

# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Mary Hosey-Pardi

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Thomas McLaughlin, Committee Chairperson, Social Work Faculty

Dr. Mary Larscheid, Committee Member, Social Work Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Social Isolation and Bullying in Central New York Schools

An Action Research Project

by

Mary Hosey-Pardi

MSW, Syracuse University, 1999

BSW, Syracuse University, 1998

Proposal Submitted

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

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## Abstract

Students who are bullied often have lifelong issues, such as depression, anxiety, and a negative outlook on life. Bullied students may avoid school because they feel unsafe. This action research study incorporated ecological theory as the lens to explore how social workers describe current school programming around bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation to meet the needs of middle-school students and what recommendations they had to address unmet needs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six school social workers from Central New York. Findings identified through thematic analysis suggest the current programs do not make the desired impact. Participants recommended programs focused on building staff-student relationships as key in combatting middle school bullying and social isolation. Findings from this study may be used to create positive social change by encouraging school administrators and social workers create vital staff-student connection programs, resulting in a school climate where students feel safe and have trusted adults with whom to interact.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to all the social workers in Central New York that work in the school setting. They are overworked, taking on endless caseloads and responsibilities to ensure students are adequately supported socially and emotionally.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my parents who have instilled hard work and the importance of education in me from a very young age. They have supported me tremendously throughout my life. I solely credit them for my love of learning. My mother has spent endless hours proofreading all my work for many years. My father and my husband have given me much assistance with word, power point and other computer technology. Also, to my husband who has believed in me and had to take on enormous responsibilities while I embarked on this long journey. Without them I am certain I would not have been able to complete this study. Lastly, to my younger brother who is also an MSW, he has helped me emotionally and academically throughout this long process. Without them I am certain I would not have been able to complete this study. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge all of the professors at Walden University. I would especially like to thank my chairs Dr. Tom McLaughlin and Dr. Mary Larscheid without their support I would not be here. I am also greatly appreciative of all the resources that have been made available to me. The support of every level at Walden University has truly made this study possible.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation are increasing problems at schools in the United States. School A took bullying seriously, adhered to the laws in New York State, and was creative at using different programs to address this problem. However, this issue is much greater than one school in Central New York. Identifying what programs adequately combat bullying, cyberbullying and social isolation stand to benefit many students across schools at all levels.

Finkelhor et al. (2016) reported that a survey revealed nearly 50% of students have been exposed to harassment at school. This contributes to social issues and bullying in the school system. In addition, there has been a significant increase in school violence across the United States (McLeigh, 2015). This was seen in the news regularly prior to COVID-19 when schools were physically in session violence had increased. Once schools resumed in-person after the COVID-19 lockdown, violence again since has increased. Numerous violent incidents are the direct result of bullying, harassment, and overall social isolation (Start with Hello, 2018).

School A uses Rachael's Challenge, The Positivity Project, and Start with Hello to improve bullying. Two programs have been created in response to school violence that have taken the lives of students (Rachel's Challenge, 2018; Start with Hello, 2018). Rachael's Challenge seeks to transform schools into a more caring community by encouraging acts of kindness through various projects based on altruism both in and outside of the school setting.

This program also teaches students to stand up to bullying (Rachael's Challenge, 2018). School A paid the Rachel's Challenge program instructors to come to the campus on two occasions to train staff and students. The training consisted of how both students and staff can use kind and consistent words as well as creating a chain reaction through acts of kindness. They also taught students in easy, simple ways on how to be up-standers and not bystanders. This was an expensive program to fund; for all students to benefit from this program an inclusive presentation should occur approximately every 3 to 4 years. Rachael's Challenge is considered a program that uses social emotional learning. The goal was to ensure all the students are learning the curriculum since each year a new class moves into the sixth grade. Currently, it is advisable for the school to hire another presentation/training to keep the momentum and the expectations understandable for the students.

The Start with Hello program was developed after the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. It is also referred to as The Sandy Hook Promise the parents of students who died started in order to protect other students by teaching youth possible warning signs of troubled youth, as well as bringing unification among integral staff who have deep vested interest in students safety and overall well-being. Start with Hello specifically aims to combat social isolation and in turn reduces violence in the school (Start with Hello, 2018). The program is free, and it provides several resources online. The main three steps are, see someone alone, reach out and help, and start with hello. Many additional strategies are available to help those students who may be suffering in silence as well as those who may notice concerns and do not speak up.

Based on these resources, creative activities have been used such as hosting multiple days of mix it up at lunch for the middle school. Mix it up encourages students to sit at different tables, and conversation cards are there to facilitate communication. The mix it up gets the activities started and the goal was to give opportunities to the students who do not know one another to learn they may have something in common. For the activity to be most inclusive, high school students would volunteer and help the middle school students engage. This was positive as in that the older students are looked up to by the younger students and the older students assisted in helping with the various conversation topics as this new exercise was unfamiliar.

The Positivity Project encourages the use of positive words, tone, and appropriate social media use with others, encouraging peers, and overall demonstrating the identified character strengths (Positivity Project, 2018). This program is teaching and reinforcing character education. One presentation has occurred for the school body and additional trainings also took place for faculty and staff. In addition, meetings were held with both staff and students to explore ways to build on the program and reach potential students who have low engagement with the program.

For a short time in the spring of 2019 We Isolate No-one (WIN) was incorporated into the existing programs. WIN consists of chapters in the school to combat social isolation and bullying and has a 24-hour hotline for help (WIN, 2019). Trained personnel run a phone line that is set up for students to report acts of bullying if they are uncomfortable or scared in their respective school settings. Then someone from the program reaches out to the school with the report to help resolve the issue.

However, this program has lost relevancy due to emphasis on other programs such as Rachel's Warriors, The Positivity Project, and Start with Hello. In addition, the brother of the shooter in the brutal attack on Majory Stoneman Douglas High School, Zachery Cruz, started this program with good intentions but it has lost momentum.

In 2017, School A conducted a climate survey throughout elementary, middle, and high school. The outcome of this specific survey was that there was a need for a more inclusive environment where students feel a more social-emotional connection in the middle school. This study provided drive for this action research project.

Since 2017, there has not been a follow up survey; this may be due to COVID-19 and all of the school complications that came with it. The survey indicated that a more comprehensive program which encompasses all students is necessary to serve the entire study body. This action research project is necessary in determining the correct program or programs as well as the proper methodology to address the clear gap in school social work service. As seen in this school district, several programs are in place or have been used, yet it is unclear, and we do not know the direct value it brings to the entire student body at this time.

School A who conducted their survey a follow up to the 2015 Oneida County Tap Survey where 14 schools participated. School A intended to gather detailed information on the specific school with the goal of identifying student needs. The Tap Survey found that one in 10 students felt they had fewer than two friends in school. One in 25 felt that they had no friends in school. Also, 12% felt they were constantly bullied, this was a decline from the 2011 and 2003 surveys.

Additionally, 15% reported being cyberbullied. This affected female students two times more than male students (Oneida County Teen Assessment Survey, 2015). Since 2015 no other surveys have been given. I assume that COVID-19 impacted the follow-up survey as these are normally conducted every 5 years. The Tap Survey is the only local survey available that includes the Central New York area.

Brandão (2020) referenced the impact bullying has on students who are subjected to bullying and those who have been a witness to bullying. There is the possibility of long-term residual effects from this as these students tend to have lower self-esteem, as well as more mental health issues. The school programming that is being sought stands to combat bullying and in turn help both victims and witnesses. Oftentimes being a witness can also bring about emotions of guilt or fear.

Cecen-Celik and Keith (2019) discussed gender differences with bullying and discovered female students were more apt to be a victim of rumors and rumors can be equally as painful but not as obvious. Rumors are reported less frequently, and this further supports the need for students to have emotional connections with adults in school to disclose this information as opposed to suffering in silence. All school staff should be attuned to the surroundings and chatter amongst the student body to combat rumors.

Since the start of this action research project the global pandemic of COVID-19 occurred 2020. School A was closed from March 2020 until September of 2020. In the fall of 2020, students either attended in-person (hybrid coming in 2 days per week and learning remote for 3 days), or students/parents had the choice to take all classes on-line. School once again closed in December 2020 until February of 2021.

Once school was back in session the set-up was again in-person, hybrid 2 days per week with on-line learning for 3 days, or students could remain on-line only. This presented great problems not only for me but for students dealing with severe anxiety, loneliness, ill family members, death, and continued issues with social peer relations. My problems were that consistent school dynamics changed dramatically. School was not the same once it was fully resumed in person and even currently is running in a different way.

School did reopen full time in the fall of 2021, and it was hoped by staff that it will bring about some normalcy. At this time, it was expected students will be attending in-person only unless parents made the decision to homeschool. Masks and social distancing were required as recommended by the Center on Disease Control's guidelines. Since the New York State governor Kathy Hochul took office, she stressed the importance of students remaining in school and there was not another closure regardless of the growing COVID-19 variants.

Grooms and Childs (2021) discussed the implications on children as well as administrators in making decisions in the time of crisis. This pandemic with school closure affected more socioeconomically disadvantaged children in a negative way. Responsible choices need to be made that can serve all students. Martinez and Broemmel (2021) highlighted the tremendous stressors on educators in schools due to the global pandemic. These include the internet accessibility students have, food insecurity, and increasing mental health concerns (Martinez and Broemmel, 2021).

Burke et al. (2021) surveyed 978 adolescents during the school closure of 2020. The authors inquired if there had been an increased prevalence of cyberbullying due to the pandemic closure. The small study indicated there was not an increase in cyberbullying. All adolescents had an increase in social media use during this time. Due to COVID-19 and subsequent school closures, more research is recommended to be conducted to determine if cyberbullying did increase. It is possible that there were no changes in cyberbullying prevalence during the pandemic (Hysing et al, 2019).

I obtained literature for this study from various search engines offered in The Walden University library. I obtained specific information directly from School A. I also used the Tap Survey of 14 local schools in Central New York.

### **Problem Statement**

Bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation in schools, specifically middle schools, is an increasing problem that presents many social and mental health issues for students. Of school staff surveyed in an urban elementary school, 41% reported they feel bullying was a problem (Letendre et al. 2016). This lead The study to use 5 focus groups with teachers, administration and staff to examine the effectiveness of positive behavior intervention.

Students have a higher risk of suicidal ideation when they are victimized,. The percentage found was students who were victimized was 17.7% and 19% who had suicidal ideation out of a sample of 44,275 students from the United States (London and Ingram, 2018).



Students experience social isolation when they lack social interaction. This may be the choice of a student who prefers to remain alone, but is often due to various underlying issues such as purposeful isolation by peers. When social isolation is occurring, it is important for school staff to delve deeper into the matter to find a solution with the student. Jiang and Chen (2019) found that long-term instances of being ostracized contribute to depression in adolescents. Social isolation may seem normal and is often overlooked when it may be contributing to sadness and pain. Ingram and London (2018) stated that social isolation during the middle school years needs to be addressed with appropriate support in the school setting. The consequences of social isolation can be detrimental, including both mental and physical issues.

Students report wanting programs to combat the problems of bullying (Ybarra et al. 2019). School social workers are called upon to manage these programs as well as address bullying at all levels, including gossip, teasing, cyberbullying, and other nonphysical forms that may go unnoticed, according to Irimescu and Rădoi (2017). Social workers are faced with a great number of growing challenges and increased needs within the school setting, including prevention of student drop out (Weber, 2018). Also, one of the greatest concerns is monitoring the student's well-being due to social isolation, cyberbullying, and bullying. Determining what program or combination of programs are more effective is essential. The task of a social worker expands to much more than social-emotional and academics concerns. Interventions assist with unmet needs within the school population.

Although teachers and school counselors can build rapport with students, and this does bring much value the level of expertise utilized by social workers is advantageous to have insight into these types of issues thus combating the problem. Social workers are skilled in identifying self-harm and suicidal ideation which can come as a consequence of unaddressed bullying.

### **Social Workers in Schools**

Oftentimes caseloads for social workers are tremendous, not leaving much time to build proper rapport with students. This can cause a student to not seek help or disclose victimization in a counseling session. In turn, the student is suffering, and the problem persists without proper adult support. When students are not functioning well due to serious emotional distress, numerous areas of their lives are impacted (Nazir and Nesheen 2015).

Evangelio et al. (2022) covered the implications of cyberbullying and the deep impacts it has on student's well-being both in and out of the school setting. Cyberbullying includes a larger audience, and often involves ambiguity which can fuel more participants. Students who are cyberbullied have negative school experiences and psychological trauma including suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, and a decrease in grades (Irimescu and Rădoi (2017). There is no escape when brutal rumors and harassment are online and accessed by many peers who may also engage thus making the problem much worse. Cyberbullying is relatively new in the school setting, and it is another issue school social workers must address and balance while handling a multitude of other issues.

DePaolis (2015) discussed how social workers can use their specific skills to address cyberbullying, but the research group indicated over half felt ill-equipped to handle these situations. Adequate training must be in place for social workers to best support students who are victims of cyberbullying.

Social isolation, bullying, and cyberbullying put students at a greater risk to experience depression, not graduate, act out violently, commit self-harm, or commit suicide (Hysing et al. 2019). Patalay and Fitzsimons (2018) discussed various mental health issues increasing for youth with one of the reasons cited being the lack of school connectedness. The definition of school connectedness is the extent that students feel they are cared for in the school environment. In this case, students who feel a stronger connection or are more connected would be more apt to get adult assistance if they felt victimized. Connell et al. (2019) found that positive school climate decreased the incidents of bullying. If students feel adults are unconcerned, they will suffer in silence. Vergara et. al (2019) contend that both suicide attempts as well as self-injurious behavior are a problem in adolescents that are victims and perpetrators. It is imperative that school social workers are tuned into and addressing all the students' needs. Also, considerations in programming should both benefit the victim, bystander and perpetrator.

Rodelli et al. (2018) specifically described cyberbullying as a probable cause for adolescent suicidal ideation and attempts. It is advisable to have effective programs in place to address this issue. There is a lack of emotional support programs in Central New York. This often makes assisting students a challenging task.

Improved support would include access to adequate counseling and referrals to outside agencies (this can include support for family-related matters). Another valuable aspect of adding staff into the school system is mentorship, as this can greatly help students lacking solid relational bonds with adults. Heiser (2018) reported that one in five school children are identified as having a mental health disorder. In addition, oftentimes mental health issues appear before the age of 24 and adolescence is a unique age where various hormonal changes occur, this coupled with bullying can drastically impact a student emotionally (Blakemore, 2019). To support students, school social workers must also work to address social isolation, cyberbullying, and bullying. Making the job even more complex is the fact that increasing acts of school violence are also intertwined with these issues (Cuellar and Theriot, 2017).

### **Climate Survey School A**

School A conducted a Comprehensive School Climate Survey in June of 2017. This survey was given to students, parents, staff, and community members. The survey results indicated an area of concern was in the middle school regarding “social-emotional security,” based on the student’s responses. Social-emotional security in this survey was defined as students that had experienced or witnessed verbal abuse, harassment, and exclusion in the school setting (National School Climate Center, 2017).

When examining students who are victims and perpetrators of bullying, there are discrepancies among sexes. Donoghue and Raia-Hawrylak (2016) spoke to differences between male and female students as female tend to use social aggression and male students use physical aggression.

While trying to combat this problem, all aspects of aggression and potential violence must be taken into consideration. Researchers will need close examination to be used when managing the problems with each individual student as their case may present unique circumstances.

The gap in the social work practice indicates that the programs in place within schools do not seem to be deterring the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation (National Climate Survey, 2017). These problems in the schools are interconnected in that as stated previously they interfere with the student's ability to have a positive scholastic and social experience. In addition, bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation greatly impact the over-all mental well-being of students.

### **Purpose Statement**

When looking at School A there are many different programs in place that seek to combat the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. However, determining what program is most effective is essential. Schools should be a comfortable, safe environment for children, but the increased incidents of bullying, social isolation, and cyberbullying have greatly impacted children on a multitude of levels.

One program, Rachael's Challenge, teaches when another student intervenes the bullying stops (Rachael's Challenge, 2018). This is referred to as being an upstander. The issues with this program are how to maximize all the available support services, use impactful programs, and to teach staff how to properly intervene. Addressing these issues directly may close a major gap in social work practice. However, there are a limited number of social workers and counselors in school settings.

Social workers cannot stand alone in addressing this growing problem. All staff must be educated and committed to assist in combatting these issues. Valuable programs that are effective should be made available to fight this problem. Specific guidelines should be given as well on how to implement the program or programs deemed impactful. Best practices for supporting students in the school setting include providing tools to social workers who will fill the gaps in practice and in turn bring about positive social change. Samara et al. (2020) contended that practitioners are best suited to lead programming. Although this is a team effort with all staff social workers, given their expertise they should serve as leaders in the program.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions in this study were:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do social workers describe the impact of current in school programming that address the needs of middle school age students who have experienced bullying, cyberbullying, or social isolation?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What school programming recommendations do social workers have to address the unmet needs of middle school age students who have experienced bullying, cyberbullying or social isolation and what suggestions can be made on how to add more social supports into the school setting?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): How do social workers view the impact of COVID-19 regarding the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation?

### **Definition of Terms**

*Bullying:* Connell et al. (2019) defined bullying as, any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm (pp 395).

*Cyberbullying:* McHugh et. al. (2019) defined cyberbullying as, “bullying that takes place using technology, includes similar tactics found in traditional bullying as well as unique approaches such as viral repetition” (pp 97).

*Social isolation:* Ingram and London (2018) defined social isolation as, the sensed absence of feeling socially connectedness both during childhood and adolescence..

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a qualitative methodology with an action research design for this study. The action research is a collaborative effort with 6 fellow master’s level social workers, as the goal is for positive social change through this experience. The methodology will be the use of information taken from one-on-one individual interviews with local social workers with some whom I have known professionally.

The group of practitioners are social workers from Central New York. Everyone in the group has a vested interest in the issue of bullying, cyberbullying and social isolation.

The social workers either currently work in the school setting, or have worked in the school setting, and or treat students from the area in the clinical setting. The social workers have a wide breadth of experience which will bring value to the study.

They are experienced social workers that were able to provide feedback on the programs in place at School A as well as make comparisons to their individual programs and other programs (formal and informal) they may have experience with.

Moran and Gutman (2020) support the use of interviews to provide valuable feedback as qualitative research. Although this study focused on the health field, the purpose was to improve the care and knowledge when working with children and adolescents (Morgan and Gutman, 2020). These types of interview sessions provide valuable insight with the study. Using interviews to explore the understanding of the existing programming and addressing the needs of middle school aged students who have experienced bullying, cyberbullying, or social isolation and discover recommendations for unresolved needs. The interviews were open-ended discussion with specific questions geared toward the best programming and ways to combat these issues.

The social work individual interview meetings included one current social worker currently at School A, and one who just retired after 30 years and had played an integral role in the initial climate survey in 2017. This social worker was able to give valuable insight regarding the issues at hand. In addition, the other social workers are all local to the area and were able to give insight specific to their locality and the problems of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation they've encountered in their practice.



The meetings took place virtually via Zoom and were 30-60 minutes in length, audiotaping was conducted.

### **Significance of the Study**

Caffrey (2019) supported the assertion that on-line bullying has become prevalent with various on-line platforms. Evidence of the problem cyberbullying has become indicates 59% of American teens reported being subjected to bullying via social media (Caffrey, 2019). This study determined which types of traumas from bullying caused suicide, social isolation, anxiety, depression, and other stress related disorders. The mental health issues from bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation create further difficulties in the school setting and these issues are challenging for school social workers to adequately manage. It is important to educate school staff to recognize and intervene when bullying occurs as it is detrimental to the students. Unaddressed bullying can cause disengagement from school.

Students who have experienced cyberbullying are at a higher risk for suicidal ideation, which can be attributed to sadness, loneliness and in turn cause more social isolation. Addressing this serious issue, the gap in social work will be filled by putting appropriate programming in place to assist these students. In turn, it is proposed that positive social change will occur if students feel safe in school, are actively engaged in their education, and have less stressful encounters (Gomes et al. 2020).

My findings have the ability to propose successful programming and or interventions that would decrease this growing problem among students. Allen (2015) utilized a study that interviewed students on their perceptions of bullying.

These students do not consider drama and conflict bullying. However, they did point out people who are fake friends are really being bullies. They also view negative behavior towards a vulnerable peer as bullying. Keeping student's various perspectives in mind is an important aspect when determining the best programming to utilize. Students also need to be committed to any proposed programs for the program to fully make an impact.

Espelage et al. (2015) contends that with proper anti-bullying programming in the schools as well as consistency, students gain more in the educational setting. In turn, they will lead more productive lives. The impact of these changes indicates that social work practice can positively affect students. This research supports professional practice through appropriate school programming. Cascardi et al. (2018) discussed that more consistent laws need to be in place due to the prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying. At the time of the study, all 50 states had legislation in place to combat bullying. These policies are at the state level, not federal, and there is confusion whereas some did not include cyberbullying which can be highly detrimental to students given the nature of constant online access.

Healy (2020) reported that victims of bullying have increased risk of suicidal behavior and depression however the peer defense model may not be the correct program to assist the victim. On the contrary, a peer acting in defense can backfire, making the victim feel worse about the situation. Instead, the use of a program to help victims stand up for themselves is proposed. This is contrary to the Rachel's Challenge programs philosophy and indicates more analysis must be done to determine the most effective programming (Rachel's Challenge, 2018)

Further research is needed to determine which support systems and programs are currently available and what assistance is currently in schools, as well as how additional support could be added. Expansion and streamlining of programs for students can assist in building trust for them to open-up about bullying. Teachers and all staff should be trained and engaged with all programs in the school that address bullying and social isolation. Also, school social workers should assess and refer to the appropriate outside resources as needed.

The intention of this research is to determine which programs, combination of programs and or strategies will be of assistance to combat bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation in the school setting. Based on the increased incidents of bullying, cyberbullying and social isolation, and the number of mental health issues associated with bullying there is a gap in social work support. Identifying the needs of students and addressing these issues could bring about positive social change in the school climate. Without the proper programming correct implementation cannot be put in place.

Rapee et al. (2020) discussed a study from Australia where bullying in schools continues to be a problem, leading to detrimental mental health issues when it is unaddressed. These authors examined schools for 2 years where whole school wide prevention programs were in place as well as targeting anti-bullying programs. Results did not show significant decreases in comparison to the control group. This theory supports analyzing varying programs to ensure effectiveness.

Gaffney (2019) reported when proper programming is in place cyberbullying decreased by 14-15%.

However, currently there is not enough research to indicate what program is most effective. This research did not examine a consistent approach to speak further on this. Therefore, more feedback from other social workers stands to be beneficial to assess the effectiveness of the specific programs.

McHugh et al. (2019) reported that the use of twitter has contributed to cyberbullying. Students who are cyberbullied are more apt to experience depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and anger issues. They are also at a higher risk to smoke, use alcohol and engage in self-harm. Twitter's public nature can exacerbate the bullying as it can spread hateful and abusive terminology about a student so quickly. The authors advise using twitter in positive way with information sharing such as cyberbullying prevention as well as the civil use of social media.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Ecological theory is utilized in this study as this theory encompasses all aspects of the student's lives at the micro, mezo, and macro levels. The environmental factors in the lives of students contribute to their actions in the school setting and are intertwined with bullying and social isolation. All these factors must be taken into consideration to fully understand the dynamics of student behavior. It includes all students, both bullies and victims.

Ecological theory looks at a deeper level into the various factors that students face beyond school. Crosby (2015) reported the importance of using ecological theory in the school setting as this is the most comprehensive approach especially when children have trauma related issues.

Trauma issues impact students deeply on various levels and interface with responses to bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. This can also be ingrained in the reason why students are perpetrators.

Gu, et al. (2021) discussed how ecological theory is essential in understanding the prevalence of cyberbullying. Children need to be examined in the context of their surroundings both in and out of school. This includes the family dynamics in the home, the community, and additional experiences the child has had exposure to. Parenting seems to play a role for both victims and perpetrators in that these parents do not closely monitor internet usage.

Lauricella and Cingel (2020) use ecological theory in examining the family system and how parents use of media impacts children at the micro level. The children of parents who model positive media use tend to have positive media use habits. Whereas the children of parents who do not model positive media use tend to have poor media use habits. The lens that the authors are using is that of Bronfrenbrenner; he is considered a pioneer in ecological theory. Bronfrenbrenner indicates all systems at every level play a critical and vital role in children's lives beyond school. DePaolis (2015) agrees that addressing cyberbullying in schools' ecological theory is the best approach as it considers all levels students function within. Examining students in the context of just school is only a snapshot of their lives.

Dente and Coles (2012) discussed the importance of ecological theory in assisting transitioning students who are on the autism spectrum.

These students can also be a target due to differences in the way they communicate. It is vital that all staff understand autism in order to best support these students. The use of ecological theory by social workers truly encompasses the person in environment framework. Using this lens allows for exploration and collaboration to meet all the needs the student presents.

Ecological theory also considers student's that have more vulnerabilities, like the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) population as well as others considered at-risk. These students indicated in a survey by the Trevor Project, 2019 showed a higher degree of suicidality as well as mental health issues (Price-Feeney et al. 2021). It is imperative for staff to be aware of those students who are victims of abuse or neglect in the home, this can impact them on many levels, not only in the school setting (Lidchi and Wiener 2020). Being a victim in the home can translate into students being passive and victims in the school or acting out aggressively being perpetrators.

Ferguson and Evans, (2019) discussed the value in ecological theory when looking at children as this multidimensional approach considers issues much deeper than the school setting alone. Ferguson and Evans reported these levels include the microsystem, which is described as a person functioning within their families and friendship groups. Mesosystem is described as the context in which the child is interacting with people in their life, such as family or teachers. Exosystem revolves around the child's surroundings where they do not participate, but are still a part of, and how these surroundings impact them.

Finally, the macrosystem is the larger context in which the child exists, which can be culture, poverty, and community (Ferguson and Evans, 2019). An example would be if a child who is socioeconomically disadvantaged being more of a target for bullying due to this factor. It can be related to dress, hygiene, and social status. To fully understand the dynamics this needs to be examined in the greater context of the school setting using ecological theory.

Another scenario for consideration using ecological theory is the parenting style in the home. Alonso-Stuyck (2019) discussed the importance of parenting with open communication. This can bring great value with bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation matters. If children can speak freely and gain support this may greatly assist them. Whereas, in other families who have weak communication children are unable to converse at home, they may feel very much alone in their school related struggles. Brockevelt et al. (2019) validate the person in environment approach (ecological theory) as this is essential when examining all facets of the children's physical and emotional well-being. Various factors beyond the school impact student's perception, framework and ultimately their experience in the school setting. Wu et al. (2019) discussed the value in using the "person in context", (meaning the environment, life experience and culture) as a comprehensive and in-depth approach when working with middle school students. Considerations were made to examine the student's risk, protective as well as promotive factors. The author examined the use of a positive action program in a middle school in which the students in the experimental group reported a boost in self-esteem as well as a

decrease in school squabbles. Assessing students from the in-school perspective only leaves much detail and pertinent information out.

Eriksson et al. (2018) discussed the use of ecological theory as it pertains to mental health issues, as settings in the environment impact the individual. This can be carried into the life of students as we continue to examine all aspects that are brought into the school community. Davies and Martin (2013) cover the impact of parental relationships on children. Using this perspective of the ecological theory students carry emotional issues into the school based on the existing problems in their households. Burns (2011) discussed the importance and value of ecological theory as the interconnectivity in the lives of children provides much value and insight into their frame of reference.

Chafouleas and Iovino, (2021) discuss children reaching their full potential when considerations are made by looking at all tiers of their lives. This is consistent with ecological theory in that no child exists in a vacuum, and we must be examining interconnections such as body, mind, and emotion. This is vital because children are seen and treated in a unique way taking all circumstances outside of the school into consideration. A child's reaction in the school setting may differ from his or her peers in that their own personal life setting causes them to view school in a different way. Just as these personal experiences can be negative there are also strategies to pull strengths from the child. Intersectionality also plays a role in this examination of all factors which influence children's lives.



Ecological theory can be used to view various assets the student has, as well as highlight both pre-existing and new programming that can be made available in the school to build the child up (Lerner et al. 2012). Rothfeder (2017) reported on the use of ecological theory not only in the individual's setting but in policy as well. Various policies should be inclusive and address the varying issues that are present. These policies can be vital in supporting the specific individual's needs.

Many links exist between all the various systems that intertwine and impact children's development. These are all complex interactions that involve families, schools, and neighborhoods. Similarly, Donoghue and Raia-Hawrylak (2016) support the ecological framework as the most desirable in schools to comprehensively address bullying. Many dynamics impact students in the school, home and community setting and all of these must be considered. The ecological theory examines these factors and include socioeconomic disadvantage, discrimination, parental incarcerations, drug use, abuse, and neglect. Dalhee et al. (2021) point to neglected students being more likely to become bully victims. Additionally, this leads to a greater risk for depression and suicidality.

According to Brabeck (2016) it is reported the impact of students who have parents that are not US citizens face various vulnerabilities. In examining the home, issues such as marital discord, socioeconomic disadvantage, as well as lack of health care contribute to social injustices. All these issues carry into the school setting in numerous ways. This further supports students and their families being examined in various contexts not simply a student in the school setting.

Ecological theory is the most comprehensive theory to ensure all aspects of student's lives are taken into consideration to best serve them in the school system. Trach et al. (2018) discussed ecological theory as being the most comprehensive when examining children in the school setting. This varying and fluid complex interaction that involves the person in the environment approach are essential in understanding children's perceptions. The authors also speaks to the use of social emotional learning to invoke positive change in the school setting.

### **Assisting At-Risk Students**

At my high school, school A, there is the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) which is in place to assist LGBTQIA+ students. Students are given a safe place and a voice for change. This came about decades ago with gay and lesbian students needing support. A teacher took the lead on his own to best support these students. Since then, it has evolved into a recognized club that is fully supported by administration and staff. Until December of 2020, this author served as a co-chair with an art teacher. Since my departure she advises this group alone. This group has appeared to be impactful as students have a safe place to meet and feel supported.

There was a meet and greet in June 2019 where the high school students were introduced to middle school students who might have an interest in the club. This eased the transition of middle school students entering high school who may have concerns about bullying related to their sexuality, dress, or gender identity. Utilizing peer support from older students was a great way to provide assurance that the high school would be a safe place and if issues arose both students and staff were there to help.

There have been numerous positive outcomes from this group's formation. A clause was added into the school board policy that no student would be discriminated against based on gender expression (School A Board of Education, 2021). This agreement occurred on December 18, 2019 and was later added into the board policy. During the 2018-2019 school year, changes were made to graduation cap and gown color choices; currently when ordering color, female is white, and male is maroon. Moving forward, students will have a choice of either color regardless of their biological gender. This is not a written board policy but rather an expectation of choice given by the senior class advisor. Since my departure more policies have been added for inclusion this includes the availability of gender-neutral bathrooms (School A Board of Education, 2021).

On January 16, 2020, a proposal was suggested via the GSA group to use gender neutral parent and guardian permission signature sheets. Previously they stated mother/guardian and father/guardian. This was sent in an email to the building principals for consideration. These types of modifications further improve the school climate with all students feeling supported at various levels. In turn this has the potential to open lines of communication with staff and students as well as reducing social isolation. Wood et al. (2016) discussed the importance of creating safe zones for LGBTQIA+ students not only in the classroom but in the entire school to help create a climate of inclusion. This environment of acceptance is very important in the school setting for students to feel welcome and comfortable.

## **Values and Ethics**

Social workers must always adhere to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2017). The specific principle that is most relevant to this study is 1.01 commitment to client's well-being as this study is meant to improve student's experiences in school. Principle number 1.03 that discusses informed consent is important if students are observed or are spoken to about their perspective.

Parents and staff should be notified and agree to any participation if applicable (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). Principle 1.07 covers privacy and confidentiality. Any information gained from the interviews have been kept private. Given the nature of the one-on-one interviews this was not necessary in regards to children. The participants names are coded by numbers and all information is kept confidential and secure.

Additionally, principle 5.02 speaks about the need for social workers to research and promote/improve social work services as well as to increase professional knowledge (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). Using this action research project to further close a social work gap serves to help the student body, the school community and beyond. This also further supports the use of informed consent. All participants signed the approved waivers, and School A was made aware of this process and the use of the school survey. Transparency is essential throughout this process.

## **Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

Bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation are increasingly more severe problems, and there are various programs to combat this growing issue. However, it is unclear what programming is truly effective.

The ultimate goal is to have a positive school climate where students feel safe and included. Barreda-Ángeles et al. (2021) noted the importance of using in-school programs with video. These videos showed bullying situations and ultimately increased empathy for the victim. In turn, this type of visual programming has the potential to decrease bullying. The viewing of the videos was intended to help students understand with empathy and in turn learn how to appropriately respond in these situations.

Programming has the potential to be successful with a combination of policies that align with no tolerance for bullying, as well as a strong administrative commitment. Gage et al. (2019) discussed the use of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports this programmatic approach to reduce bullying. Students that were surveyed had a broad perspective of bullying, which implies that a multitude of factors related to bullying should be addressed. The proactive program (school-wide positive behavior interventions) further supports examination of a variety of programming and possibly a mixture of supports to help students.

The problem of cyber bullying is often compounded by young students having free access to social media without parental oversight. Barlett and Fennel (2018) reveal that parents often do not have the same perceptions of children's on-line social media use. Parents and guardians may be shocked by their children's own cyberbullying. It is advisable to use education not only with students but also with parents. Teaching parents about social media monitoring on-line can be helpful in combatting this on-going problem. Byrne et al. (2016) addressed student's perceptions of what bullying consists of. This includes meanness and how they felt, as well as repetition.

The authors advise that programs are tailored to the elimination of those specific behaviors and again include educational material. Presumably when students are receiving adequate support in the school setting, they will be more successful in the school setting and ultimately in society. Students often avoid school due to bullying related issues and social workers as well as all staff must be attuned to these situations, while intervening to guarantee safety (Mulvey et al. 2018). Blust (2016) discussed the importance of using professional development with staff to have consistency with support programs among students. Education throughout the school to streamline programs is essential.

School faculty and staff should receive on-going training to adequately engage and support students' varying needs. These include assistance with social skills, strategies and support for anxiety and depression in the classroom as well as ways to handle bullying and exclusion. The programming must include regular and consistent education provided to students on the dangers of cyberbullying as well as appropriate ways to handle these situations. Schools that provide positive outlets to encourage social bonds for students with authority figures and have clear, consistent rules about bullying have less prevalence. This includes positive teacher and student relationship, which in turn creates a more positive school environment (Lehman, 2019). Ryan and Hurst (2021) found the use of young adult literature can assist with helping students understand bullying and roles such as bully, bystander, victim, and ally. This type of dialogue can be used to both educate and combat bullying.

At the prevention level various social skills can be taught to help students build relationships to ensure they are not feeling alone and left out. These skills can be taught in a group setting with peers or practiced with adults in school.

Schools have various inclusive sports and extra-curricular activities that reach all cross sections of the student population, which is essential. When students have connections outside the classroom, such as a club, it increases their sense of belonging. Coelho and Sousa (2021) discussed how bully-victims often have lower self-control and therefore this makes them a target. This notion ties into the importance of a comprehensive program to support all students and build social emotional skills on all levels.

Tang (2019) reported that cyberbullying is highly detrimental and often overlooked since it is not physical. Tang has proposed to teach students to become upstanders in the online and social media setting to combat the problem. Letendre et al. (2016) discussed the use of a positive behavioral intervention program in which all staff and students use consistent terminology and approaches to bullying. This includes a stop, talk, and walk approach for students to use in these situations. Additionally, training programming is integrated into the school's curriculum. Corral-Pernía, et al. (2018) analyzed if more physical activity could reduce instances of bullying and cyberbullying. However, their research was inconclusive, but this is a factor to consider when examining the configuration of effective programming.

Bystanders are witnesses of online bullying 90% of the time and with the proper education can teach students to intervene.

A United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) survey (2019) highlighted that as many as one in three students are a victim of cyberbullying, and that cyberbullying is a global problem impacting socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Students have skipped classes to avoid bullying that tends to enter the classroom setting. When bullying is examined, it is apparent when exclusion and social isolation occurs purposely and hurtfully, often increasing anxiety and depression. These are very serious symptoms and social workers must adequately address them. (Schoeler et al. 2018). Fischer et al. (2020) ruled out teacher's self-efficiency to intervene in bullying situations. It was determined this was not the case, rather teaching prevention skills would be more advantageous to the student population.

Pontes and Pontes (2021) report on the correlation of bullying, gun carrying, and mass school shootings. There is a relationship to school violence and this calls for attention to obtain supportive effective anti-bullying programs in schools. The information indicated that male students are more likely to carry weapons into schools and all the mass shootings noted in the study were carried out by male students. This statistic brings to question if appropriate school programming should target male and female students in the same way (Pontes and Pontes, 2021).

### **At-Risk Groups**

London and Ingram (2018) reported that since the 1980's, feelings of social isolation and loneliness have doubled with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQA+) youth.



Because academic stakes are higher needs are often overlooked as LGBTQA+ youth tend to be lonelier and often can become homeless. Depression and physical symptoms are more frequent in lonely youth. Beyond Differences is a program to combat social isolation (London and Ingram 2018).

Due to much needed protection of students in the school setting, New York State signed The Dignity Act into law on September 13, 2010. The law was put into place to include character education, sensitivity training and required reporting instances of bullying, harassment, and discrimination (New York State Department of Education, 2018). Since the law's initial inception, several addendums have been added. This was to be sure various protections for all students are in place, including transgender students, and provides recommendations on how to address bullying and cyberbullying. This includes ways to create a safe environment for learning as well as numerous training materials for staff.

The legislation requires notification of harassment, discrimination, or bullying to be reported to school administration or a Dignity for All Students Act Coordinator within 1 day orally and within 2 days in a written report. Following this, an investigation must occur. The investigation must promptly occur to address and remediate the matter. The importance of this law is to ensure proper protection of students who are in harm's way in the school setting (New York State Department of Education, 2018).

The New York State legislation further supports the expansion as well as the examination of the process to ensure that these specific steps are being followed and the students are adequately protected (New York State Department of Education, 2018).

Pinquart (2017) reported children with physical conditions as well as disabilities can put them at a higher risk of being bullied. This can be due to the child's features or lack in social skill development. All school staff must be given special attention to children with vulnerabilities as they may have a decreased capacity and be unable to advocate for themselves.

At-risk groups specifically can be a target based on their identification. Wang et al. (2018) reported that obese students tend to be a target for bullying this is the case for both males and females. However, often an overlooked group are underweight males. These boys tend to be victimized as they are seen as weaker, less muscular, and less strong. Specifically, physical education teachers should be more aware where bullying occurs in the locker rooms at school as this is a place for bullying to develop males.

Peker (2020) argued that an at-risk group are students who have a primary language other than English. These at-risk students are a target and can be especially vulnerable to cyberbullying. Given the language barrier this group can go unnoticed. It is essential to have staff that speak other languages to ensure proper support. Often, there are breakdowns in communication which can impede proper interventions and support.

Another at-risk group for bullying are students who have disabilities. Bills (2020) asserted that this population is often more targeted but using extracurricular activities are a way to combat this through inclusion. Consideration needs to be made in the context of programming where students are encouraged to join an athletic extracurricular activity and be involved in the school community.

Lebow (2018) reported on the effects of Donald Trump's public statements regarding his perceived attack on immigrants. These policy changes caused more prejudice against families of color. The administration's comments have been particularly problematic because they appear to normalize that behavior. Therefore, careful attention should be given to these groups of students to ensure a safe school culture. Immediate implementation of interventions by school staff is of vital importance to not only stop the attack but show support to the students. Having bilingual staff is necessary to assist students who have English as a second language.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this project is to assist a vast number of students. My goal is to create a positive climate for the students and staff as well in the building. Appropriate school programming will benefit the entire community as a whole in the long run. Social change will result when students feel more supported and safer in the school setting which can carry over to the community as well. A positive school climate can give students feelings of empowerment, thus helping them in multiple areas of their lives.

The key for positive social change to take place is to have the proper interventions as well as strong policies in place that address bullying. Students will graduate pursuing post-secondary education/certifications and in turn contributing back to the community by leading more productive lives. As stated previously, when bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation occurs it has detrimental effects into adulthood and can change the course of one's life.

Proactively addressing these issues with positive programs in the school as much as possible can help many children. This includes programs as well as social work support services and utilizing all staff as much as possible.

Often, acts of school violence are related to bullying. The entire family system is impacted by bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. This also negatively impacts and ripples harm into the community as well. Lane (2015) discussed both detrimental effects on both bullies and victims. Bullies are often fearful; they avoid academic challenging situations and can suffer from depression. Victims of bullying can become violent in their romantic relationships later in life. In addition, schools lack funding to adequately support all the growing needs of the student body. It is vital to have proper programming in place to assist all students.

Gaffeny et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analytical review of 4 bullying prevention programs in 12 schools and found perpetration decreased 19 to 20% and victimization 15 to 16%. However, a limitation of the study includes a lack of analysis comparing effectiveness of different school programming approaches as well as none of these schools were located in the United States.. This continues to indicate a gap to specify which program, or programs, are most effective in the school setting. As discussed, there are numerous programs but determining which program or combination of programs is best to address this issue is the goal.

## Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

### **Research Design**

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore the impact of social isolation and bullying on middle school aged students as when students are feeling supported and safe with their emotional needs met at school, they can enjoy a better, stronger, stable, and more supportive environment. Students who are given adequate and feasible support in the school through improved social climate change, graduation rates will be higher as well as overall social-emotional well-being post-graduation (Yang et al. 2018). Forsberg and Horton (2020) discussed the value in addressing anti-bullying programming verses simply addressing the acts themselves. When I conducted the social work interviews I examined various programs available, hearing the recommendations of what actions can be put in place in the schools to combat this serious issue. Stutterheim and Ratcliffe (2021) shared the importance of qualitative studies as this captures the social phenomenon as well as characteristics and beliefs of people which also reinforces the importance of community. Social workers who have been in the field working with students can uncover gaps that need to be filled to best serve children in schools.

### **Methodology**

I conducted a qualitative study and interviewed 6 social workers (Bradbury and Reason 2003). To best gather information I used feedback from one-on-one interviews.

Overall, the social work group will consist of 6 local social workers from Central New York who work in the school setting, or have worked in the school setting, and treat students from the area in the clinical setting. The social workers provided feedback on the programs in place at School A as well as make comparisons to programs in their respective schools as well as other programs they are aware of. Nyumba et al. (2018) report that an average of 6-8 professionals are sufficient for an effective group. This can be configured as one-on-one, or in the group setting. This methodology was of a general qualitative nature. Williams and Moser (2019) discuss the importance when analyzing data gathered from qualitative studies by reviewing information, sorting, and coding accurately to capture emerging themes. This process was completed in a comprehensive manner taking the time needed to capture all of the information correctly..

The social workers were given the opportunity to share feedback and make suggestions to both current programming, other prospective programs as well as ideas pertaining to the issues. The social work interviews included 1 current social worker from School A, and one who retired after 30 years but played a role in the initial climate survey in 2017. This social worker was able to give valuable contributions regarding the issues at hand. Conducting interviews with local social work professionals was key to collecting valuable data, especially when they have extensive diverse experiences concerning the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation.

## **Data Analysis**

The social work interviews I conducted consisted of evaluation of other types of programs previously used, or currently used, to assist in decreasing social isolation and bullying in the school setting. I allotted time for other ideas such as activities or alternative interventions. These interviews were semi structured using the questions provided in the appendix but also allowed for some open-ended discussion to elaborate. The social work interviews were audiotaped, and thorough notes were taken as well as it is essential to gather both accurate verbal and nonverbal data. Parameswaran et al. (2020) discusses the importance of preserving the credibility of interviews with the use of video. This allows for more introspection into the questions and answers. These were reviewed to ensure all of the information was captured correctly.

When I conducted the transcription I used coding, and allowed for pertinent terminology to be taken out of the narration from the social workers. I tagged words such as bullying, cyberbullying, social isolation, programs, school supports, family dynamics, and COVID and highlighted these. Once this process was complete I added various subcategories were added as well. The coding was key information for me to determine the emerging themes.

Cantu and Chen (2021) discussed the increase in bullying once middle school years arrive and how the use of both social skills and character education can be

impactful in combatting bullying. This validates the importance of having programming in schools from when students are of an early age. I took the discussions in the social work interviews and I analyzed the successes and failures of various programs and intervention strategies.

The methodologies used in other respective schools were considered in this process. The one-on-one interviews reviewed programming and allowed me to make comparisons based on what is effective and ineffective in School A, as well as other schools.

The notetaking I conducted occurred throughout the process and this data was highlighted, examined, and then put into a word document for further assessment. Codes were identified based on topics all relating to common themes (Laureate Education, 2016).

Cresswell and Poth (2016) speak to the value of using narrations in qualitative studies. The researcher serves as the observer in the natural setting and obtains information from others as to best interpret it. In my study, my experience of working in the school for over 20 years and while using social work peers provided valuable insight as to the most appropriate programming, and recommendations for schools. Yin (2016) also discussed the importance of qualitative research in that it uses multiple sources to examine various social interactions. The use of interviews is beneficial as it brings the observations of others to the study and in turn assists in the process.

The social work interviews I conducted were then examined specifically how these initiatives will support the research question affecting bullying and isolated students. Discussions that occurred in the interviews explained how the social workers



came to use these school based programs and what information was used to conclude whether they were effective or ineffective. Judson and Austin (2012) used a literature review determining if a parent-educator partnership was most beneficial.

This program allowed students to grow with social skills, and saw a reduction in bullying and students had mutual support both at home and in the school. Justin and Austin (2012) believed that the ecological perspective of this program was most effective.

Social work participants in my study were in agreement to use ecological perspective based on the varying dynamics in students' lives. In the narrative interviews some conversations and brainstorming occurred regarding student attendance as it relates to bullying and school climate. This information was all included in the notation process.

Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018) cover the importance of the use of precise notes and how these can impact qualitative research. The notes I took provided much value in advance within the study. These were triangulated into the comprehensive assessment. Various guidelines were discussed to best utilize and collaborate with the field notes. I was able to include nonverbal content in these notes, as well as reviewing the audiotape, which provided a deeper meaning into the context of conversations and observations. During the interviews, detailed notes were transcribed by me to precisely capture recommendations as well as information gained. Topics included various questions that probe issues which may be impacting students on a personal level, such as witnessing violence outside the school, struggles with family, other psychosocial problems, and poverty related issues. This ties into the ecological perspective and gives deeper insight into children functioning outside the school walls. To further complicate matters as the 2022 school year began, it

is noted that most students were behind academically since the onset of COVID-19. This issue can bring about higher levels of stress, and frustration associated with school attendance.

Karikari et al. (2020) reveal the varying perspectives of stakeholders in the school when it comes to bullying. The authors conducted interviews with not only social workers but bus drivers and principals. It was made clear the social workers have roles in addressing bullying. However, the other school staff were witnessing bullying and can with appropriate training intervene in ways to assist in both supporting students and stopping bullying behaviors. This action research project allowed, an in-depth analysis of the previous school climate survey was used. The survey identified areas that need attention and ones that are problematic. The identification of these issues is key in the action research process (Caro-Bruce, 2000). Collection of information from the social work interviews aligned with the project's goals. The outcome of the social work interviews provided valuable data.

Discussions from the social work interviews took place concerning the climate survey and suggestions were openly accepted about ways to make improvements within the school climate. Time allowed for questions to be conducted about the social workers' perspective on their respective school's climate, and efforts they have made to combat bullying and social isolation. The goal of improving students' experiences in the school setting stands to make significant social change as many students struggle greatly with this issue.

In the social work interviews had program comparisons took place to examine schools whom have programs with similar goals. The Positivity Project is used in some of the schools and the various presentations to the student body may be different than the way School A presents.

Currently a weekly video is shown on a character trait and these traits are embedded into various curriculum as well. Being open to new ideas to make this more impactful is essential throughout this process. Time was allotted for deeper conversations and perceptions, as well as codable information, were gained from the social work meetings. I was able to conduct careful analyzation was conducted with collaboration from the social work participants.

Based on feedback from the previous climate survey, which occurred in 2017 and identified areas of social connectedness as an issue, Levitan et al. (2018) reviewed how important it is to consider individual values and perspectives when analyzing narrative interviews. I was able to accurately use comparisons that made in reference to the effectiveness of the current programs as well as the new program as The Positivity Project that was introduced December 21, 2018. In the social work interviews, this program was discussed as other schools utilize it. There is a possibly that with proper research examination can occur to see if there were any changes to bullying, or to the school climate based on this program. Positive adjustments made to the school climate would bring about social change. The premise of the Positivity Project is to use kind and caring terminology in the building. Consistent compassionate language in the school

setting can make a positive impact. The way I guided the social work interview meetings allowed for me to conduct them in a comprehensive and collaborative manner.

When I began the analyzation phase care was given and consideration to everyone's response. This information was carefully used in conjunction with the above-mentioned analysis.

Dilshad and Latif (2013) argued the use of focus groups in qualitative research is beneficial. Essential information can be obtained from such interviews when a skilled facilitator guides, and the interview process stands to uncover various perceptions. The social work Interviews were also a cost-effective approach for qualitative research. In this action research project, my interviews stood in the place of focus groups with the hope to gather valuable information individually. My 20 years of experience brought value and knowledge into the interviews.

The data conversation I conducted explored unique and individual understandings of social issues in schools . These include guided questions applicable to the study, as well as clear objections to keep the participants engaged. Nyumba et al. 2018 discuss the importance of using pre-set questions as well as having set goals for interviews. My precise note taking allowed for the transcription of the meetings as an essential way to transform the information into usable data for the study Stringer, 2014 reinforces the importance of using notes in qualitative research to capture the correct information..

I used strict considerations to use valid transparency with disseminating data from the interviews as well as observational data. This interview process must accurately

demonstrate the scale and scope of the social work participants as well as preserving the anonymity of the interviewees. Data Transparency and methods in quantitative and qualitative research, 2021 emphasize the importance of valuing the time and relationships of the participants was shown throughout the interviews as well as the entire process. I was able to confirm the qualitative research process with validity (Singh et al. 2021).

Salimi et al. (2021) conducted bullying research outside of the United States as bullying in schools is a worldwide problem. The authors discovered that schools promoting health programming did not have success with the reduction of bullying. However, unlike the United States, there were no statewide laws against bullying. This program would need to be re-examined given the legal backup we have not only in the United States, but New York State has stronger laws as compared to other states.

Iraklis (2020) used semi structured interviews to gain information from preschool teachers. The authors found that the teachers did witness bullying, although this is a controversial topic if children can bully at such a young age. The teachers were prone to have emotional reactions to what was witnessed. My project is examining an older student population for effective school programming, however exploring starting programs with younger children may be helpful in offsetting more detrimental acts of bullying as seen in the older population.

### **Summary**

The purpose of my action research project is to obtain information from social workers in Central New York to assist in determining what programming in schools is the most effective way in combatting bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. In-school

programming may be preventative in nature as well as reactive to address these serious issues. Many of these problems are contributing to the mental health crisis middle school age students are experiencing currently. At this time COVID-19 has impacted students' functioning in school, and conversations among social workers and staff have continued. Communication surrounds how students have been impacted and what ways schools may need to appropriately adapt. The social work interviews will entail discussing adding additional social supports, using staff in place at schools to not only best support students but improve the overall school climate.

It is important to keep at-risk groups were discussed as they tend to be targeted more frequently, and exploring what provisions could further assist in combatting these obstacles. In New York State there are laws in place to ensure that schools have programs and adequately address bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. The social work interview participants revealed insight if these laws are strong enough and if schools are following them to safeguard all students. Ecological theory is being utilized as this encompasses all systems and aspects involved in a student's life. School is one part of the larger context students exist in. Examining family as well as community is essential to fully understand diverse frames of references.

### Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

#### **Introduction**

The goal of my action research project is to identify school programs or a combination of programs that exist to combat the growing problem of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation in middle schools. This could be a single program or a combination of programs or alternative strategies. The interviews being used in the action research project allowed for school social workers to not only share programs but personal interventions and unique techniques to assist students. The social work interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting on Zoom. The school social workers were very comfortable in sharing their individual experiences in school with students. They showed passion for this topic, and all agreed this is a major issue that needs to be addressed to best support all students. They were committed to contributing to the study to find adequate support and resolution to assist students. Each social worker brought varying degrees of knowledge and experience to the interview meetings.

The research questions proposed in this action research project were:

RQ1: How do social workers describe the impact of current in-school programming that addresses the needs of middle school age students who have experienced bullying, cyberbullying, or social isolation?

RQ2: What school programming recommendations do social workers have to address the unmet needs of middle school age students who have experienced bullying, cyberbullying or social isolation and what suggestions can be made on how to add more social supports into the school setting?

RQ3: How do social workers view the impact of COVID-19 regarding the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation?

The research questions used in the social work interviews were asked as a guide in the form of nine questions. These took place as one-on-one with local school social workers (Appendix B). The interviews took place on Zoom and were recorded with permission from all participants.

The school social workers all hold master's degrees and have professional experience ranging from 1 to 30 years in the school setting. The diverse knowledge, skills, wisdom, and experiences from the social workers provided helpful to gain a comprehensive in-depth look at their time and commitment made to address this serious issue. The social workers interviews provided broad views that enabled me to grasp fully how the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation have changed over the years with COVID-19 and to identify programs and interventions that were effective and ineffective. Social workers also presented challenges from their respective schools with programming as well as staff, administration, and student commitment to the issue. Additionally, social workers disclosed various individual therapeutic measures they implemented on their own without program guidance in order address their student's issues related to bullying.

In the following sections, the data analysis and findings will be revealed. The data analysis section provides information on the recruitment process, how the data collection occurred as well as the percentage of responses from the respective participants.



The data analysis section will include information gained from the interviews as well as limitations. The findings section describe 's qualitative analysis as well as my interpretation of the data. Additionally, the answers to the research questions will be fully explained and discussions of findings both expected and unexpected will be reviewed in detail.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Walden University was given on September 23, 2022. Once this permission was obtained, recruitment letters (Appendix A) were distributed to the school I previously worked at, as well as the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) of Oneida, Herkimer, and Madison County where it was posted by school social workers. BOCES in New York State is a school system that provides various educational programs to twelve component school districts. Additionally, after meeting with one social worker, she referred me to share the letter with another local social worker. Lastly, I emailed a social worker whom I knew professionally from a neighboring district. Recruitment was slow given it was the beginning of the school year in September as well as various holiday breaks in the fall, and over the winter some social workers were sick with COVID-19.

The interview process occurred from September 2022 through February of 2023. In total 8 social workers expressed interest and 6 followed through with the interviews. The 6 social workers signed the informed consent to participate. Initials were used to protect the identity of the participants. All interviews took place in December of 2022 and January of 2023.

I was waiting for one additional social worker who did not follow through. The average length of time of each interview was approximately 40 minutes. I took comprehensive notes in the meetings. The information that was taken from the meetings I transcribed, hand-coded, sub coded, collated into similar groups, and patterns were reviewed in the end thematic analysis. Additionally, keywords and names of programs were pulled from the transcription.

The themes the social workers shared included the lack of student buy in, staff not being well educated about the topic, the lack of consistency in the schools with various bullying prevention programs, the lack of time the social workers had to address these issues or implement programs, as student fear of missing out (FOMO) Due to FOMO, students would rather see negative things being said about them as opposed to logging off the online platform. Programs that were discussed had pros and cons in each, not one single program posed the ability to address all the issues related to bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. Branthwaite and Patterson (2011) discuss the value in the use of online technologies to gain reliable research information since software can save conversations and include active listening with dialogue as well as the ability to link meanings.

### **Validation Procedures**

The live coding that I conducted provided the ability to go through the audio of the interviews as many times as needed to obtain the exact information. According to Parameswaran et al. (2020) there is a benefit to using live coding in interviews which allows for easier review when transcribing.

The coding took 6 weeks. The information I took then was copied, highlighted, and compared to previous notes and audio to ensure accurate information from the social workers was captured in its entirety. Each social work interview participant was asked to answer the same questions, however, at times additional questions were asked for specific clarification. The social workers were open to these questions. Also, answers were repeated back to ensure that the information given was understood correctly. This process is referred to as member checking and this prevents inaccurate interpretation from occurring (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). Therefore other questions I used included “Am I understanding this correctly?” when the information was repeated back to the interviewee. These questions I used was done to prevent any misinterpretations from occurring and in turn invalidating the research. Each participant agreed to be available for follow up conversations and clarification if needed after the interview process. This was not necessary, as all the information was both consistent and concise. I took the protection of the data as one of the highest priorities throughout the entire process. My chair, Dr. McLaughlin, and I had on-going conversations to make certain I was correctly handling the interviews and they were not misinterpreted in any way.

### **Findings**

My findings were drawn from individual meetings with 6 local school social workers. These interviews I conducted took place on Zoom and I recorded them. I also took precise notes when all the information was coded, sub coded, and groups were formed, which led to patterns and ultimately my thematic analysis.

The information that I gained in the social work interviews did answer the research questions as stated in Appendix C and is described in full. Although, there was not one stand-alone program, nor a combination of specific programs valuable information was drawn from these interviews. The participants ‘were able to share their background information and this is described in the next section in order to best understand the population interviewed. This is important to show the diverse backgrounds and years of experience. Two male participants were approached to participate but only one followed through. The social work field tends to have more women practicing; however, understanding the issues at hand through the lens of a man was quite beneficial.

**Table 1**

*Years of Social Work Experience of The Interview Participants*

Participant	Years of Experience
Participant 1	10 years
Participant 2	5 years
Participant 3	1 year
Participant 4	29 years
Participant 5	30 years
Participant 6	1 year

### **Participants Professional Experiences**

Participant 1 identifies as a man and has worked with children and adolescents for a total of 10 years. Prior to entering the school district in 2020 he worked in an intensive program to help keep at risk children and adolescents in their home and out of foster care. His experience includes involvement with the court system as well as Child Protective Services (CPS).

Participant number 2 identifies as a woman. She has worked for 10 years in the school setting; this is an alternative program where her caseload is primarily of students with individualized education plans (IEPs). It is a small setting where most students have behavioral issues. Participant number 2 made me aware of two local student suicides related to bullying. She reported that students who were in her small program preferred to stay in their current program for safety reasons even when they were deemed appropriate to return to their home district.

Participant number 3 identifies as a woman and has been in the school setting for 1 year. She completed her master's level internships in various school programs. Despite her limited experience in the school, she brought a variety of knowledge and ideas to the interview and was familiar with the two main programs discussed.

Participant number 4 identifies as a woman and has been working in the social work field for 29 years she has been in a variety of different social work settings with many different age groups, including foster care, case work, as well as having been an assistant administrator. She is currently working with an older student population that focuses on career technology education.

Participant number 5 identifies as a woman and has worked 30 years in the school setting, additionally she has done clinical work throughout her career. She also has experience overseeing various social work interns and running programs based in the classroom. This would be considered coteaching with the classroom teacher.

Participant number 6 identifies as a woman and has 1 year of school experience.

She was in a regular education program in a public school and now is in alternative education. Although she does not have as much experience as others, a student in her previous school died of suicide directly related to bullying. This experience has made her very passionate about this growing problem and she brought several ideas into the interview.

### **Limitations**

Unfortunately, none of the interviews completely provided the exact information I sought which was to identify a program or a combination of programs that would adequately address and combat the problems of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation in schools. Several programs were discussed in the interviews such as the Second Step, Rachel's Challenge, and the Positivity Project. Each brought up both positive and negative qualities. Not one stood out as the right program and no combination of them appeared to align well. COVID-19 brought on many issues to the school and into the lives of the students. It was felt by the social work interview participants that the issue of cyberbullying and based on these interviews cyberbullying appears to be on the rise. Additionally, the study consisted of only 6 local social workers. Future studies could be expanded to a larger population or add an additional focus group to increase the number of participants. I could be considered a limitation in that I knew three of the social workers from when I worked in the school system for 20 years. Also, although I am very knowledgeable and passionate about the research topic, a great deal of time and attention were used to develop questions and follow-up questions to ensure I was obtaining the words of the participants accurately.

### **Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Social Isolation**

The first research question I presented was if the participants believed or perceived bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation as a problem with the middle school student age population. All 6 candidates reported yes, absolutely, and that it is a major problem. All the responses were very similar in that each participant considered the topic to be a major problem. Two of the participants, number 1 and 3, noted that this problem has grown since COVID-19 and cyberbullying has increased. Especially since the schools in New York State were closed for a very long time due to the pandemic.

The second question I presented was what anti-bullying prevention programs are being used in the social workers respective school districts and whether the participant found the program, or these programs, (if any) as helpful tools. Social workers number 1 and 5 reported the Positivity Project were involved in their respective schools; social worker 3 reported her school used to have it, but it was no longer in use. Social worker 1 reported Positivity Project was being pushed heavily in the classrooms in the elementary school, and in Grades 6 through 12 the program was being used in the school news as well as a tool to facilitate reinforcing positive character traits. Social worker 5 reported the use of the Second Step with the elementary age group as well. Social worker 2 reported although there was not a program in place, and the social work staff solely use counseling and awareness. Social Worker 4 reported that the in-school programs are not helpful with cyberbullying, and she reported this being the biggest issue. The consensus with both the Positivity Project and Second Step was that they have productive aspects to help but neither are comprehensive enough to fully address the issues.

The third question I presented in the interviews was if the participant was familiar with the Positivity Project, and if so, what were their experiences with the effectiveness of the program. Four of the participants were aware of the program in a professional capacity. One participant was not, and participant number 4 reported her own children were involved with it at the elementary level and it ended in junior high. The consensus of all the participants who had knowledge of the Positivity Project reported it to have many good qualities, but it is not all-inclusive enough to address the magnitude of the problem. Participant 1 reported it is helpful but not entirely effective as a stand-alone program. Participant 3 reported her school had used it but did not subscribe any longer, and she did not want to make assumptions about why it was not being used. Participant 5 reported the program had value in conjunction with other initiatives but a lot was lost in the pandemic. Participant 6 reported it is effective but in some ways lower functioning students had a harder time grasping the concepts. Also, the program was more for prevention, and it did not effectively address the issues of bullying which were already occurring.

The fourth question I presented was what program or programs does the participant feel are impactful in combatting bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. Participant 1 reported he felt the modeling of positive characteristics is vital as well as other initiatives in combination with the Positivity Project. Also, ensuring a positive school climate is important as well.



Participant 2 had experience with Rachel's Challenge at her internship and she reported this program was impactful as it brought to light the start of school violence and bullying back when Columbine happened. She would like to have this program in her school.

Participant 3 reported Second Step had corny videos the students could not relate to therefore she would take these situations and make them into her own role-plays where the students could learn. Participant 4 felt community-based programs that came into school to discuss various topics was effective. These included bullying, character education, drugs and alcohol, and anger management. All of these were relatable to her students. Sadly, the grants were cut, and these programs are no longer available.

Participant number 5 reported Second Step is a good program through the 8th grade.

This program required teacher training as a key component to the program's effectiveness and implementation. This program both focuses on prevention and bullying. This involves the community as well as families and this connection is key. In addition to this program, she brought her own programs into school such as students raising fish which would later be released, as well as students tending to a garden. She felt that this was proactive for any students at risk and would target both the bully and victims in a positive way. Bystanders are key in this as they are often overlooked emotionally as well as having the power to assist. She could potentially see Second Step, if coupled with the Positivity Project, as being impactful. Participant 6 reported she did not have a program but rather her own creativity and resourcefulness to address this issue. She had all staff pick students grades 6,7, and 8 to be a safe person to connect with. She used groups and peer mentorship and groups for supportive discussions.

One major undertaking coincided with mental health awareness week, and it was called “let’s chalk” about it. This is in 2 other states and brings a positive approach to promoting kindness, words were written on school property and posters made with affirming messages. There was news coverage about this, and it opened doors for conversations, built awareness, and celebrated the students’ use of creativity.

The fifth question I presented was how much of a problem does the participant feel bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation are in relation to the mental well-being of middle-aged students. All the participants reported it is a tremendous problem and time limitations on school social workers continue to be an issue hindering their ability to provide adequate support to address this need. Participants 3, 4, 5 and 6 have noted there is a growing problem of cyberbullying and the use of on-line apps.

The sixth question I presented was does the participant feel staff other than teachers, counselors, social workers, and administrators are adequately trained and equipped to identify and intervene when it comes to bullying, cyberbullying and social isolation, if not, what more can be done to educate them.

Participant number 1 reported he feels teachers need to be more educated to take steps with warning signs of bullying, and that skills need to be built in the classroom curriculum. Social workers can educate staff but tapping into the community resources to facilitate staff education would be increasingly helpful. Participant number two reported more training is needed for all staff, staff and that needs to not take on personal views on what constitutes bullying.

An example provided is that staff may perceive an action does not constitute bullying due to their personal views, and consequently not intervene to stop bullying or assist a student who has been the victim of bullying. Also, it was reported that favoritism occurs and there needs to be consistency for all students.

Participant number 3 reported teachers come to the social workers for assistance but often turn a blind eye in their own classroom. There needs to be more education for all. At this time there is an interim administrator and discipline is not occurring as it should. Additionally, the children of staff that have bullied have not had consequences and these instances are overlooked. Participant number 4 reported in alternative education where she works currently the staff is well trained in this area and intervenes appropriately. Superintendents' days are used on continuing education.

Participants indicated that dialogue about the students is an important intervention to address these issues. Talking and communication is vital, and the administrator, who is a former social worker, takes the time to do many sit-downs with teachers and they work as a team. Participant number 5 reported that time constraints placed on school social workers limit their ability to engage in prevention efforts, and past prevention efforts were not supported adequately by the district and eventually were halted. Additionally, student mental issues are so prevalent that there are frequently crisis situations that need immediate attention and divert time/resources away from prevention. It seems that education would be the social workers' job and due to time constraints this remains a challenge. Key staff that need education are cafeteria workers, aides, bus drivers and monitors on the playground.

The more engaged we are with kids the more we will discover. There is a need for clear expectations of roles with staff. Faculty meetings with open dialogue are necessary as well. Participant number six reported training needs to occur throughout all staff, and teachers need to learn how to address bullying and not ignore. There needs to be more awareness as well as ways to redirect and mediate.

When a student of her school died to suicide there was no staff aware of the bullying. This issue of education is also coupled with parents' allowing unrestricted access to smart phones, and social media technology advancing. This lack of awareness on the part of the parents is a contributing factor and the internet is sometimes viewed as a tool for parents to keep their kids busy. Parental education is also very important and needs to be addressed.

The seventh question I presented was inquiring whether participants felt New York State law regulation was being followed to address and combat bullying. If not, asking participants what changes should be made to adequately protect victims as well as obtain guidance and assistance for perpetrators. Participants reported there can be more follow through with regulations at the school level, and also more can be done programmatically to adhere to regulation and provide consistent consequences to perpetrators. Participants reported these approaches would likely lead to improved outcomes regarding bullying, cyberbullying, and isolation. Participant 4 reported there are many components of the law to consider. However, in her school there is not much paperwork and documentation, but issues are handled as they arise. She also feels families need to be more aware and engaged in prevention efforts.

Participant 5 reported that time is a hinderance to documentation and that problems should be addressed sooner.

The eighth question I presented was do participants feel New York State has sufficient protocols under the legislation to protect students that may be more vulnerable. Participant number one reported the protocols are being followed in school. Participant number 2 reported there are not enough provisions in NYS to adequately protect vulnerable students. She reported 2 13-year-old local student suicides related to bullying and these issues of bullying to be taken more seriously and that there are not enough protections. Also, issues can be exacerbated by the changeover in staff. Participant number 3 reported she feels the law can be worded differently to better define bullying. She reports that instances of bullying are very situational and unique. Participant number 4 reported she could not speak to this as she did not know enough about it. Participant number 5 reported that each school should take the time to examine if provisions of the law are working to protect these students. Participant number 6 reported that more can be done for staff to adhere to protocol.

The ninth question I presented to participants was asking whether they agree with state policy that when cyberbullying occurs off school campus, but residual issues come into school, this must be addressed, and perpetrators are punished in the school. Participant 1 reported there must be tangible evidence for the school to discipline. Participant number 2 reported her stance is not concrete. She believes that proper tools need to go into the investigation, but it is difficult as social media messages can be erased and you cannot discipline on hearsay.

She leans to say yes, but it is a hard call and situational. Participant number 3 stated that the school should be able to discipline perpetrators of bullying, but not in instances of harm or vandalism. She reported that other times the behavior can be addressed in the school not via discipline. Her school recently had an on-going vandalism issue which was handled by the school, but vandalism remained prevalent. She felt the use of an assembly to educate all the students would be helpful to have clear expectations for the students.

Participant number four reported outside of the school bullying can be addressed in school, but she prefers to reinforce to students that if you do not want me in your business keep it out of school. They do not punish as a rule in the school. There can be other consequences though, including the use of the school resource officer to intervene. She feels strongly that prevention is important. Participant 5 reported that careful respect needs to be given to the law and the specific situation of bullying. Staff should get accurate information, parental contact is needed, and the parents should be shown compassion. The issue must be addressed, even if it is not feasible for school discipline the possible use of peer mediation should be considered. Miscommunication is a problem and there needs to be transparency in the entire process. Participant 6 reported this is a hard topic and experienced multiple challenges in her previous school related to bullying and threats of violence. There were reports of guns, threats of violence, and a masked man which needed be addressed immediately. This led to police coming in to speak about bullying and suicide prevention to help stop these incidents from happening.

### **Additional Comments**

All the participants noted the lack of support and resources within their respective schools and in the community. This was a reoccurring theme throughout the interview process. The social workers spoke to having little time for prevention, and contend with limited resource investment into programs that combat bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. This topic was important to all, and they recognize it needs more attention. Each were doing the best they could with the caseloads they have as well as pushing for more support.

The cancellation of the grants that brought in community speakers and additional support was a great loss for the schools and was another theme throughout the interviews. Multiple participants emphasized the importance of these programs and how it ties into student engagement and buy in. Everyone familiar with the programs noted there was great benefit received from community presentation and involvement in the schools. Participants also commented on how important the family, school and community connections were for kids.

This way of looking at students as a whole directly relates to the ecological theory that children do not exist only within the school system. All aspects of the child's life need to be involved such as parental education programs, community-based programs, and involvement in schools. Parental involvement is especially important when it comes to social media use. Gaining buy-in from the parents proved to be problematic. They need to be educated and active in monitoring their child's activity and the activity of others possibly targeting their child.

Participant 3 presented a great teaching tool for students. She would talk about saying things on the internet and asked the students to empty a toothpaste bottle onto a plate. She asked them how to get it back into the tube, meaning once something is said it cannot be taken back. This sounded like a very useful learning activity. Additionally, there needs to be more discussion on how to involve the community given the loss of grants, possibly seeking volunteers to come into the school or searching for more grants.

### **Summary**

In summary, the main themes from the social work participant interviews were the lack of a sole all-inclusive program or combination of programs to adequately address the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. In the schools there is not enough social work support for the students. All staff must be adequately educated and trained on these issues. Additionally, students need strong connections and bonds with staff. The participants felt cyberbullying was on the rise, especially since COVID-19 and is becoming increasingly uncontrolled in the area of cyberbullying.

The social workers were very creative in connecting with students and having staff build better relationships. These unique connections seem to bring value to relationship building with students and can be added to any of the programs. The idea of having each staff member “adopt” a student to connect with is very valuable. Students can be paired based on interests and staff can serve as positive role models many students lack outside of the school. I did this 3 times when I was working in the school which meant everyone took a student and made a conscious effort to get to know them.



Staff would then say hello more often, invite them for lunch and help build rapport by learning and sharing personal interests. Unfortunately this program did not stick for long and it was done under 3 different administrators. This activity should go beyond teachers, counselors, nurses, administrators, and social workers. I feel all staff should be included such as aides, secretaries, bus drivers and custodians. Having a trusting adult relationship is key for students to feel safe to disclose bullying and feel supported. Less than half of middle and high school students report that they have a trusted adult in the school to talk to when they need support. (NASW, 2023).

Also, perpetrators of bullying can be engaged to develop healthy relationships in school, which can distract the need to act out toward others. Students can be given small tasks or jobs and receive praise to help build self-esteem. The unique programs shared by some of the social workers interviewed were peer mentorship, raising fish, the kindness closet, students being given good deed tickets, let's chalk about it, and students helping to tend a garden. These were inclusive for a variety of students and served as a proactive measure to build up students who may be at risk.

If possible, the training of all staff should be done on superintendents' days or in faculty meetings given the large caseloads school social workers take on. This would be a great opportunity for educated professionals in the community to take on this role. Once all staff are educated, they can relationship build with students while being on the lookout for signs of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. All students want to feel heard and cared for. This may seem impossible in very large schools, but it must be made a priority.

Also, all these social work participants, despite being over-worked, were passionate about this topic. No one was overly burned out; some were frustrated but still were willing to do what it will take to address this growing problem.

## Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Social Change

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the action research project was to explore what specific program or programs were effective in schools to combat bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. These issues in the school have increased significantly over the years and continue to negatively impact the mental health of students. The interviews that I conducted revealed all social workers agree that bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation is a huge problem. None of the social workers were in agreement on one specific program or combination of programs to best address these issues. Additionally, all social workers felt understaffed and overworked in their respective schools. Various community-based programs that appeared to be helpful have been cut. The social workers brought creative ideas to the interviews on strategies they personally used to assist students. These bring value in that there are alternative ways to support students, bystanders, as well as perpetrators. Having strong student connections with not only social workers, but all staff, is a measure schools can take, as well as providing proper education to staff on these issues. This adheres to social work best practice as it is the duty of all social workers to best support and protect students. Students who are bullied have a lower meaning of life satisfaction (Seon and Smith-Adcock, 2023). Facilitating this process of support in the school will enable students to feel fulfillment in school years and beyond. In Seattle, 28 students were suspended for cyberbullying. This action represented support from the school to protect students when matters take place out of school.

The school taking punitive action against the bullies recognized the severity of cyberbullying and bolstered feelings of hope among victims of bullying that the perpetrators would be held accountable. The punishment brought about hope in the school that the perpetrators learned a lesson as parents were brought in on this suspension. (Shaw, 2010). Seeing these issues addressed and taken seriously is a tool to combat bullying and in turn shows a no tolerance policy as well as displays care and empathy to the victims.

Based on the social workers feedback in the interviews it would not be recommended to stop any program where there is school wide engagement and buy in, but to rather include additional programs that promote building healthy adult relationships, which shows the ability to assist with this growing problem. Social workers using creative ideas to build strong social bonds will assist in combatting the issues surrounding bullying. Social workers can also work with other local social workers in the form of focus groups using teachers and other school staff to utilize ingenuity to relationship build and discuss approaches to address bullying.

Although the study did not indicate that a single program or combination of programs as being most effective to combat bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation in the school, the ideas, techniques, knowledge, and insight brought by the social workers in valuable in providing helpful guidance to schools. I would recommend more research take place, such as implementing these suggestions into a comprehensive plan in a school or using two schools to closely examine bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation documenting instances before and after the plan.

A more in-depth study could allow for more specific inferences to be made. I would recommend quasi-experimental research to capture all aspects of the student population regarding variations of possible change related to the specific plan. This plan, if positive changes are documented, can then be shared with other schools, and not only in the United States but across the globe. Smith and López Sánchez, 2023, discuss the magnitude of the problem growing in many countries and the need for proper intervention strategies to support all students.

### **Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice**

NASW guides social workers in practice, ethics, and research, and also provides a code of ethics to follow. It is important that as social workers we use NASW as a guide to inform our professional actions which in turn can invoke positive social change. The issues of bullying, cyberbullying and social isolation in schools are a major problem and as social workers we are called to protect those that are struggling and vulnerable (NASW, 2023). This action research project fulfills the expectation of NASW in that social workers take part in research to provide social change in an effort to better the lives of our clients (NASW, 2023). The information gained from this project and the interviews will be shared with School A and suggestions for a comprehensive connection program will be made. Then based on this I plan to approach other schools as I have since relocated to Florida.

NASW can be looked at as a framework and a model to inform best practices of social workers, this is also a living document that changes periodically adding in necessary updates to best support our clients (NASW, 2023).

Most recently, cultural competence and self-care were added in (NASW, 2021). This is very important in that school social workers are susceptible to burn out and must partake in self-care to best support the student population they serve. Additionally, cultural competence is extremely important to both understand diversity in students and how this impacts them personally, at school, in the home, and community. Using the ecological approach is vital as the student needs to be supported as a whole person in their environment, and cultural competency is key to provide support and build a strong trusting rapport. Social workers must always continue to keep abreast with cultural competence and demonstrate this to best support the student population they are working with. This is especially important as we have an influx of immigrants entering school.

### **Recommendations for Social Work Practice**

The goal of my action research project was to investigate how to best combat the growing problem of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation to keep students safe and thriving in a healthy school climate. When students are in a supportive environment they will also perform better academically. Social workers must ensure the emotional health and well-being of students are being met. Exploring ways to best train school social workers as well as all school staff to identify and intervene when it comes to bullying, cyberbullying and social isolation is essential. Using community services or exploring grants or alternative funding would be recommended. The school social workers felt a great loss when these services were cut. A potential idea would be to approach local businesses to help with funding or investigate national grants.

Another goal of my action research project was to better understand programs in schools that address bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation and to examine if they are impactful. The perceptions of the school social workers from the interviews provided insightful information and allowed me to gain knowledge of programs as well as the impact on students.

The qualitative action research methodology I chose allowed me to meet one-on-one interviewing social workers and although there was not one program or a combination of programs many gains were made. I was able to obtain detailed information and insight into this problem. Ensuring student connection with all school staff was a main theme and it is something that can be put in place in the schools. The school staff encompassed all staff such as aides, coaches, bus drivers as well as custodial workers.

All of the social work participants are overwhelmed and overworking. The ability to possibly use outside resources training, such as education and developing a staff and student connection program would be ideal. If money from the school is not available and community grants have been cut this would take some creativity to allow for such a training. If possible, sharing a training course with multiple school districts could cut costs. Once training takes place social workers can play an integral role in assisting in maintaining the education portion, and to identify and intervene, but also with the social connectivity piece. Social workers cannot do this alone all staff must be invested in a program. Social workers have also shared various innovative activities they developed on their own that both build relationships and create a safe school community.

This included mix it up at lunch where lunch tables were designated to help students meet new students and older high school students helped facilitate. Another was when a local college came into the gym and played various games and made crafts with students. All staff were invited to participate. The act of staff playing with students brought about social connection in a different way.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The number of social workers needs to be increased in the school setting; all participants indicated a rise in mental health issues as well as more demanding responsibilities that impact their jobs. Fifty percent of middle school students report that depression and anxiety impact their learning. (NASW, 2023). Having more time with students would proactively address the issue of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. Although for monetary reasons this may not be possible, but it would improve connectivity with students and help bridge positive relationships with all school staff. Using staff that are vested in building affirmative relationships with students can transform school experiences as well. Students would be more apt to disclose bullying with a trusted adult, additionally perpetrators would have an outlet gaining positive attention as opposed to negative attention from bullying. The ability to decrease bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation in the school setting stands to assist not only the students in feeling safe and to be more productive in school but in society as they grow. Social work intervention has the power to make this possible. Johnson and McKay, 2020 discuss the vital role school social workers play as over 3.2 million students were seen in 2014 for counseling support services.



They are promoting diversity within the school social work population to best relate to unique student populations and to implement unique evidence-based interventions to support their students.

Social workers can lobby for more support in the school such as reinstating grants in the community. There are often lobby days held at the state capitol. (NASW, 2023) encourages social workers to lobby on behalf of clients in need. This could be a school wide process as teachers and administrators are also experiencing challenges and consequences related to student bullying, cyberbullying, and isolation in the classroom. Social workers can team up with other school social workers to strengthen the lobbying process as this is a large-scale issue. This can be done by writing to local congressmen and congresswomen.

I plan to meet with School A, offering a free training to all staff on my findings and assisting the school in creating a student-staff connectivity program. Once this is done it can be expanded to other local NYS schools. If this proves to be impactful by using proper research analysis such as a mixed method research project this can be proposed to add into a national programs that already exist. A connectivity program added to another program may prove effective in combatting bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. In addition, I now reside in Florida I plan to approach schools in my local area not only to share my study and propose a student-staff connectivity program but also to offer examining crisis plans. Sadly, in Florida there was a school shooting in Parkland Florida on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Presumptions were made this attack was related to past bullying. The shooting went on without proper interventions and protocols expected for a school crisis plan. Based on this project as well as my 20 years' experience sitting on and co-writing school crisis plans I would have a lot to offer to help develop and streamline the implementation of crisis plans.

### **Summary**

In this study I used an action research method to examine the growing problem of bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation in schools. All social worker's interviews indicated that bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation are a growing problem not only in the school but also contribute to students' mental health. This issue expands into the life overall of students, at home they are unable to escape cyberbullying and oftentimes have unlimited access to social media. All social workers interviewed stated there is the need for more education for all school staff and more social connection for students with all adults in the school. Although there was not a stand-alone or combination of programs, using education combined with social connection can be devised in many ways to best combat these issues. It would not be recommended to stop programs that are in place if there is student engagement and buy in. Forming strong relationships with school staff can be an additional piece to assist with the problem. Students making solid social bonds can help them both feel supported as well as have a safe place to disclose when bullying, cyberbullying, or social isolation is occurring.

This can be the case for perpetrators as well gaining value in meaningful relationships as bullies act out negatively due to various personal or family issues. This can be done by having staff sign up to “adopt” students, making small talk, or giving students tasks. Additionally, the use of social workers’ originative ideas with activities, programs or events can help build not only relationships but social connections.

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## Appendix A: Interview Invitations for the School Social Work Candidates

Dear Social Work Colleague,

Hello. I hope this email finds you well. As you are aware I have been working on my doctoral action research project. My study entails finding the correct programming for schools to combat bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation. I would like to invite you to participate in an individual interview via Zoom to help best understand programs you have experience with that could address this growing issue in schools. This interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be audio recorded.

If you are interested, please contact me via email or phone.

Sincerely,

Mary Hosey-Pardi, LMSW

### Appendix B: Interview Questions for the school Social Workers

I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me to discuss social isolation, bullying and cyberbullying in Central New York Schools as you know this is a growing problem. The experiences you have with various programming will be helpful in my study.

The interview will be approximately one hour and will include open-ended questions to be used in my study. The interview will be audio-recorded and will not include your full names, only first names will be in the study.

Do you perceive bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation as a problem with the middle school student age group?

What anti-bullying or bullying prevention programs are you using in your school district?

Do you find this / these programs helpful?

Are you familiar with the positivity project, if so, what are your experiences with the effectiveness of the program?

What programs do you feel are impactful in combatting bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation?

How much of a problem do you feel bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation are in relation to the mental well-being of middle school aged students?

Do you feel staff other than teachers, counselors, social workers, and administrators are adequately trained and equipped to identify and intervene when it comes to bullying, cyberbullying, and social isolation? If not what more can be done to educate them?

Is the New York State law regulation being followed to address and combat bullying? If not, what changes should be made to adequately protect victims as well as obtain guidance and assistance for perpetrators?

Do you feel New York State has the sufficient protocols under the legislation to protect students that may be more vulnerable?

At this time when cyberbullying occurs off school campus, but residual issues come into school this must be addressed and perpetrators are punished in the school, do you agree with this state policy?

Appendix C: Organization of coding and groups

