to those who need it. However, these supports do not necessarily focus on shifting a behaviour. Rather they focus on taking things away from the perpetrator.

There are specific strategies listed within the progressive discipline approach that when implemented can not only help determine why a behaviour is occurring but can also target different systems/environments a child is part of. These steps include consultation, referral to counselling and community programs, involvement of or referral to outside agencies, and parental involvement (HWCDSB, 2016, 2022b). It is important to have professional support. If there are different factors in different systems that are causing a child to act a certain way (i.e., trauma, parental factors, mental health, etc.), professionals such as psychologists and social workers can diagnose behaviour or patterns in behaviours (Borg & Drange, 2019). Unlike teachers who are just able to manage bullying and bullying behaviour and its effects, these professionals can treat and diagnose the individuals and help them alter their behaviour and thinking (Borg & Drange, 2019). This can be applied to victims of bullying as well. If a victim is depressed, suicidal, or having issues sleeping or eating, a professional can help with this. Educators cannot and should not be solely responsible for managing these behaviours (Ekornes, 2015; Studer & Mynatt, 2015). Even parental involvement can be beneficial as they know their

child best (Gaffney et al., 2021; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). They can offer strategies that work at home, which can help the teacher.

Interprofessional collaboration is important (McClain et al., 2022; Studer & Mynatt, 2015) and is a component of the third MTSS tier. It is interesting to note, that while students from Kindergarten to Grade 3, should not be suspended, an exception is made for bullying behaviour (HWCDSB, 2022a, 2022b). It is stated in the policies that bullying should be addressed with appropriate positive behaviour supports in school (HWCDSB, 2022a, 2022b); echoing a MTSS approach (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023). Children at this age are still growing developing mentally, they may not be fully aware of their actions, thus it is important in instill positive behaviour supports so that the inappropriate behaviour can be corrected before a child is put at greater risk from suffering/experiences negative impacts of bullying, either in adolescence or adulthood. The *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) states that if the bullying is motivated by hate based on different characteristics (such as race, ethnic origin, mental or physical disability, gender expression, etc.), they must be suspended, but where are they learning this behaviour from? If it is from a parent/guardian, a suspension will not necessarily stop the behaviour or a way of thinking from occurring as the parents view will not change in that time frame.

Even though these additional supports beneficial and should be implemented when dealing with and trying to stop a behaviour, the *Codes of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and the *Policy Manual – Schools. S.M. 09 – Code of Student Conduct* (2022b) both state that not all steps outlined in the sample need to be followed. Therefore, this list becomes subjective, depending on the viewpoint of the person carrying out progressive discipline. Just because consultations or referrals are options does not mean they will be incorporated. By not using these resources and including other professions who specifically know how to deal with problematic

behaviour, the behaviour may continue to be displayed. It is not mandatory to use the supports when implementing progressive discipline.

Consequently, this can all be moot, as if a child is under the age of 16, parental consent is needed for the child to be able to receive counselling. So, even if a child is referred or offered additional support, they may not receive it. Further promoting the ecological systems lens that different systems influence a child's behaviour and so do the interactions between these systems such as the microsystem and mesosystem (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Whipple et al., 2010).

What is more, the *Family Guide* (2012) gives reasons for why a child may be displaying bullying behaviour. This is important for parents to understand, as their child is not necessarily a bad kid for partaking in these behaviours; something else in their life may be influencing the poor behaviour. The *Family Guide* (2012) outlines reasons for why a child is acting a certain way, they may be trying to gain social status, trying to regain their social status, a child may be imitating violent or aggressive behaviour they regularly see, or they may be encouraged to bully by a role model; ergo, exemplifying Bronfenbrenner's theory (1999). Interventions need to be aimed towards different factors/systems in a child's life to get behaviour to stop, such as homelife which is part of the microsystem. Including and teaching parents is part of the third step tier of the MTSS process. For a behaviour to shift in a child, the parents/guardians will also have a role to play. The *Family Guide* (2012) was the only document specifically outlining steps parents/guardians can take.

Support for the Victim

The *Family Guide* (2012) is the only document which directly provides examples of the long term effects of bullying. Examples given are that bullying can have long-term social and emotional effects on not only bullies and victims but on bystanders too, as well as lead to

violence. Specific examples are provided. The effects of bullying on bystanders, victims, and perpetrators were explored in the literature review. Studies have found that all three groups can be affected by bullying, thus demonstrating why it is important to stop the behaviour before serious consequences occur (Downes & Cefai, 2018; Romano et al., 2020; Valdebenito et al., 2017) which can affect the chronosystem of the child.

The *Family Guide* (2012) depicts warning signs a parent who suspects their child is being bullied can look for. This is important information as changes in a child's behaviour can mean that something is wrong; something in one of their ecological systems such as a microsystem, mesosystem, or macrosystem has shifted which has now caused them to act differently (Day et al., 2018; Katz-Wise et al., 2022; Smokowski & Evans, 2019). The warning signs listed were also not just physical attributes such as bruises or stolen items, but signs that through a mental health focus can mean that something is wrong; for example, asking to stay home from school, a change in eating habits, trouble sleeping.

Ways parents/guardians can help their child if they think they are a victim of bullying are also explored. This is beneficial information for parents to know, as it shows that more can be done in addition to reporting the behaviour to the school. Parents have an influence over the way their child can develop; they are part of the child's microsystem. Parents and their relationships with teachers or other individuals in a child's life are also present within the child's mesosystem. Thus, it is important for them to have strategies they can impalement to help prevent the effects of bullying becoming long lasting or permanent. Specific resources and phone numbers parents can call are also given. The numbers are for social work services, behaviour resource teachers, and a psychologist, who are all board approved. Websites that provide further information and

resources about bullying are also provided. Other documents refer to counselling and additional resources, but detailed information of where to actually go or who to call were not provided.

The *Student S. M. 15* (2023d) specifically outlines that the HWCDSB is committed to using programs, interventions, and other supports for victims, perpetrators, and bystanders of bullying. At the macrosystem level, this demonstrated that the culture and society the school board exists in values and supports stopping bullying and helping those involved. These programs, supports, and interventions "may" be provided by trained professionally such as social workers and psychologists. Within the *Policy Against bullying Behaviour* (2012) and *Student S. M. 15* (2023d), it is outlined that "appropriate counselling or other supports" that victims, perpetrators and/or other students affected by bullying shall be arranged by the board. What is not stated, is how often this can happen. The word "may" be used in both documents. Therefore, a child may or may not be offered support; there seems to be no guarantee. The literature illustrated that both victims and bystanders can have long-lasting effects resulting from bullying, some of which will not present themselves until later in like. Therefore, having mandatory additional support can act as a protective factor for possible effects of bullying.

If support can be given, it is unclear when during the process it can be offered. If a behaviour is serious enough that consequences are being given or suspension is being considered, can it be offered prior to the investigation being completed or is the support conditional depending on the outcome of the investigation? The wording of the policy only outlines that additional support will be organized through the board (HWCDSB, 2023d).

The *Harassment – An Information Guide for Students* (2023b) states that harassment can have long-lasting consequences on the victim's heath and affect the school climate. It is outlined that harassment can occur between student to student, staff to student, or student to staff. Yet, the

document makes no reference to any additional support that may be available to those involved in the incident. A child can call the police and involve them, but that is not the same as counselling support. If a student is being harassed by a teacher that is a serious offence; similarly, if a student is harassing a staff member that is also inappropriate behaviour. For it to stop and not continue to escalate, it needs to be determined if the child fully understands what the behaviour they are partaking in is and the implications of this behaviour. Even when a teacher is involved in the process, their role is to listen and act as an impartial witness to mitigate a meeting. They are not investigating. The principal will conduct one in step three, but if the behaviour gets to this point or if the student goes directly to the principal then the harassment may be quite severe. A stronger intervention than a simple investigation may be needed.

This theme helps to answer the research questions, as it illustrates that there are elements of MTSS present in the policies and policy documents of the HWCDSB. The presence of these elements is reflective of best practices. However, there are also strategies being used that are not reflective of best practices.

Connection Between Words and Actions

The *Policy Against Bullying Behavior* (2013), the *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a), and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d) discuss ways schools can be proactive in preventing bullying. The *Policy Against Bullying Behavior* (2013) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d) provide specific strategies that can be implemented within schools/classrooms; the wording is clear that the board only "expects" staff to implement these strategies, unlike when it comes to reporting bullying, which is something they are "required" to do (HWCDSB, 2013, 2023d). Therefore, this can be subjective as some teachers may take the initiative to directly implement strategies or programs within their teaching, while others may not. This can also be for a variety of reasons. The

literature review outlined how many teachers do not feel like they are prepared enough or mental health literate enough to deal with bullying/bullying behaviour (Dawes et al., 2023; Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012; Migliaccio, 2015). Thus, this can cause proactive strategies to be forgotten about or not well implemented. The proactive strategies are broadly described, and specific proactive programs are only named, detailed information of what the programs are or examples of how the strategies can be implemented were not given (HWCDSB, 2013, 2023d). Perhaps illustrating that these proactive steps are only suggestions not mandatory, as more information and detail of the document is given when discussing mandatory reporting and investigation of bullying. As discussed in the literature, Wassdorp et al. (2021), found that antibullying policies can be beneficial but are not enough to shift behaviour on their own, more needs to be done. The *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) document does not outline these strategies or refer to them. What is stated is that each school will create its own bullying prevention and intervention plan, where a "whole-school approach involving all educators" (HWCDSB, 2022a, p. 1) is required. The board provides a template for each school to follow, which falls within the macrosystem, when creating their policies and safety pans. Those individual policies and safety plans may include more detailed information about specific strategies that school must use, specific resources, steps teachers and/or administration must follow, and/or even paperwork/record keeping that would need to occur during this process. In that event, individual schools may also have a guideline and/or specific steps that outline how a victim or bystander can be helped during and after the process. But the overarching school board policy does not provide a framework stating examples of what this may look like. Proactive strategies, programs, teachable moments, and progressive discipline are examples of a whole school approach, but they are not explained in detail within this document. Direct information for

proactive strategies programs, teachable moments, and progressive discipline are found in *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2012) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d). Having information located in different areas can make it hard for a policy to be implemented, because if the reader only reads *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) they can question what is meant by a whole school approach, but when they read the policy in conjunction with *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2012) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d), more information is provided, thus giving a clearer picture.

The *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013), *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a), and the *Student S. M. 15* (2023d) explore in-service education regarding bullying prevention and intervention. The *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013) and the *Student S. M. 15* (2023d) discuss that workshops can be provided to school staff and even members of the school community such as bus drivers, crossing guards, and volunteers. These opportunities for further education for the school community can be made "upon request" (HWCDSB, 2013, 2023d). It is unclear who needs to request these opportunities; is it the people themselves or does the school/school board request their presence? It is important for anyone working within the school environment or with the school population to be knowledgeable of proper bullying prevention and intervention because depending on their understating of bullying behaviour this can influence if and how they respond to problematic behaviour. In the future, allowing more than just educational staff to be present for professional development regarding bullying behaviour should continue.

Moreover, the *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) language is used to differentiate between regular and annual professional development. Regular professional development will be provided to school board staff, whereas annual professional development will be provided to teachers and staff, who "directly" work with students (HWCDSB, 2022a). However, a timeline

of how often this will occur is not stated. Further it is not outlined if the professional

development will be insisted by the board or if each school/school administration will have to set

up the in-service education. It is important that every teacher has some sort of knowledge or

training of how to intervene and spot bullying, especially new teachers, or new staff of the school

since every school has its own bullying intervention and prevention plan. This can be associated

with the exosystem and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Teacher training is part of the

exosystem. The child is not directly involved in the training, but depending on the type, quality,

and/or amount of training a teacher receives, the child's environment and behaviour can be

affected. It is at the macrosystem level, where policies and initiatives are created that mandate

how often teacher professional development will occur, who will receive it, and how it will be

carried out. Consequently, depending on the culture and society that the school exists within, the

teacher professional development can influence the beliefs and perceptions about things such as

bullying. If the society/culture that schools exist in does not see value in teacher training

regarding bullying or does not view bullying as a major issue within the school the teachers may

not receive adequate training, which in turn can affect the students, their learning environment

and school climate.

Connected to in-service education, is community outreach. Both the *Policy Against*

Bullying Behaviour (2013) and the *Student S. M. 15* (2023d) declare that the HWCDSB will

continue to partner with community agencies when it comes to bullying prevention initiatives,

but, there is no example or explanation of what these agencies are or the role they play within

bullying prevention. Like the literature review stated, incorporating community outreach into

schools and bullying prevention programs is beneficial and something the Hamilton community

wants (Safe Schools, 2021). Community outreach is mentioned within the *Code of Student*

Conduct and Discipline (2016) and *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) as part of the progressive discipline approach, which again illustrate how following policy can be difficult if the wording is not clear, especially when specific statements are being made. It can cause the reader to not have a clear picture of the intent and purpose of the policy. Policies need to be clear by not being specific, this can lead to a policy not being implemented or carried out to its full potential.

Language of Procedure

Under the board policy (HWCDSB, 2013, 2022a, 2023d), it seems that when investigations by the principal or school designate occur the focus is to determine if bullying behaviour is occurring and not why a behaviour is occurring. Investigations are mentioned in *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013), *Student S. M. 15* (2023d), *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016), *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b), and *Harassment and Harassment* (2023b)

In the *Policy Against bullying Behaviour* (2013) and *Student S. M. 15* (2023d) documents, an investigation is outlined as an intervention strategy to stop bullying behaviour from further occurring. Thus, the investigation is conducted once a report of bullying is made. Depending on the outcome of the investigation consequences can be given. In the *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b), an investigation is framed as a way for a principal to determine if a student has "committed one or more infractions" that are listed in the Code of Conduct on either school property, during a school-related activity or event and/or in circumstances where the incident has an impact on the school climate. If the investigation concludes that an incident did happen, the principal will then consider suspension and/or expulsion. Therefore, in both cases an investigation is occurring with the focus to determine if a behaviour happened. There are no steps outlined that illustrate a principal need to consider why a behaviour may be occurring. Situational factors do play a role

when determining if a child should be suspended or not, but there is no specific or direct information explain that a principal needs to determine why a behaviour is occurring. The situational factors outlined in the *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) deal with factors such as if a student knows a behaviour is wrong, if they can see the foreseeable consequences of their behaviour, if they have the ability to control behaviour, their academic and discipline history, and impact on future education. If a child understands that the behaviour is wrong and can see the foreseeable consequence of the action, then perhaps a deeper look into why the behaviour is occurring is necessary. However, this is not explored in the policy. What is interesting to note is that one of the factors take into consideration if the incident was a result of the student being harassed in any way. Thus, the school would take into account if the other party involved was doing something to which instigated another student to act out, but they will not necessarily look into the homelife or factors outside of school that can be influencing a child's behaviour.

When describing the type of investigation that a principal will conduct, the language is ambiguous. The word "thoroughly" is used followed by "the investigation may include interviews with students, staff and parents/guardians, review of school records and involvement of the Board's Student Services Staff" in both the *Students S. M. 15* (2023d, p. 3) and *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013, p. 3). What the policy means by "thoroughly" is not described. There is also no mention of documentation or if the principal needs to keep records of the investigation. During the harassment investigation record-keeping does occur (HWCDSB, 2012), but in both code of conduct documents, record-keeping is not referenced.

The stage at which a principal becomes involved with addressing bullying behaviour is not clearly established. The *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d) outline that a teacher (or parent/guardian) must report bullying behaviour right away and

once a principal is made aware of bullying behaviour they will being an investigation. However, what is unclear, is if the official report will be the first time a principal becomes involved in a situation. For example, if a child is having behavioural issues in the class which can be related to acts of bullying (e.g., making comments about people, trying to exert control of peers) and a teacher goes to the principal to inform them what is going on, will a formal investigation be started right away? Or will the teacher need to monitor the situation and try and use their own behaviour management strategies to stop the behaviour? This ambiguity can put a strain on the teacher, especially if the behaviour continues to escalate. According to Wasdorp et al. (2021), teachers should be able to discuss incidents with other teachers and be able to refer the student for additional help if needed. The policy documents (HWCDSB, 2021, 2022a, 2023b) are not clear if the teacher is able to discuss students' incidents with other staff, nor is it clear if the principal needs to be the one to refer the student for extra support or counselling or if the teacher can do it themselves.

The policy documents (HWCDSB, 2012, 2022a, 2023d) do not state how severe a behaviour needs to be or if that is even a consideration prior to starting an investigation. The literature review illustrated that some teachers and even parents believe that bullying behaviour is a normal part of development (part of the microsystem), and that experiencing bullying can make a child stronger (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). If a teacher or administrator has similar views this may cause a delay in reporting the behaviour or initiating an investigation into the behaviour. These types of reporting situations can also become subjective as what one teacher and or administrator may understand and view as bullying behaviour another may not. This can cause students to not receive help or assistance quick enough.

The resolution process outlined in the *Bully and Harassment* (2023b) document describes that a principal is only aware of harassment in the third and final stage of the process, unless a

child goes to them right away. The other two steps of the process describe that a child first should attempt to stop the harassment themselves and step two is when a teacher can become involved. Therefore, depending on the route the student chooses, the principal may not be aware of the behaviour right away. On top of that, in step two the teacher must use their discretion in deciding if the principal should know of the harassment right aware or night, which again leaves room for subjectivity and can delay actual intervention of the behaviour (HWCDSB, 2023b).

The wording describing the steps a principal takes when investigating if a student should be expelled or not is interesting. Both the *Codes of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *the Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) stated that as a component of the investigation a principal will make "all reasonable efforts" to talk to the student, parents, and guardian of the student (if under 16 or 17) and any other relevant people involved. Would it not be beneficial for the principal to directly talk to the students involved? If there are reasons a principal would not, they are not outlined within the documents. Expulsions are serious offences; it would be beneficial to at least talk to the students directly involved.

The *Harassment – An Information Guide for Students* (2023b) provides a three-step resolution process students follow to stop harassment from happening. The first step is an informal approach, that is stated to usually be enough to stop an unwanted behaviour. However, if a child feels uncomfortable approaching the person harassing them, they can always go to step two or three. Steps two and three are considered formal steps. Parents are involved and documents/records are being kept. Step two involves a teacher and a confidential meeting between the two parties. In step three, the issue is referred to the school principal. While the steps make sense logistically, there is no evidence in the process that either the teacher or principal will inquire why a behaviour is occurring. The complainant can verbally state their

displeasure and request the behaviour stop. A teacher can even assist in coming to a mutually agreed resolution. If someone is partaking in unwelcome physical contact using degrading words, making and/or distributing harmful material, the students may not recognize that the behaviour is wrong, that words they use are hurtful and that the threats can be seen as valid.

When investigations are mentioned in the documents, specific timelines are not given, nor is it stated that the parties involved will be kept up to date with information surrounding the investigation (HWCDSB, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2022b, 2023b, 2023d). On the Hamilton Police website, it states that if consequences or discipline for bullying are given they are confidential, the victim will not know about it (Hamilton Police, 2023). The school cannot tell them. The website states this is a board protocol, but none of the documents from the HWCDSB that were analyzed outlined this. Thus, the victim does not necessarily know what, if anything, is being done or has been accomplished to stop a behaviour from reoccurring. It can be understandable that investigations can take time and that confidentiality can be an issue. However as per the policy documents, every child has the right to feel safe within the school environment (HWCDSB, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2022a, 2022b, 2023b), thus if something has happened to make an environment unsafe, it is important for the victim(s) to have some affirmation of some sort, so they know their environment is safe again.

This theme illustrated the importance of clear policies. The way policies are worded, and the way information is presented can affect the way the polices are interpreted. The wording of the policies can affect the way bullying is understood and interpreted under the HWCDSB. Policies act as part of the macrosystem, therefore the way these policies may be understood and implemented can alter their effectiveness.

Outdated and Inconsistent Information

A surprising finding of the critical policy and document analysis was seeing that outdated policies are still live and posted on the board website. The *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) are similar versions of each other. The *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013), *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a), and *Students. S. M. 15* (2023d) documents are also similar to each other. This is problematic as it can cause issues when trying to implement the policy, as the documents listed are similar but contain different information. At the end of each policy document (aside from *Students. S. M. 15*, 2023d), it specifies how often they must be reviewed.

The *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013) is outdated, as it states that the policy must be reviewed every 5 years with the most recent year on the document being 2013. The *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) has a 5-year renewal period, making the document up to date. The *Code of Student Conduct and Discipline* (2016) states that it is to be reviewed every 3 years, but the most recent date on the document is 2016. The *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) is current, with a 3-year renewal period. Having outdated policies on the board website can cause issues for implementation because depending on which version is being referenced the procedures can be different, valuable, and current information may not be present. The following are examples of how inconsistent information can lead to different understanding the policy documents.

The *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013) and *Policy Manual – Student* (2022a) copy the *Education Act* (1990) definition directly into the policy. The *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) includes additional information to help illustrate bullying. The inclusion of the additional information causes some inconsistency with how bullying can be perceived within the

HWCDSB. The definition taken from the *Education Act* (1990) includes a line which states that "bullying means aggressive and typically repeated behaviour," however the *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) states that the behaviour can occur one time. It is true that there are circumstances that fall under this category (i.e., sharing intimate pictures without consent). Thus, this inclusion is beneficial, and should be applied to all bullying policy documents. The addition came from a Ministry of Education Memorandum (2021). This help victims as they do not necessarily need to prove a behaviour or act done to them has been occurring over a period of time. Some forms of bullying, especially if there is a misuse of power, should not happen repeatedly. If a victim needed to always prove the behaviour was repeated, this could put them at more risk for long terms effects of bullying. Any document which uses or outlines a definition of bullying should include this additional information.

The wording surrounding staff's and parents' need to report bullying is contradictory. In the *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour* (2013) and *Students S. M. 15* (2023d), it is stated that parent/guardians and staff are required to report bullying if they observe or become aware of bullying. However, in the *Responding to Bullying Behaviour* (2012)*, it is stated that the board expects staff and parents to report bullying; the heading of that section states that parents and guardians shall report bullying. The inconsistency of wording can distort the interpretation of the policy and policy documents. "Expects" is not the same as "requires." When a person is expected to do something, it not a mandatory action. When a person is required, however, to do something it is a mandatory action. It is necessary and compulsory. Whereas when a person is expected to do something there is still a chance that they do not perform the action.

The *Responding to Bullying Behaviour* (2012) includes outdated information surrounding cyberbullying. The document itself is from 2012 and cyberbullying within the document is

referred to as computer-based bullying. The information provided focuses on password

protection, hacking emails, and how to monitor a child on the family computer (HWCDSB,

2012). While the information can still be applicable especially for younger children who may not

have their own devices, no mention of social media, cell phones, Wi-Fi, or apps is made.

Currently these are major ways cyberbullying manifests; students post or share information or

photos that another person does not want shared more frequently than they hack email. Many

students have their own devices or in some situations the school will provide a device for a

student. The cyberbullying definition used in the *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) uses a

current information illustrating how cyberbullying is understood today. The *Code of Student

Conduct and Discipline* (2016) and *Policy Manual – Schools* (2022b) also refer to current ways

unfavourable behaviour can present itself online. Therefore, the information in the *Responding to

Bullying Behaviour* (2012) document needs to be updated in the future so that parents are aware

of current ways cyberbullying happens and how they can protect their children.

The theme of outdated and inconsistent information helps answer the research questions

because policies exist within a macrosystem. Policies create the social context for which

behaviours can or cannot exist. Thus, having outdated information available, or having multiple

documents that are similar but different from each other, can create a space for bullying

behaviour to exist, as people may not be following the correct document, or they may be using

outdating information.

These four themes helped answer the research questions of this MRP. They illustrated

that while the policy of the HWDSB shows that the board has a strong understanding of bullying

behaviour, the initiatives the board takes to intervene and manage the behaviour are not always

reflective of best practices. Further, having multiple documents posted which deal with the same

information as well as having outdated information posted can make it difficult to carry out policies. At a macrosystem level, these policies act as intervention for students of the HWCDSB. Thus, they need to be reflective of current society so that they can be carried out effectively. Bullying directly affects schools, therefore the policies need to be reflective of current best practices and up to date information to be valid. Otherwise, they may not have the intended affect and bullying behaviour can continue to escalate within the school.

<div align="center">**Summary of the Presentation of Results**</div>

Conducting a critical document and policy analysis included outlining the purpose, intended audience, and use of each policy and document. I examined the key components of each policy individually to maintain the integrity of the document and to adequately porty the policy and document messages. Four major themes that emerged from the critical policy and document analysis are: (a) HWCDSB and bullying behaviour definitions; (b) shifting behaviours versus managing them; (c) connections between words and actions; and (d) inconsistent and outdated information. All eight documents analyzed have central connections to show how bullying is understood and addressed within the HWCDSB, and how the bullying policy itself compares to best practices.

The following chapter will provide a summary of the research with a focus on why conducting a critical policy and document analysis of the HWCDSB bullying policies was beneficial. A comparison to the HWDSB task force recommendations, as well as recommendations for improving the HWCDSB's bullying policies and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The final chapter of this MRP provides a summary, discussion, and implications of the research conducted. The chapter begins by summarizing the research. Distinct conjunction to important information learned from conducting the analysis and benefits of the analysis will be explored. Connections and comparisons to the recommendations of the HWDSB task force findings are made, along with recommendations for improving HWCDSB's policies on bullying and recommendations for future research. The chapter closes by providing concluding thoughts regarding the MRP.

Summary of the Research

The focus of this MRP was to conduct a critical policy and document analysis of the HWCDSB bullying policies. This specific board was chosen, because in 2019, a boy from the HWDSB died as a result of bullying (Taekema, 2019a). While there was focus on the public board of Hamilton, the Catholic board also has issues with bullying, as illustrated in Chapter 1 of this MRP (Clarke, 2019; Hristova, 2022). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory was used to frame the research conducted within this MRP. The theory stipulates that there is a complexity related to the development of a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The environment(s) a child is a part of, and different factors presented or missing from that environment, can affect the development and behaviour of a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bullying is a complex behaviour (Atlas & Pepler 1998, as cited in Mishna et al., 2010; Winton & Tuters, 2015). Adopting an ecological lens, there are different systems a child is a part of and depending on how they interact, it can influence a child's environment with bullying behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, critically analyzing the HWCDSB policies and supporting documents helped better

understand how HWCDSB addresses bullying in their schools, and how bullying is influenced by the board policy and the environment the policy exists in.

Chapter 2 of the MRP highlighted important literature concentrating on bullying in schools, bullying interventions, and bullying policy and policy development. The literature review assisted in illustrating the importance of why bullying needs to be prevented and why it is important to have adequate intervention and management. Policy acts as an intervention for bullying within schools. It provides guidelines for steps to be taken to stop bullying behaviour, manage bullying behaviour, and can even help to prevent the behaviour (Faucher et al., 2015a). Therefore, it is important that policies are reflective of current literature and best practices, because if information used in the policies is not reflective of best practices it can cause the policies to not work as they were intended, nor stop a behaviour from occurring.

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology of the MRP. A critical policy and document analysis was chosen as the best method of study for this MRP. A critical policy and document analysis looks to comprehend the environment the policy exits in (Cardno, 2018). Therefore, to truly understand the policy, a researcher must have an interpretation of the literature surrounding the policy. This literature helps illustrate the environment that a specific policy exists in. Chapter 2 of this MRP allowed for this to happen. Additionally, by using an ecological systems theory approach, a focus on the environment and the effects it has on policy and people within it was able to occur. Questions about policy were able to be framed with intersectionality of different issues the policy reflects and multiple ecological systems in mind.

In Chapter 4, eight policy documents and supporting documents were analyzed: (a) *Policy Against Bullying Behaviour*; (b) *Policy Manual – Students. S. M. 15 – Bullying Prevention and Intervention*; (c) *Students S. M. 15 – Bullying Prevention and Intervention*; (d)

HWCDSB Code of Student Conduct and Discipline; (e) *Policy Manual – Schools. S. M. 09 –*
Code of Student Conduct and Discipline; (f) *Bullying and Harassment. Responding to Bullying*
Behaviour – A Family Guide; (g) *Bully and Harassment. Harassment – An Information Guide*
for Students; and (h) *Anonymous Bullying Reporting Tool*. The data collected from these
documents helped answer the research questions of this MRP: How does HWCDSB policy
contribute to how bullying is understood and addressed in HWCDSB schools? How do
HWCDSB bullying policies compare to best practices identified within the literature?

Critical issues reflected in the literature review were connected to emerging themes of the
data. From the analysis four themes emerged: (a) HWCDSB and bullying behaviour; (b) the
policies focus on consequences rather than shifting behaviour; (c) connections between words
and actions; and (d) inconsistent and outdated information. These four themes illustrate that the
HWCDSB does have a strong understanding of what bullying behaviour is. There was evidence
to support that the board recognizes the damaging effects that bullying can have not only on
individuals, but also on a school climate. HWCDSB acknowledges that bullying behaviour can
cause harm and that everyone deserves to learn within a safe environment (HWCDSB,
HWCDSB, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2022a, 2022b, 2023c). A child spends most of their day in a
school system. They can interact or be in the presence of their peers, teachers, and other
educators more so than in their families/home environment. Therefore, it is important that school
is a safe place and that school boards have a strong understanding of different behaviour and
factors that can negatively influence a child's time within the school. These different factors
relate back to the theoretical framework of the MRP, because bullying is a behaviour and
according to the theory, the behaviour of a child is influenced by the existence or vacancy of
different factors and the intersectionality of them (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Therefore, to stop a

behaviour from occurring, a shift in ideology needs to happen. Factors and the intersection of different characteristics need to change. It is in this area that the HWCDSB is somewhat deficient.

The final three factors found within the analysis illustrate flaws of the HWCDSB bullying policies and supporting documents. The policy does refer to different intervention and management strategies which can be implemented to stop bullying behaviour; however, not all of these are reflective of best practices, nor do they focus on shifting behaviour. Suspension and expulsion were the two most focused on consequences of behaviour within the policy (HWCDSB, 2016, 2022b). These are the most extreme responses the board can take to stop a behaviour from occurring, thus it is understandable why they are so detailed; however, these responses do not focus on shifting a behaviour from reoccurring in the future, the focus is more on creating a safe school environment within a given moment. Recognition of initiatives and steps that can be taken to shift a behaviour from occurring were made but were not given as much specified detail as was suspension and expulsion. Even the language used was broader and more subjective when outlining these approaches (HWCDSB, 2013, 2023d). The MTSS approach was indirectly referred to within the policies and documents, but never directly stated nor outlined. Therefore, the policies focus on consequences and discipline instead of examining why a behaviour is happening and outlining the appropriate steps to stop it, something the ecological systems theory states is necessary when looking to stop a behaviour. Furthermore, the board policies outline that bullying can have long lasting effects on victims of bullying and that the board is committed to using programs, interventions and other supports for victims, perpetrators, and bystanders of bullying. This is a positive, but the policies do not state how often this will happen, or if this will happen for every bullying incident reported. Each school creates

their own bullying prevention, intervention, and safety plan; therefore, some schools may specify

or have more detail, but the overarching policy gives no specifics of additional help or resources,

besides counselling, that can be given to a victim of bullying.

The third theme, connections between words and actions, illustrates the importance of

language within a policy and policy implementation. As stated in Chapter 1, the HWCDSB has

an inconsistent practice with labelling bullying incidents (Clarke, 2019). Additionally, while

policies are in place, they are not always followed like they are meant to be, as illustrated in

bullying and racism incidences outlined in chapter one (Clarke, 2019; Hristova, 2022). The

literature review further outlined that there is a certain level of subjectivity that principals have

when determining whether to suspend or expel a student (Bailey, 2017). For these reasons it is

important to consider the language of policies as this can affect the ways the policy interpreted,

implemented, and carried out all of which impact the effectiveness of the policy.

Language within the HWCDSB policies was subjective when outlining how schools can

be proactive, manage, and intervene bullying behaviour. While having broad and subjective

language can be beneficial as it can allow more incidents to fall under the umbrella of bullying

behaviour, it can also impede policy implementation. For example, the board only expects

teachers to implement proactive strategies, they do not mandate that they do so (HWCDSB,

2013, 2023d). Furthermore, specifics illustrating timelines for investigations and when a

principal must become involved in a bullying incident are not given (HWCDSB, 2022a). It is

unclear how many "teachable moments" can occur before an investigation can commence. When

a principal does become involved, there are no specifics of a timeline given for how long an

investigation can go on for before decisions are made, nor is there a specific statement outlining

whether the principal determine why behaviours are happening. The intent of investigations

revolves around identifying if an incident or behaviour has occurred. Thus, the behaviour may still be occurring in tandem with an investigation. Policies act as part of a macrosystem (Pennell et al., 2020). Policies can create a situation for which behaviours can or cannot exist. Social, political, and cultural factors can all influence a policy. Due to the language of a policy, this can allow for bullying to continue to occur. Therefore, it is important that policies reflect these different factors and are worded in a way that allows for the policy to be applicable to a variety of instances but also have a focus of shifting behaviour.

Finally, a theme of outdated and inconsistent information being posted and accessible was found. There were multiple similar but different versions of policy and supporting policy documents posted on the board website. Depending on which document a person finds can determine their course of action or understanding of the intent of the policy. This can make it difficult to implement an effective policy. Some of the policies had dates to indicate when they were meant to be updated, yet these policies were still live and were not updated. This can put children at risk because bullying and societies' understanding of bullying have evolved and will continue to evolve. For example, in the past, some believed that bullying behaviour was a natural part of growing up (Mishna, Sanders, et al., 2020). However, over time, new research has proved this to be untrue which has led to the creation of new policies. Outdated policies can put victims, perpetrators, and bystanders of bullying at risk as they may no longer be reflective of best practices. Thus, the outdated policies should not be available on the HWCDSB website.

Having similar but different versions of documents or outdated documents available to view can lead to the presence of conflicting information being present. Depending on which document was being viewed (the old or the new version), the wording surrounding definitions, or the information provided was different or even contradictory which affects the implementation of

the policy which in turn can influence if the bullying behaviour will continue to exist within the school environment. This reflects the ecological systems lens as being outdated and inconsistent information can intersect with other factors a child experiences within a school environment which can result in bullying continuing to be a problem within a school.

Examining these policies is worthwhile because it helps identify the positives in the policies best and helps identify the gaps within the policies. The next steps would be to bring the attention of the HWCDSB the inconsistencies of the policies and to encourage change/revisions within the policies.

Comparison to the Recommendations From the HWDSB Task Force's Recommendations

Following the death of Devan Bracci-Selvey who died because of bullying, the HWDSB created the Safe Schools: Bullying Prevention and Intervention Review Panel (2021). The panel gathered data, both qualitative and quantitative, for not only the HWDSB but also for the Hamilton community and government to address bullying (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). The panel made 11 recommendations following the report. The recommendations were aimed towards students, parents/guardians/caregivers, schools, the HWDSB organization at a system level, the Hamilton community, and Ministry of Education (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). For this reason, it is important to make direct comparisons between the recommendations of the panel to the results of this MRP. While this MRP did have a specific focus of the policies used by the HWDSB, the recommendations the panel made can be applied to members of the Catholic board as well.

The Safe Schools: Bullying Prevention and Intervention Review Panel (2021) recommended the development of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). MTSS was outlined within the literature review. The literature illustrated that this type of support is

beneficial in shifting negative behaviour, like bullying from occurring (Njelesani et al., 2020).

As illustrated in Chapter 4, MTSS is indirectly referenced within the bullying policies and

supporting documents of the HWCDSB. Elements are present; however, many of these elements

are not specific action requirements but more so suggestions or guidelines that teachers,

educators, and principals can adapt within classrooms/schools. Thus, it would be beneficial for

the HWCDSB to directly adopt this approach within the board as this approach not only acts as a

preventative measure but can be used to intervene as well. This approach is reflective of the

ecological model as it looks to shift culture and ideology within a school to stop behaviour from

reoccurring.

      The panel (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021) recommended that there should be an increase

in student ownership as well as further inclusion of the student perspective. They expanded by

stating that students are not blank slates; they have expertise and value. The HWCDSB bullying

policies also do not incorporate student ownership and perspective. Indirect reference is made

when policies state that every student deserves to have a safe learning environment. Students can

also be used in a proactive manner to prevent bullying through peer mentorship and conflict

resolution. However, the literature review outlines how these initiatives do not necessarily have

the intended effect (Bauman, 2008; Gaffney et al., 2021; PREVNet, 2017; Whitley et al., 2018).

Thus, it could be beneficial for the board to adopt this recommendation as well. This can be

beneficial for victims of bullying as they can give input and make recommendations on how to

make the school environment safe for them and how to shift the school culture of thinking which

can help prevent future incidents of bullying, thus incorporating an ecological lens. This can also

be reflective in MTSS, incorporating students/student voices helps give initiatives with an

initiative school approach to preventing bullying (Njelesani et al., 2020).

The panel recommended that parents/guardians or caregivers be more involved in not only responding to bullying behaviour but preventing it as well (HWDSB Safe Schools. 2021), another avenue of MTSS (Njelesani et al., 2020). Parents can be great resources as they know their child best, thus they should be incorporated especially when trying to shift a behaviour from occurring. This can be difficult to do when expectations are different at school versus at home. Thus by including them, a more cohesive plan can be created. It is important for resources and information to be shared. Parental/guardian involvement is outlined within the policies of the HWCDSB. When using progressive discipline, a model adopted by the HWCDSB, parents may become involved to stop a behaviour (HWCDSB, 2016, 2022b); however, their involvement is not mandatory. It is at the discretion of the teacher and administration how quickly parents will be involved, or how much involvement there will be. Involvement can range from a call home to bringing the parent to the school. When behavioural issues begin to arise, especially bullying behaviour, it would be beneficial to have mandatory parental involvement or more of it. Bullying is complex and has long-lasting effects. Factors present not only in school but also at home can be influencing a child's behaviour (Auerbach et al., 2014). The interactions between a child's teacher and parent are part of the mesosystem (Espelage, 2014). Therefore, it is important to create and have positive interactions to help the child, their development, and shift negative behaviour.

Providing support for schools so they can all create their own bullying prevention and intervention plans was another recommendation made by the panel (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). The HWCDSB has adopted this approach. What is interesting is that the panel states that in this case the HWDSB should give "time, information, tools and resources" to each school so that they can create, implement and "evaluate their own school-led, student-centred bullying prevention and intervention plans" (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021, p. 8). It is unclear what the

involvement of the HWCDSB is in the creation of the plans. Within the policies it was only stated who will review the plans and how often. The recommendation further stipulated that the plans "should use the PREVNet whole-school approach (Pepler & Craig, 2014) and draw from specialized bullying supports and resources as needed" (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021, p. 8). This could also be beneficial for the HWCDSB to adapt. A whole school approach and up to date resources are also part of the MTSS approach.

Making sure that policies and procedures are consistently followed was recommended (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). Some policies analyzed within the critical policy and document analysis outlined how often the policies were to be reviewed. Some of the documents were outdated. Other documents did not provide dates of renewal. Having multiple versions of documents available to review and use can lead to inconsistent practices, which can result in bullying behaviour continuing. Additionally, the policies did include subjective language. Depending on what the beliefs are of the teacher and/or the administration different steps can be taken to try and stop behaviour from occurring. What one school deems necessary for severe intervention of a behaviour, another may not. Additionally, schools are all able to create their own bullying prevention, intervention, and safety plans. This can lead to further inconsistent practices. The overarching board policies made no reference of how consistency among schools and their prevention plans are carried out. A template was mentioned but further detail was not provided. Thus, it may be beneficial for the board to create more stipulations to help ensure there is consistency in the carrying out of bullying policies and procedures; for example, making certain interventions or initiatives mandatory.

A recommendation of having a firm foundation for a culture of sharing was made (HWDSB, 2021). The panel asserts that the "HWDSB create a commitment statement with clear and measurable goals" (HWDSB, 2021, p. 9). These goals should be specific to bullying

prevention and intervention. They should assist in creating organizational values that embrace a culture of caring. The goals should develop continual monitoring and transparent reporting processes specific to bullying and positive school climate. The goals should be created with students (HWDSB, 2021, p. 9). The concept of respect is present throughout the HWCDSB policies. Documents directly state that every child within the school deserves respect and to have a safe learning environment, how bullying and bullying behaviour are not tolerated, and how a whole school approach is needed to stop bullying. However, specific information outlining how a whole school approach will be adapted and carried out is never expanded upon. Adopting this recommendation would be beneficial as it can help shift the culture of thinking within the school. As the literature review showed, students who attended schools where a supportive school climate existed, were more likely to seek help from teachers for bullying (Eliot et al., 2010). Thus, by involving students and having set goals this can help create a more supportive school climate. Positive school climate has been found to have less instances of bullying (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023).

The panel recommended that the HWDSB needs to work with a wide range of community partners (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). These partnerships should develop within and across Hamilton. The partnership can help address bullying and build a positive school climate. The HWCDSB refers to community partners, but specifics are not provided. No specific games are given nor is information provided on how the community partners with the school. Therefore, it would be interesting to see the type of relationships and partnerships the HWCDSB has with community partners.

Recommendations for Improving the HWCDSB's Policies on Bullying

Following the commencement of the critical policy and document analysis, recommendations for improving the bullying policy of the HWCDSB are presented. These recommendations are based on the analysis and rooted in the literature.

Expanding the Definition of Bullying

The *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a) extends the bullying definition to include that bullying behaviour can be "repeated or occur one time and can be carried out by an individual or group of individuals" (p. 2). The original definition is broader and states that bullying is a "typically repeated behaviour." Other documents that include a definition of bullying should be updated to include this addition.

As the literature stated, there are different types of bullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Depending on the type of bullying (physical, social, cyber), more than one perpetrator can be partaking in the bullying behaviour. With the creation of technology, the perpetrator does not even need to be present when the aggressive behaviour is being carried out (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Studies have found that a person's self-esteem can be affected by bullying (Baumeister et al., 1996; Choi & Park, 2018). When a person becomes a victim of bullying, they may start to feel threatened (Hunter et al., 2007) and look for ways to restore their self-esteem (Choi & Park, 2018), which may result in victims becoming bullies themselves (Baumeister et al., 1996). This is also not a behaviour nor incident you want repeated. Therefore, the extension of the definition in *Policy Manual – Students* (2022a), while more specific, does not make the definition too broad as it is now clearly stated that the behaviour does not need to be repeated for it to be considered bullying. For example, spreading a rumour or threatening to spread a rumour that has harmful consequences in hopes of exerting power over an individual is not something that should be repeated.

Providing Specific Examples and Guidelines

The HWCDSB bullying policies provide information outlining overarching information of policies, however, more information can be provided when discussing specific strategies or programs the board wants schools to incorporate.

The Hamilton community wants strong and clear bullying policies and procedures (HWDSB Safe Schools, 2021). Policies themselves hold information that illustrates how they are meant to be implemented and interpreted (Cardno, 2018). Acting at a macrolevel, different environments and contexts can influence a bullying policy which in turn can influence how a child behaves (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, the consequences of implementing a policy are related to how a policy is carried out and how those who are using the policy make sense of it (Ryan, 1994). When trying to implement a policy, it is important to consider barriers for that policy to be implemented effectively. Not being specific in the information provided can be a barrier. For example, when listing preventative strategies that schools can implement only the names of the programs or strategies are listed: Roots of Empathy, student leadership initiatives, second step violence prevention programs, restorative practice program, et cetera (HWCDSB, 2013, 2023d). This may impede the implementation of the policy as staff may not know what the different programs are or not know how they can be implemented. Staff may not know where to begin with implementation or use of different steps.

Additionally, providing more concrete information or timelines for reporting of bullying incidents to a principal may also be beneficial. While teachable moments do occur and teachers are meant to use behaviour management within their classrooms to deal with incidents, the policies may benefit by providing guidelines for when a teacher should reach out for help/report an incident. By talking to other staff, they can learn new strategies or information to help them stop a behaviour. Alternatively, speaking to a principal can help them begin the reporting and investigation process. By not providing specific guidelines this can make the policy become ineffective as teachers and educators are not using it correctly.

Mandatory Interprofessional Collaboration

The policies outline that proper support may be provided by the board. Additionally, when discussing the steps of progressive discipline, the policy provides examples of steps that they can take to stop the behaviour, some steps suggest seeking consultation with relevant support staff, referral for counselling and community programs, involvement, or referral to outside agencies (HWCDSB, 2022b). However, the language used in the policy does not allude to the fact that interprofessional collaboration will be used for every instance of bullying, since it is used at the discretion of the staff and principal dealing with the situation.

Throughout a day, a teacher holds a lot of responsibility, which can make it difficult for them to attend to and manage each individual student's needs every day (Ekornes, 2015; Hornby & Atkinson, 2003). Certain things can get overlooked or missed; for example, bullying, as this is a non-academic issue (Studer & Mynatt, 2015). Bullying does not always have physical evidence of it occurring, which can make it difficult to prove leading to teachers not properly dealing with the behaviour (Michiels et al., 2008; Murray-Close et al., 2007; Rubin et al., 2006). Moreover, bullying can fall under the umbrella of mental health. Teachers are not equipped nor properly trained to deal with mental health (Borg & Drange, 2019). They do not have the ability to diagnose different factors that can be causing a child to act a certain way or diagnose the effects of bullying within a child, they can only manage the situations (Borg & Drange, 2019). Teachers may also not have the confidence to go about starting an investigation dealing with mental health concerns (Reinke et al., 2011). Therefore, having trained professional help can be beneficial as they can help assess the situation and see if the bullying has had some effect on the child, or if there are factors causing a child to act a certain way. Bullying has long lasting effects, thus it is

important to implement intervention early, so that strategies can be put into place to minimize the effects of bullying (Beduna & Perrone-McGovern, 2019; Graff, 2020; Sweeting et al., 2020).

Consistent and Up-to-Date Information

The HWCDSB posts all its policies on the board website. They can be accessed by anyone. Different policies and different versions of policies are posted on different pages. Thus, depending on the page a person finds first, the information they are referencing or following can be outdated or not the current board practices. The HWCDSB should put focus into keeping information current, updated, and centralized for easy access and better implementation.

According to Cardno (2018), a policy needs to be evaluated to determine if it is working to achieve the purpose for which it was created or if changes need to be made. Some policies and supporting documents clearly had a date indicating the next time the policy is meant to be evaluated. Other documents gave no such indication. Policies within the HWCDSB are used to solve problems, in this case bullying. The policies act as tools that once implemented act as guidelines which help align beliefs and actions of the population they are directed towards (Ruiz Estrada & Park, 2018). Specifically looking at educational policy, many policies provide important resources needed for educational endeavors (Alexander, 2013; Razik & Swanson, 2001). Outdated policies still live on the website or having similar but different versions of documents available to the public increase the possibility that the policies may not be properly implemented or carried out. Policies and policy documents need to be easy to find, and easy to read and understand (Vaill et al., 2020). If information is missing, inconsistent, difficult to find, and outdated, then victims and others wishing to report bullying may not be inclined to do so, as the policy is not clear (Vaill et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

This MRP examined bullying policies and supporting documents within the HWCDSB. After conducting a critical policy and document analysis, I have made several recommendations for future research.

Future research could compare the bullying intervention and prevention plans of the different schools within the HWCDSB. I kept the scope of the study small by looking at the provincial- and board-level bullying policies all schools must follow. The individual plans may provide more insight on how individual schools manage and prevent bullying and if the plans are reflective of the school community and populations. Insight could also be provided on safety plans for victims of bullying within the school.

When analyzing the documents, it was found that students can be suspended more than once for bullying. Future research could examine how many children are suspended multiple times for bullying to examine what factors are causing them to continue the behaviour. Different factors such as school and home life can be examined.

Future research can investigate if existing programs such as the SNAP program or programs run by the John Howard Society can be adapted and implemented within the HWCDSB in dealing with and addressing bullying so that suspension and ineffective practices are not relied upon to manage and eliminate bullying.

Concluding Thoughts

This MRP has given me the opportunity to explore and analyze bullying policies within the HWCDSB through an ecological systems theory lens. My research questions looked to examine how HWCDSB policy contributes to how bullying is understood within the HWCDSB and how HWCDSB's bullying policy compares to best practices identified in the literature. Even

though the HWCDSB bullying policies show that the board has a strong understanding of what bullying is and does take steps to address it; the board does not use the best practices to property intervene and stop the behaviour from reoccurring. Not to mention, the board has different but similar documents on different pages of their website. This can make it difficult to implement and or follow the policies.

Policies are not meant to be static; they must evolve as society does. Policies are influenced by the environment in which they are situated. Therefore, it is my hope that this research contributes to the bodies of work on critical policy and document analysis, bullying and school bullying policy through an ecological systems theory and helps illustrate that bullying while complex can be managed so that school environments are safer for everyone.

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