CYBERBULLYING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION

Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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Cyberbullying is defined as the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, which is intended to harm others. This is a problem in educational settings due to the impact of cyberbullying on students’ learning, mental health, and social development. This study examined middle school students’ perceptions of cyberbullying. Participants included three general education students and three special education students. Results indicated that students feel parents cannot help prevent or intervene with cyberbullying. Respondents receiving special education services were less likely to know about cyberbullying. Furthermore, general education students perceived their special education counterparts as more vulnerable to cyberbullying. School psychologists can be key personal in working in school environments and school communities to prevent and address cyberbullying.
For my mother, Tracy Ball, who has always supported my dreams and helped me reach for the stars
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Bullying in schools is a problem discussed among educators for decades. However, the rise of technology has led to the development of a new form of bullying, which is termed cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is defined as the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, which is intended to harm others (Baas et al., 2013). As technology is more commonly used by school-age youth, it is important to examine how cyberbullying impacts the school experience. Middle school can be a difficult time of transition for students during which significant changes occur socially, emotionally, and physically (Andrews & Bishop, 2012), and bullying often occurs in middle school. This is particularly true for students who are receiving special education services. While a great deal of recent research pertains to traditional forms of bullying and cyberbullying (Hase et al., 2015, Lapidot-Lefler et al., 2015, Waasdorp and Bradshaw, 2014), there is a lack of research on cyberbullying in students receiving special education compared to cyberbullying in general education populations.

Students have more access to technology than ever before, with 75% of students ages 12-17 owning cell phones and 88% of those students using text messaging regularly. The typical teenager sends 50 text messages a day, a majority of which involve
communication with peers (Allen, 2012). While technology has many positive aspects, it also is what makes cyberbullying a possibility. Allen (2012) found that 26% of the students with cell phones reported being harassed via their cell phone. Harassment via cell phone may take the form of cruel text messages or tweeting out photos of what a student wore in class that day to make fun of them. Forty-six percent of the teenagers in the study reported that they had sent something via their cellular phones that they later regretted, either because it was cyberbullying or because it led to them being cyberbullied.

Cyberbullying prevalence rates explain how much cyberbullying is occurring, but do not illuminate people’s perceptions regarding cyberbullying. Bryce and Fraser (2013) looked at perceptions of students (ages 9-19) in regards to cyberbullying. Their findings indicate that perceptions tend to vary, especially if terms such as cyberbullying are not clearly defined in advance. Understanding one’s perception of something can help us learn how people see topics in their everyday lives and better understand the role situations or occurrences plays in their lives. Thus, understanding how students and teachers view cyberbullying is important to help everyone understand what cyberbullying is, how often it is happening, and ultimately how it can be stopped.

The scant literature on cyberbullying, specifically in special education populations is concerning because this traditionally vulnerable group of students is often targeted by bullies (Roekel et al., 2010). Blake et al. (2012) reported that bullying victimization rates for students with disabilities ranged between 15-28%. However, this statistic represents traditional forms of bullying only, and does not include cyberbullying. The impact that cyberbullying may have on students in special education remains largely unexplored.
The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying in middle school by comparing perspectives of students who receive special education services to those in general education. This study is important because understanding students’ perceptions is a key first step towards eliminating cyberbullying in schools.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with a section on traditional bullying in schools, including the types of bullying and consequences of traditional bullying. The second section covers cyberbullying, including roles that students (bullies and victims) may play in cyberbullying, the prevalence rates of cyberbullying, and cyberbullying in schools. The impact and consequences of cyberbullying, the relationship between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, and the student experience of cyberbullying are also discussed. The third section reviews students’ social and school use of technology. The fourth section reviews literature related to bullying in special education, including traditional forms of bullying in special education. Finally, students’ perceptions regarding bullying, and perceptions about bullying in special education are discussed.

Traditional Bullying in Schools

Traditional bullying is considered a type of aggression repeatedly directed towards a person where there is also an imbalance of power (Burton & Gore, 2013). Traditional bullying is directly related to aggression; different types of bullies either use proactive or reactive aggression when they bully others. Proactive aggression is a means to an end because the intention is to gain something. Reactive aggression is defense driven and is often the byproduct of feeling threatened by others (Burton & Gore, 2013).
Further, both proactive and reactive aggression can be described as verbal, physical, or relational bullying (Compton et al., 2014). Verbal bullying refers to acts of aggression that occur verbally, for example, name calling or teasing. Physical bullying encompasses any physical aggression such as hitting, kicking, or throwing things. Relational bullying, also referred to as social exclusion bullying, is when students are passively aggressive. For example, the bully may intentionally leave someone out of a game, withhold their friendship, or spread rumors about another person (Compton et al., 2014). Wang and Iannotti (2012) report that based on their survey of adolescents, 53.6% of adolescents are involved with verbal bullying (bully or victim), 51.4 reported being involved with relational bullying, and 20.8 reported being involved with physical bullying.

Consequences. The consequences of traditional bullying are also important when considering bullying in any capacity. Compton et al. (2014) found that consequences of traditional forms of bullying for the victim likely include: isolation and lack of trust in others, depression, school absences, anxiety, contemplation of revenge, and suicide. While these consequences range in severity, each one has the potential to be devastating to a student. In a longitudinal study on the consequences of bullying from elementary school through high school, Smithyman et al. (2014) found that peer victimization had the potential to lead to consequences such as poor adjustment capabilities and poorer overall life satisfaction. These findings indicate that victims of bullying may have a more difficult time with transitions in life, such as the transition from middle school to high school or from high school to college. Additionally, these findings show that being a victim of bullying lessens life satisfaction, which means that students may experience higher rates of depression and anxiety (Compton et al., 2014).
Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Pelfrey Jr. & Weber, 2014, pp. 398). Burton and Gore (2014) point out that cyberbullying is distinctive in that the damage it inflicts is, in most cases, psychological in nature and that it occurs wherever the student has access to technology, which means it may not necessarily be escapable. The ability to copy and paste or share something that another person has said is also a distinctive feature of cyberbullying because of the ease at which technology allows information to spread. Cyberbullying has the potential to infiltrate the lives of the victims twenty-four hours a day and involves an instant and ever expanding audience (Compton et al., 2014). Waasdorp and Bradshaw (2014) conducted a study on cyberbullying among high school students and found that students tend to think that the person who is cyberbullying them is a friend of theirs, even if they are not sure who it is.

**Types of Cyberbullying.** In guidance published by the school of social work department at Tulane University, four types of cyberbullying were identified. These types include; social media bullying, harassment, flaming, and exclusion. (Tulane, 2018). Social media bullying includes shaming victims in their social circles or in private via a social networking platform. Gossiping and threatening via private messages is included in this category. Tulane (2018) states that harassment as a category of cyberbullying includes repeated and unrelenting negative threats. Harassment was created as a category of cyberbullying to highlight the importance of repetition in the definition of cyberbullying.
Flaming is when cyberbullying occurs in a public forum, like a chat room. In these situations the victim is targeted directly but members of a group are readily able to view the cyberbullying interaction (Tulane, 2018). This form of cyberbullying is unique in that it can make victims feel as though they are being ousted from the group and are no longer welcome. Finally, Tulane (2018) identified a fourth category of cyberbullying called exclusion. Instead of cyberbullying their victim directly, cyberbullied who engage in exclusion, cut the victim out of a social group that occurs online. This could include a Facebook chat group, Group Me, or any other form of social media that allows private chat groups to be formed.

**Roles in Cyberbullying.** Eden et al. (2015) describe six different roles that children may have in cyberbullying, including: 1) entitlement bully, 2) target, 3) retaliators, 4) victims of retaliators, 5) bystanders who support the problem, and 6) bystanders who are part of the solution. The *entitlement bully* holds the belief that they are above the person that they choose to bully in some way or another. This sense of entitlement makes them believe that they have the right to do or say things to another person. The sense of entitlement that develops can be based on even small and trivial differences between the bully and the victim. The *target* is the group of students who are cyberbullied by the entitlement bullies because of a belief that they are inferior. *Retaliators* are individuals who were bullied in the past or are current victims of (traditional or cyber) bullying. Retaliating bullies take to the Internet and become cyberbullies as a way to seek revenge for the bullying they experienced. *Victims of retaliators* are usually those who were bullying others but are now the victims of students trying to retaliate against bullies. This group is sometimes comprised of students who did
not bully first but because the retaliator does not know who cyberbullied them, has picked someone that they suspect might be doing it, might know who did it, or is involved in some other way.

_Bystanders who support the problem_ do not directly bully, but remain a part of the problem. They may know who is bullying another student and encourage them, or at the very least, do not attempt to intervene and help. For example, if a student knows that their friend is sending hurtful e-mails to another student but does not tell an adult or tell their friend to stop sending the e-mails they are a bystander who supports the problem.

_Bystanders who are part of the solution_ are not the bullies and they are not the victims of bullying. This group of students sees bullying and actively seeks to stop it. They may seek the help of an adult, confront the bully, protest what is happening in some way, or become a source of support for the victim (Eden et al., 2015).

**Prevalence.** One out of every five students in the United States and Great Britain report having been the victim of cyberbullying, either currently or in the past (Hartley et al., 2015). Pelfrey and Weber (2014) report that anywhere from 11 to 72% of students (middle school and high school age) have been victims of cyberbullying. This large range in Pelfrey and Weber’s study is due to the inclusion of survey questions asking students if they had been the victim of at least one online incident, which may be based on one unfriendly online comment. Additionally, 25% of teenagers in Pelfrey and Weber’s study reported that experiences on social networking sites lead to face-to-face issues with peers at school. For example, if one student posts a picture of themselves on Facebook and another student begins to comment on the picture with things such as, “you’re ugly,” or “why would you post such a disgusting picture of yourself,” and then brings it up at
school the next day to the student it has become a face-to-face interaction. The impact of negative social networking site experiences is concerning; 13% of students report feeling nervous about going to school the day following cyberbullying incidents.

**What Constitutes Cyberbullying?** Whittaker and Kowalski (2015) completed serval studies that were focused on cyberbullying and social media. The participants in their studies were college students. As part of their studies that determined keywords that were typically linked to cyberbullying, words which included, “fag,” “dick,” and “bitch.” These words were the three most used words that were primary indicators of cyberbullying. These words were directly linked to fostering an imbalance of power among students. Additionally, Whittaker and Kowalski (2015) found that there are certain modifiers which when used in tandem with the aforementioned words are indicators of an incidence of cyberbullying. These modifiers include, “such a,” “what a,” and “you’re a.”

**Cyberbullying in Schools.** Li (2006) defined cyberbullying as the sending or posting of harmful or cruel texts or images using the Internet or other digital communication devices. Cyberbullying creates a unique environment for the aggressor, or the bully, because it takes away some of the face-to-face aspects of traditional bullying. For example, having to say something to someone’s face and see the reaction that it brings out of the other person might inhibit someone from verbal bullying. One aspect of cyberbullying that makes it difficult for schools to address is that oftentimes the bullies are anonymous. The internet and social media allow bullies to be anonymous because you can create accounts without names. For example, if a fake e-mail account linked to a fake name and date of birth were created, one could then use that e-mail
address to create a fake twitter account. Twitter is one form of social media that may be a platform for bullying. Twitter is an online social networking cite where users can post 140 character limited statuses (Hische, 2010). Calvin et al. (2014) describe twitter as a hybrid between communication media and an online social network. They describe that it hosts real time discussions within the 140 character limit. This character limit will be increasing to 280 characters in the near future, however, this update is not yet live. While victims of cyberbullying may suspect who is bullying them, it is hard for schools to take action without proof.

Another issue with cyberbullying in schools is the peer influence that students face every day. Hinduja and Patchin (2013) investigated the extent to which peers influence the cyberbullying of their peers in adolescence. Findings indicate that how much a student thinks their peer group is engaging in an activity changes how much they engage in the activity. Thus, if a student thinks that their friends are making hurtful comments online, or that a majority of people their age are doing it, they are more likely to engage in the cyberbullying behaviors themselves. Hinduja and Patchin (2013) further found that students who said that their friends were cyberbullies were more likely to report that they themselves have cyberbullied someone.

**Protective Factors.** Research describes risk factors that can leave students vulnerable to become either victims or bullies in the school systems. Conversely, factors that keep students from being victims or perpetrators of bullying are called *protective factors*. Rose and Espelage (2012) found that students who are provided with educational supports are less likely to be victims of bullying. Educational supports meaning safe school environments with focus on bullying prevention and schools that fund
extracurricular activities which service as protective factors and foster community. Students with positive self-concepts, supportive peer relationships, academic independence, and who participate in class, may be less likely to bully others or be the victim of bullying. These factors are protective factors and act as a buffer to the bullying world. Dilmac (2017) found that student values also act as a protective factor to cyberbullying as the two are inversely related. Values that were found to act as protective factors for cyberbullying in particular include responsibility, friendship, peacefulness, respect, honesty, and tolerance.

**Impact and Consequences.** Cyberbullying increases feelings of social anxiety and lowers self-esteem in victims of bullying (Pelfrey Jr. & Weber, 2014). Thus, cyberbullying can change the way people interact with the world around them. The stress and pressure produced from cyberbullying can be unavoidable and overwhelming. Studies indicate that bullying leads to suicidal ideation and completion; however, it is not only victims of bullying that are at risk for increased suicide; bullies are at higher risk as well (Hepburn, Azrael, Molnar, & Miller, 2012). Hepburn et al. (2012) aimed to uncover a link between bullying and suicide. To do so, they used a self-report survey to examine the relationship between bullying and suicide/suicidal ideation. The researchers found that students associated with bullying in any capacity (bullies or victims) are more likely to attempt suicide and engage in suicide ideation than students not associated with bullying (Hepburn et al. 2012).

Another possible issue faced by victims of bullying is a fear of coming to school resulting in missed instruction. Steiner and Rasberry (2015) found that both traditional forms of bullying and cyberbullying were equally likely to lead to a student missing
school. Female students were more likely to miss school due to cyberbullying while male students were more likely to miss school due to traditional forms of bullying.

Specifically, Steiner and Rasberry (2015) found that 15.5% of students who are bullied have missed one or more days of school in the past 30 days. Young-Jones, Fursa, Byrket, and Sly (2015) conducted a study to understand the implications of victimization on academic motivation and found that victims of bullying are less academically motivated and less likely to achieve at the collegiate level. An issue of concern that arises from bullying is its effect on mental health of bullies and bullying victims. Social media has illustrated that bullying has led to suicidal ideation and completion, but it is not only victims of bullying that are at risk for increased suicide; bullies are at higher risk as well (Hepburn, Azrael, Molnar, & Miller, 2012). This risk is associated with bullies being likely to feel that they do not have control over their lives or experiencing feelings of depression/anxiety.

**Relationship to Traditional Bullying.** Holfeld and Grabe (2012) found that being a victim of traditional forms of bullying is the biggest predictor of being a victim of cyberbullying. In fact, the risk of being victimized online increased almost ten times for those who were the victims of traditional bullying. Sticca and Perren (2013) found that cyberbullying was worse than traditional bullying due to the increased potential for a larger audience. In their survey responses, students gave two major reasons why cyberbullying is worse than traditional forms of bullying. First, cyberbullying ruins the pleasure of using the internet and tools to access the internet such as cell phones and tablets. Second, students don’t think that adults can help them with cyberbullying because they lack knowledge of technology. They feel that adults can be more helpful with
traditional bullying because they can stop it when they see it occurring and they know who the bully is (Sticca & Perren, 2013).

**Student Experience.** In schools, cyberbullying may be part of the positioning process for students, meaning that students may choose to cyberbully someone as a way to increase their own social status (*proactive* bullying). This may mean that students are trying to achieve a higher social status themselves or diminish the social status of someone they feel threatens their own social status (Baas et al., 2013). Baas et al. found that students are very aware of cyberbullying. Students often have a fear-centered reaction to cyberbullying because they have seen how socially devastating it can be to someone. Students also report that not knowing who may be bullying them from the other side of the screen is difficult because it makes it hard to know if you can trust your friends or if they are the ones bullying you. Baas et al. (2013) also found that students are aware of the impact that cyberbullying can have on the victims of cyberbullying.

**Student Use of Technology**

Technology is a significant part of daily life in western civilization, including among youth in the United States. Students growing up in the age of increasing technology view tools like cell phones and access to the internet as a critical part of their social life (Sticca & Perren, 2013).

**Social Use.** Pelfrey Jr. and Weber (2014) report that 77% of teenagers between the ages of 12-17 own a cell phone. Teens report using their cellular devices to text, call, video-chat, use social networking sites, use messengers, and e-mail. Approximately 95% of all teens are online and 80% of them are using social networking sites (Pelfrey Jr. & Weber 2014). Upon closer analysis, Pelfrey Jr. and Weber (2014) found that 63% of the
daily communication for teens takes place via text messaging. Phone calls accounted for
39% of communication; 29% of communication was done via messengers on social
networking sites, 22% via instant messaging, and 35% were in-person outside of school.
These prevalence rates have implications for cyberbullying because increased screen time
means that the likelihood of cyberbullying occur also increases.

Facebook, in particular, is a common venue for cyberbullying among adolescents.
Katz, Felix, and Gubernick (2014) conducted a survey of technology use in adolescents
and their preferred platforms of social networking. Findings of their study show that
adolescents are initially overwhelmed by Facebook and often leery of the social
networking site but as their friend groups become tighter they feel freer to post more
frequently and more personal information on Facebook. This transition creates an avenue
for cyberbullying as potential bullies now have access to victims and personal
information about victims.

Twitter is also a popular platform for cyberbullying. Calvin et al. (2014) conducted a study focusing on twitter, the use of hashtags and their impact on bullying and cyberbullying. Hashtags are keywords that are prefixed with a # symbol and are annotated within tweets themselves. The study categorized different hashtags that were typically linked to bullying to discover their intents. The study found that the use of hashtags on twitter ranged from talking about consequences of cyberbullying, like suicide, to antibullying/cyberbullying campaigns, and actual occurrences of cyberbullying.

In this ever changing landscape of technology, as parents and adults catch up to
students and social media, the social media changes again. The Pew Research Center
(2017) reports that Facebook and YouTube dominate the social media market for adults with roughly 63 to 78% of adults reporting regular use of those sites. However, when focusing on the 18 year old to 24 year olds, snapshot and Instagram join Facebook and YouTube as the top used social media sites. In fact, 94% of 18 to 24 year olds report regular use of YouTube (Social Media Use in 2018, 2018). According to the Statistics Portal, Snapchat is the most popular social media site among teens with 79% of teens reporting use, while Facebook is the second most popular with 76% of teens reporting use. (Research of Social Media and Networking Sites, 2017). Also on the list of sites popular among teens were; Instagram, What’s app, Tumblr, and Musical. Ly. Additionally, as technology changes and social media evolves, both students and adults are faced with the reality of keeping up with changing technology.

Rice et al. (2015) found that students who reported any involvement in cyberbullying were more likely to report using the internet for more than three hours every day. Additionally, students who texted others more than fifty times a day were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying in some form or another (either as the perpetrator or the victim).

**Technology and Schools.** Li et al. (2015) found that as technology has become a larger part of not only pop culture, but culture in general, the idea of using technology in the classroom has become more and more enticing. Many schools provide students with access to technology, sometimes in the form of chrome books and iPads, for example. Many new programs geared towards teaching in the general education classroom and towards intervention are now available on an iPad or table, which also encourages the switch to technology in the classroom. Li et al. (2015) also found that students are
interested in using technology to learn, but that they are not self-motivated to do it for learning purposes in the classroom setting. As schools focus more and more on technology, they are changing their rules to allow students to have laptops and cell phones in class. These changes in school rules allow students to have access to texts, social media, and e-mail during the school day, increasing their screen time and increasing the potential for cyberbullying incidents.

**Bullying in Special Education**

Bullying has become a problem nationwide and consideration must be given to characteristics that have the potential to place students at a greater risk for being involved in bullying (Rose et al., 2011). When considering bullying in special education populations, there may be differences within that population itself that affect the likelihood of being bullied. For example, students in inclusive settings may be bullied at different rates than those in non-inclusive settings. Students with more severe disabilities may be bullied more than students with mild disabilities. Inclusive settings meaning educational settings where both students receiving special education services and students not receiving those services are educated together. Rose et al. (2011) reported that 55% of students with mild learning disabilities and 78% of students with moderate learning disabilities experience peer victimization in the form of bullying. Therefore, when considering bullying in special education it is important to consider the specific areas of disability.

**Traditional Bullying in Special Education.** “Peer aggression and victimization by bullying are persistent problems for students receiving special education services for their disabilities” (Hartley et al., 2015, pp.176). Today, 95% of students who receive
special education services are educated in a general education classroom, spending more than 80% of their day with their typically developing peers (Hartley et al., 2015). Hartley et al. (2015) surveyed more than 3,000 students receiving special education services, all of whom reported being a victim of bullying two to three times a month. The survey was based on the Youth Voice Project which surveyed all of the students in the school, one of the leading and most comprehensive surveys of victimization currently available. Results indicated that bullying behaviors among general education students tend to change as they progress through school, from physical to more relational forms of bullying.

Hartley et al. (2015) reported a gender difference between who was more likely to be traditionally bullied in special education. Males were more likely to be traditionally bullied than females, and the form of the traditional bullying was typically physical in nature (e.g., hitting, punching, poking, biting, etc.). No grade level differences were found.

Hartley et al. (2015) reported that, overall, students receiving special education services were overrepresented as targets of bullying in American schools. The researchers explained that this is due to the imbalance of power that exists in bully and victim relationship. There may be a perceived imbalance of power between general education students and those receiving special education services. This may include one group thinking they are more intelligent than the other group, one group being more physically powerful, or one group being more socially able. Additionally, students receiving special education services are seen as less likely to retaliate against their bullies by the bullies themselves, again due to the imbalance of power. The lower likelihood of retaliation
means that bullies are less concerned with the consequences of bullying students in special education.

Finally, Hartley et al. (2015) note that certain children receiving special education services are more prone to misread nonverbal communication from bullies or to misunderstand when other students are deliberately mean to them. Some students receiving special education services may lack the social skills, such as active listening, apologizing for perceived wrong doing, or seeking outside help to deescalate situations of verbal and physical violence (Hartley et al., 2015).

**Perceptions of Bullying in Schools**

In a qualitative study, Compton et al. (2014) explored the views of teachers, parents, and students regarding cyberbullying through focus groups. During the first half of the focus group sessions the researchers let the participants answer the questions asked to the group based on their own definition of cyberbullying to gather information on individual’s perceptions. Halfway through the sessions the researchers shared a common definition with the group and the remainder of the session was based on that definition.

One critical part of the Compton et al. (2014) study asked participants to explain their understanding of cyberbullying. Results showed that there were differences in the definition of cyberbullying among all three participant subgroups (teacher, parents, and students). Students and teachers were more likely to report that intent to cause harm was needed to cyberbully, whereas parents did not think this component of cyberbullying was necessary. The three groups of participants also did not agree whether repetition was required for an incident to be considered cyberbullying. Reporting an imbalance of power was the only aspect of bullying reported by all of the participant groups. Differences in
the way that people perceive cyberbullying, for example, what cyberbullying is or why it is occurring, stem from the way that people define cyberbullying.

**Student Perceptions.** High school students tend to report that the person cyberbullying them is a friend, even if they are not sure who it is; this can make the experience more challenging for them. One concerning finding from Compton et al. (2014) was that a majority of youth who are cyberbullied does not tell an adult. They do not think that adults can do anything about the bullying because it occurs online and they see adults as less technologically savvy (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2014). Eden et al. (2012) report that 64% of the students they surveyed in junior high believed that adults (both parents and teachers) took action to stop cyberbullying when they were informed that it was occurring.

**Perceptions of Bullying in Special Education.** In a study completed solely with students identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Roekel et al. (2009) used surveys to examine peer ratings of bullying, self-ratings of bullying, teacher ratings of bullying, and perceptions of bullying. To ensure that all participants understood the researcher’s definition of bullying, it was printed on the survey. The researchers hypothesized that students with ASD would have difficulty recognizing bullying behavior. Roekel et al. (2009) found that between 6-46% of the students with ASD were victims of bullying. However, the teachers reported much higher numbers than the students, leading to the conclusion that there are differences in perceptions within special education depending on which group, meaning staff or students, were surveyed. Roekel et al. (2009) explain that the perception of bullying is twofold. First, the individual has to perceive that the action is aggressive in nature. Second, s/he has to perceive that the
action is directed at someone weaker than the aggressor. Thus, it is easy to understand why there may be differences in the perception of an event with regard to bullying. This is critical in regards to cyberbullying because it could indicate that students in special education do not perceive cyberbullying when it is happening and, in turn, may be unknowing victims. This population needs to be better understood with regards to cyberbullying because their voice is not currently represented in the literature.

The Present Study

Extensive research exists on traditional forms of bullying, what traditional bullying looks like in schools, and the consequences of traditional bullying. With regard to cyberbullying specifically, studies have examined the relationship between students’ screen time and the likelihood of cyberbullying. There is a notable absence of research regarding cyberbullying specifically for students in special education. Therefore, the present study seeks to address the gap in literature regarding the perceptions of cyberbullying in students receiving special education services, as compared to general education students.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Question

This study examined the following research question: What are the perceptions of cyberbullying among middle school students in general education and special education?

Research Design

This study used phenomenological qualitative design to examine the relationship between the perceptions of students in general education and the perceptions of students receiving special education services with regard to cyberbullying. This study employed a phenomenological design because it sought to understand the student’s perception of cyberbullying. The phenomenological inquiry was particularly appropriate to address meanings and perspectives of research participants. The major concern of phenomenological analysis is to understand "how the everyday, inter-subjective world is constituted" (Schwandt, 2000). For the purpose of this study, phenomenological was interpreted to mean, “(a study) that focused on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (Patton, 1990, pp.71). A qualitative design was selected in order to better understand the students’ perceptions of cyberbullying. Asking open-ended interview questions allowed the participants to draw on experiences and explain their perceptions to the researcher.
Participants and Setting

In qualitative research designs, the data gathered further develops, contributes to and expounds upon the understanding of a phenomenon, thus sampling is deliberate (Krathwohl, 1998; Richard & Morse, 2007). Purposive sampling is used in qualitative research to identify cases that will develop, understand, clarify and describe the phenomenon studied (Krathwohl, 1998). Therefore, the participants in this study included a purposive sample of middle school students in either a general education classroom setting and students receiving special education services from a variety of disability categories as laid out by the Ohio Department of Education.

Snowball sampling was utilized to recruit participants; the study was not directly linked to a school district and parents were asked directly for their consent. As the study is not linked to a school district. E-mails were sent out to people that the researcher had contact with asking for e-mails of parents with children ages 11-14 who were alright with receiving an email from the researcher about potentially participating in the study. Students participating in the study were asked for their assent to participate in the study. It was important for the gathering of quality data that the students wanted to participate in the study and were willing to answer the interview questions.

Participants in the current study included \( n = 6 \) middle school students (ages 11-14). Three participants were general education students and three were special education students. Any student who was on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was eligible as a special education student for the purposes of the current study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity and confidentiality of the students.
Prior to the start of interviewing students, rapport was established between the interviewer and interviewee. To establish rapport, conversations took place regarding the interests of the students being interviewed. Students may have also been asked about their day, weekend, things they were looking forward to, or any other topic that arose naturally.

**General Education Participants.** Two female and one male general education participant were interviewed for this study.

**Mae.** Mae was interviewed on March 28, 2017. She was fourteen years old at the time and enrolled in the eighth grade. Mae attended a local suburban middle school in a traditionally middle class district. Mae was part of the general education curriculum and was not receiving any special education services.

While building rapport before the interview and in speaking after the interview, Mae shared that she enjoys school a lot. She sometimes feels a lot of pressure to do well in school and doesn’t ever want to settle for less than an A. Mae explained that she is starting to become interested in boys and potentially having a boyfriend. She expressed that her parents and her don’t always see eye to eye on this issue and that they are afraid if they increase her allotted phone time, she will spend more time focusing on boys.

**Pharah.** Pharah was interviewed on April 3, 2017. She was eleven years old at the time of the interview and enrolled in the sixth grade. Pharah attended a local suburban middle school in a traditionally middle class district. Pharah was part of the general education curriculum and was not receiving any special education services. Pharah spent a lot of time talking about videogames and sharing facts about some of her favorite games. Pharah asked if she could play on her phone during the interview and was worried
that she wouldn’t be able to talk with her friends during the interview if she didn’t have her phone.

**Winston.** Winston was interviewed on May 26, 2017. He was thirteen years old at the time and enrolled in the seventh grade. Winston was attending a local suburban middle school in a high socio-economic area. Winston was enrolled in the general education curriculum and was not receiving any special education services. Winston shared that he has his own phone, laptop, and tablet. He shared that he also has a computer at school for school things but that he doesn’t like it because it’s not a Mac. Winston feels like he is very tech savvy and that he may want to go into a career with technology someday.

**Special Education Participants.** Two female and one male special education participant were interviewed for this study.

**Ana.** Ana was interviewed on April 3, 2017. She was twelve years old at the time and enrolled in the sixth grade. Ana was attending a local middle school in an urban setting. Ana was on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to address needs based on her eligibility category of Autism. Ana’s mother was apprehensive about allowing her to participate because she felt that Ana had been sheltered from a lot of the topics that the interview would cover.

Ana is aware that she has a diagnosis of Autism and provides the definition of Autism when asked. Ana did not articulate that Autism made her unique and did not describe the impact of her disability, despite being asked questions regarding her perception of what it is like to be a student diagnosed with Autism. Ana shared that she likes going to school and that she is fond of her teachers. Ana shared that she enjoys
playing with dolls and that she likes to get dressed up herself. She is currently learning how to apply make-up, but, “just for pretend and fun.”

**Bridget.** Bridget was interviewed on May 1, 2017. She was twelve years old at the time and enrolled in the sixth grade. Bridget was attending a local middle school in an urban setting with a lower socio-economic population. Bridget was on an IEP to address her needs based on her eligibility category of Other Health Impairment-Minor (OHI). Bridget qualified under this disability category due her diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). At the time of the interview, Bridget took medication for ADHD during the weekdays, but not on the weekends.

Bridget does not know that she has a diagnosis of ADHD and that she is on her IEP due to the impact of this diagnosis on her education. Her mother does not want her to be aware of this diagnosis. Bridgett doesn’t always enjoy going to school and really dislikes getting up early. In her free time she likes to play videogames. Bridget thinks that learning is hard and reports that she doesn’t like to ask questions in class because she doesn’t want to appear to not understand something in class.

**Jack.** Jack was interviewed on May 5, 2017. He was eleven years old at the time of his interview and enrolled in the sixth grade. Jack was attending a local suburban middle school in a high socio-economic area. Jack was on an IEP to address his needs based on his eligibility category of Other Health Impairment-Minor (OHI). Jack qualified under this disability category due to a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). At the time of the interview, Jack was not taking medication for ADHD.
During Jack’s interview, he had a hard time sitting down to answer questions so the interview was conducted while engaging in activities such as: playing a board game and passing a ball. Jack shared that the best parts of his day are gym and recess. He reports that he gets into a lot of trouble at school and that sometimes he is afraid that his teachers don’t like him. Jack wants to learn in school but thinks that math and reading are “just so, so hard.”

**Setting.** Interviews were conducted with the participants in a setting agreed upon by the parents of the student being interviewed and the researcher. Settings included a quiet room in the home of the participant while the parents were home or a quiet room in a church that the participant attended.

**Materials**

**Measures.** A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) created by the researcher was used in the present study. Richard and Morse (2007) state that the semi-structured interview is used when the researcher has acquired knowledge from the literature about the topic and therefore can develop open-ended questions in a logical order. The goal of a semi-structured interview is to allow participants to answer a question that falls in line with the data needed, but gives them room to expand on the issues at hand. The interview topics included: defining cyberbullying and cyberbullying behaviors as well as why students think other students (or themselves if they would like to disclose that information) engage in that behavior.

**Procedures**

**Data Collection.** Before data collection began, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board and parental consent (Appendix B) was gained from each
participant’s parent/guardian. Each child who participated in the student also gave their assent to participate in the study. Additionally, the semi-structured interview questions were piloted with two students. Based on the results of the pilot interviews, the questions were altered to be more youth friendly as it appeared that some of the vocabulary in the semi-structured interview was difficult for the students to understand. One of the students was receiving special education services and one was receiving the general curriculum.

Each participant was interviewed in depth for approximately 15 to 30 minutes with the semi-structured interview instrument. Each interview was audio recorded for the sake of accuracy in representing what the participant said during the transcription process. Notes were taken by the researcher during the interview. After the interview, the researcher summarized the interview back to the student to ensure that the information was accurate. The researcher journaled for 10-15 minutes following each interview as a way to debrief the experience. This reflexive journaling was completed in the form of a concept map with the students name at the center and thoughts regarding the interview process and information shared by the student stemming from the center. All information regarding participants was kept in a secured research file in the home of the researcher.

**Data Analyses.** The interviews conducted with the students were first transcribed by the researcher. The additional filler words used by the students, for example, “like” and “um” were transcribed at the discretion of the researcher. Long pauses were noted in the transcription of the interview as the pauses were considered relevant to what the student was saying or thinking about. Then, the data collected through interviews were analyzed by coding the data into major themes and then reporting information gained from the interviews. The data were coded by hand and not with the use of software.
Through the coding process, instances that were conceptually similar were grouped together; instances that were different from one another received different codes. This enabled the researcher to discern emerging themes and to identify properties and characteristics of each theme. The researcher used within-code comparisons to analyze data within thematic codes, which served to increase reliability and uncover different aspects within single themes; this served to add richness and depth to the analysis. For reliability, the coded data were presented to another school psychology graduate student who verified the identified themes. The data collected from the two populations of students were compared by looking at the themes that emerged from the interviews and examining if and how the themes differed. At the conclusion of each interview, the content was summarized back to the study participant as a method of member checking. However, these summaries were not transcribed and therefore not reviewed by the peer who checked the coding of the transcriptions.

Following the interview process, the researcher wrote concepts maps which were kept as reflexive journals. When analyzing the coded data, the reflexive journals were used to remember thoughts and feelings from the interviews. This information used in tandem with the interview transcripts allowed the researcher to make the analysis of the students’ point of view as true to the student as possible.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The research question for this study addressed the perceptions of students in middle school in regards to special education. Based on the interviews conducted with the participants in this study, four major themes emerged. The first theme was that students did not feel that cyberbullying was a problem that their parents could solve. This theme came up universally among participants in this study. The second major theme that emerged was that the students receiving special education services had a lack of understanding of cyberbullying in general. This theme emerged within the subgroup of students who were classified in the special education group. A third theme was that students participating in only the general education curriculum perceived their peers receiving special education services to be more likely to be the victim of cyberbullying. Finally, a fourth theme regarding student’s cyberbullying for a variety of reasons emerged. Themes three and four emerged universally within the interviews conducted with the students.

Parents Cannot Help with Cyberbullying

The first theme identified from the student interviews is that cyberbullying is not a problem that students feel their parents can fix. This theme was apparent across
genders, ages, and educational placement. During his interview, Jack reported that, “parents don’t really understand computers, so they wouldn’t know how to take it down.” Jack also shared that if a parent knew who was doing the cyberbullying, they could talk to that person’s parents. This statements indicated that a parent solution may not be internet based but rather an in person solution. This may perpetuate the idea that parents are not tech savvy. Similarly, Pharah reported that, “it would be nice to tell an adult but really the only way to get away from it (cyberbullying) is to get off their phone and relax. Get away from it.” When describing this take on parents’ ability to help with cyberbullying, Pharah seemed nonchalant. She demonstrated this by frequently shrugging her shoulders and looking around the room as though she was uninterested. When asked how schools could help with cyberbullying, Pharah did not mention parent involvement as helpful.

Bridget explained during her interview that she would probably not tell anyone but she might tell a friend. When asked about telling an adult she said, “Like, how would they help?” Mae responded by saying,

You don’t really tell your parents everything in middle school. That’s not cool. Like, if it were an emergency I might tell but just so that I could see a counselor or someone, not because I thought it would go away. I mean, there’s news stories and stuff where people had to move. They’re parents couldn’t help them so…

Winston reported that he wouldn’t tell an adult because, “They can’t really do much against people they don’t know.”

In her interview, Ana—who was diagnosed with autism—was the outlier stating that, “I would tell my mom.”
**Video Games.** A sub-theme that emerged from this theme was the presence of video games as a medium for cyberbullying. Particularly, team based games. Bridgett shared that, “People can be mean on video games.” When asked to share more, she explained that in these team-based games, people chat via a microphone with people that they either know or that they have been grouped with randomly. Winston shared, “When people lose in games they can be total *****.” Winston also shared that videogames likely cultivate a hostile environment that would foster a bully mentality as people, “take losing seriously”. Given that video games and video game chat came up several times, it is a medium for communication and cyberbullying that adults must be mindful of.

As technology changes rapidly, adults are tasked with staying current on technology and communication trends. Many adults may not know about the level of communication that occurs via gaming platform and as such adults may not be intervening as necessary when cyberbullying occurs. This perpetuates the idea that parents are not able to help when cyberbullying occurs.

**Cyberbullying Increases in High School.** Another sub-theme that emerged related to this theme was that these middle school students believe cyberbullying is going to get worse in high school. Results of this study indicate that students already believe that their parents cannot help them if cyberbullying occurs. This idea can be linked to the perception that adults are not always able to help with cyberbullying. As students grow older and their access to technology changes, it stands that they have the potential for more exposure to cyberbullying with less of an option for adults to help them. When students were asked about cyberbullying in middle school and their thoughts about the future, Mae shared that “high school is probably worse for cyberbullying.” Bridget thinks
that cyberbullying will, “probably get worse in high school.” When asked to expand on her statement she shared that, “it’s the age difference. When you get older, you get more issues, I guess.” By this statement she explained that she meant, life gets more complicated as you get older. When Pharah was asked about this topic, she shared that she thinks cyberbullying would get worse. She thinks that as you get older you have access to more technology and the more that things that happen gets passed around.

**Students Receiving Special Education Services were Less Aware**

The second theme that emerged from the interviews with the students was that students receiving special education services were less aware of cyberbullying, its definition, and questions derived from the topic. For example, when asked about the definition of cyberbullying, Ana responded, “I don’t know what that is.” When asked about her understanding of bullying in general she stated, “it’s when people call you names and push you around.” After hearing the definition of cyberbullying, Ana expressed that cyberbullying was just, “rude text messages.” When Bridget was initially asked what the definition of cyberbullying was she stated, “It’s not a big deal unless you make it a big deal.” In order to prompt her for a definition of cyberbullying, she had to be asked what cyberbullying might look like.

In another showcase of a lack of understanding for the broad concepts, Bridget shared that cyberbullying was “just something stupid on the internet.” When asked to expand on her definition she stated, “When I play videogames, I see people fighting, I try to ignore it.” When asked about the definition of cyberbullying, Jack stated that “it’s a thing that is bad.” In contrast to the students receiving special education services, their...
general education counterparts provided a clearer concept of cyberbullying. Winston’s definition of cyberbullying included,

Having a person online…telling other people about your private information or having embarrassing pictures of your or trying to hurt you and just being mean in general, online.

In addition to a lack of understanding of cyberbullying as a concept, the student’s in the subgroup receiving special education demonstrated a lack of understanding for other questions regarding cyberbullying. When asked, “Do you think one of these groups (general education or special education) is more likely to cyberbully than the others,” Ana responded with, “I don’t trust people in black,” and “they look like the ones that would do it.” When Bridget was asked where cyberbullying might occur, other than via gaming servers, she responded with, “like kids have problems in their lives and take their anger out on other people.” The responses that the students gave did not always align with the “wh” questions they were asked. These struggles may be directly linked to the student’s disabilities or relative areas of weaknesses if they have language goals on their IEP’s.

Of the conducted interviews, Ana was the most impacted by this theme. Ana often gave one word responses during the interview and had a difficult time grasping concepts. For example, when asked what cyberbullying was, Ana responded that she did not know. After it was defined for her, she stated that she could not remember what it meant. After it was explained to her again, she came up with “rude text messages.”
**General Education Students Perceived Their Peers as Victims**

The third theme that emerged from interviews was that students participating in only the general education curriculum perceived their peers receiving special education services as more likely to be the victim of cyberbullying. Conversely, students receiving special education services viewed themselves as equally likely to be victims of cyberbullying. Pharah reported that students in special education are, “more likely to be cyberbully victims. They’re victims because they’re different and the bully doesn’t like that.” Pharah expanded on her thoughts by focusing on how students in special education are different from the bully. Winston stated that students in special education are more likely to be, “victims because they’re different, usually.” Mae stated that, “Well, I suppose they could be both but probably more likely to be victims because they would be easy targets.” She expanded by increasing her certainty that they would be victims because they stand out for being different.

In contrast, students receiving special education services either reported that the groups were just as likely to be victims or gave an answer that did not align with the question. Jack reported, “It doesn’t really matter. They’re probably really the same.” Bridget shared that students in both groups were, “the same, I guess.” When she gave this answer she appeared confused and indicated that she was unclear as to why anyone would ask this question in the first place. Angela reported, “The only difference would be in how they are raised.”

One sub-theme that emerged from this theme was students in the general education curriculum had a stereo-typed view of what special education was. This relates to how general education students view their special education counterparts and is
perhaps related to how they view special education students as more likely to be victims of cyberbullying.

As part of the interviewing process, students were asked if they knew what special education was, in order to have an understanding of their perspectives before they were asked about special education and cyberbullying. When asked about special education, two of the general education students shared their perspectives. Pharah said, “Yeah, like wheelchairs and stuff.” Pharah went on to explain that she knows this is what special education is because, “they come into our gym class and stuff.” Her definition was primarily based on students in self-contained educational settings pushing out into the general school setting for inclusion class settings. Winston said, “Yeah, like kids that look like they aren’t as smart and stuff.” When asked to describe special education, Bridget, who received special education services said, “It’s like when you learn different. Like you need extra time to do things.” She also shared that it might look like, “needing a teacher to focus on you more.”

**Students Cyberbully for a Variety of Reasons**

When talking about reasons that people may cyberbully others, Mae shared that, “you don’t really know what a cyberbully looks like, like it can be anyone.” She went on to share that, “aren’t cyberbullies just people that are hurting too?” Mae seemed to have a good grasp on cyberbullying perpetrators and the way that they may be feeling. She went on to share that life may be bad for these people.

Jack shared that, “All kinds of people cyberbully,” and when asked to elaborate stated that, “some people just want to be mean to others.” When asked why he felt people cyberbullied, Winston shared that maybe people who, “have a lot of money and don’t
know what it feels like not to have as much,” may be likely to cyberbully. Bridget shared that “cyberbullies are trying to be cool, like popular for being mean.” Similarly aligned to the sentiments shared by Bridget, Ana shared that (cyberbullies) “think it’s fun or funny.” These statements indicate that all students who participated in this study had an understanding of the point of view of a cyberbully. When asked to explain more about her thoughts, Bridget shared that these students may cyberbully because “they have issues in real life -- parent issues or something.”
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Review of Purpose and Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of middle school students in both general education and special education settings in regards to cyberbullying. The findings of this study were based on interviews conducted with six middle school students – three students receiving special education services, and three students in the general education curriculum. Results indicated that students believe that, if cyberbullying occurs, parents cannot help them to solve the problem. Additionally, findings indicated that students receiving special education services generally did not understand what cyberbullying was. Additionally, students participating in only the general education curriculum believed their peers receiving special education services as more likely to be the victim of cyberbullying. Participating students in special education did not perceive cyberbullying as an issue. Finally, students had varying perceptions of the type of students and reasons that a student would cyberbully.

Interpretation of Findings

The question addressed in this study sought to explore perceptions (including differences in) of middle school students in special education and general education in regards to cyberbullying. Based on the major themes that emerged from the interviews with students, findings of this study indicate that students in both educational settings are
aware that cyberbullying is happening. The student’s level of experience and understanding of cyberbullying varied based on their own backgrounds, including ages and educational placement. For example, Ana, who has Autism and thus does not possess full understanding of social constructs, has different background knowledge and understanding than the other students who participated in this study. As such, she brings a unique perspective to the discussion. Younger participants like Pharah and Jack have less school experience at the middle school level to draw from than older participants like Mae and Winston.

Previous research indicated that the nature of cyberbullying depends on the nature of the perpetrator of cyberbullying (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). This phenomenon was uncovered in the current research study, specifically seen in students’ responses to the questions about what kind of person would cyberbully. Mae shared that, “you don’t really know what a cyberbully looks like, like it can be anyone.” She went on to share that, “aren’t cyberbullies just people that are hurting too?” Jack shared that, “All kinds of people cyberbully,” and when asked to elaborate stated that, “some people just want to be mean to others.” Conversely, Bridget shared, “cyberbullies are trying to be cool, like popular for being mean.” All of these statements share the sentiment that cyberbullying occurs for many different reasons.

Findings also indicate that students do not feel that their parents can help them with cyberbullying and report that they are less likely to share information regarding cyberbullying with their parents due to feeling that parents cannot help alleviate the problem. Compton (2014) found that parents had a differing opinion of cyberbullying than teachers and students in that they viewed the definition of cyberbullying and actions
that would be considered cyberbullying differently. The findings of the current study are consistent with the findings of previous research, indicating that parents are not on the same page as students. This indicates that a disconnect exists between students and parents regarding cyberbullying.

Additional findings from this study indicate that students in special education do not always have a firm understanding of cyberbullying and the questions surrounding cyberbullying that they were asked as part of the semi-structured interview. Questions that included the type of people that may engage in cyberbullying. These findings are consistent with the work of Roekel et al. (2009), which focused on students in special education. Their findings showed that, to be a victim of cyberbullying or any bullying, one has to have an understanding that they are the victim.

The findings of the current study indicate that students in general education and students receiving special education services have varying viewpoints regarding which group of students are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying. Students receiving the general education curriculum reported that students receiving special education services are likely to be victims of bullying. Conversely, students receiving special education services thought that all students were equally likely to be victims of cyberbullying.

This finding may indicate that students not receiving special education services may have a different perception of students receiving special education students than students who are receiving special education services have about themselves. This finding was based on the report of students in special education who did not see a difference between themselves and general education students. It is consistent with the findings of Hartley et al. (2015), who found an imbalance of power between students in
general education and special education. This imbalance of power is related to social status that students have in schools. Social status can be related to educational placement and a perception that students receiving special education services are lesser than their counterparts. Therefore, a student’s preconceived or stereotyped view of an educational placement of another student could give them the perception of having power over that group. This imbalance of power leaves the stakeholder with more perceived power to cyberbully someone with less perceived power.

Finally, the current findings indicated that students have varying ideas of why they think that cyberbullies decide to cyberbully and the type of people that they feel would be most likely to cyberbully. In a study completed by Campbell et al (2013) researchers found that students who engage in cyberbullying report more social struggles, depression, and anxiety than their non-perpetrator peers. Students who engaged in cyberbullying reported that they didn’t realize or understand the harsh impact that the experience of being cyberbullied would have on their victims. The internal struggles of the student’s engaged in cyberbullying behaviors include; poor social skills, depression, and anxiety. These internalizing problems explain the reasoning why some cyberbullies might decide to cyberbully.

For example, Jack shared that, “All kinds of people cyberbully,” and that, “some people just want to be mean to others.” Winston shared that maybe people who, “have a lot of money and don’t know what it feels like not to have as much,” may be likely to cyberbully. Bridget shared, “cyberbullies are trying to be cool, like popular for being mean.” All of these different examples of why people cyberbully indicate that students may draw on their personal experiences to explain why people do something that all the
participants categorize as, “mean,” and/or “hurtful.” Winston, who is from a higher socioeconomic status school may view money and valuables as a core reason why cyberbullying occurs. He evidenced this when he talked about the spoiled nature of people who are cyberbullies. Bridget may draw from her experiences watching movies about teenage girls that she stated she enjoyed after her interview. She also explained that movies about teenage girls are relatable for her and her friend group because they see themselves in those types of movies.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study is that some of the students with disabilities had a hard time sitting and participating in the interviews. For example, Jack had difficulty sitting still during the interview. As such, the interviewer decided to play a board game with him while the interview was conducted. Although this decision helped Jack sit and listen to the questions asked, it is possible that this hindered his accurate comprehension of the questions or the time he spent thinking about his answers.

Given the difficulty that some of the students had sitting still during the interviews, if this study was completed again, a different line of questioning and different question structures would have been trialed and possibly used. Questions that allowed for greater explanation of concepts in a natural way may have been helpful. In addition to changing the types of questions that were asked, finding more ways to engage the student interviewees is an additional recommendation. Some of the middle school students stuck to short one words answers and did not have a lot of explanation for their reasoning when prompted with, “Will you tell me more about that,” or “Tell me more.”
Additionally, the information provided by the students may be different if greater variation in student socio-economic status, disability category, age, grade-level, or school setting. This study looked at three students with disabilities from only two disability categories. Expanding the study to include all disability categories or including only disability categories encompassing students with social/language deficits may yield different results and as such add important information to the research base for cyberbullying. While this study focused on students in middle school, the perceptions of high school and college students would likely add to the discussion of cyberbullying in the educational setting.

Finally, a large limitation of this study was the summarizing of the interview at the conclusion of the interview with the students. Typically this summary was short, however, as the summary was not transcribed and therefore not checked by the peer who helped with the validity of the study. Future studies should verify the summary of the interviews with students in a more concrete fashion to ensure accuracy.

Future Research

Future studies should address the limitations covered in this study. Addressing a wider range of disability categories may change the results of this study and would add to the knowledge base regarding cyberbullying in middle school. Additionally, future research might consider differentiating between low and high incidence disabilities and potentially examine if a difference exists between those two groups of students. Future research should also consider adding parent or school staff interviews to examine adult perceptions of cyberbullying are in middle school. Such research could discern whether perceptions of adults and students are similar and where the differences are.
Future studies could expand on this study by categorizing students into groups such as perpetrators of cyberbullying, victims of cyberbullying, and bystanders of cyberbullying. Looking at the perceptions of students from these points of view would be helpful in understanding the perceptions that students have.

**Future Implications for Practice**

This research is valuable in the field of education. It should help teachers, administrators, and parents understand the perspective of different groups of students, which may help such stakeholders consider changes in how to talk to students about cyberbullying. School/district administrators and leaders should consider if and how they are explaining cyberbullying well to all students. These stakeholders should also consider if and how they are solving cyberbullying and bullying problems for students when they come up. These solutions could potentially include staff professional development, student presentations for school or classrooms, and an intervention/mediation plan for when cyberbullying occurs.

Schools need to consider the response to students who report cyberbullying. Due to the nature of the internet, these situations are complicated, but as technology changes, response plans need to change too. Among all these changes, it is important to keep in mind that providing safe environments that allow students to learn every day is a priority for educators.

In addition, this research should be considered when developing bullying prevention programs. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2012), best practices in dealing with bullying--including cyberbullying--in schools is to implement prevention programs as early in a child’s education as possible.
(Brown & Demaray, 2008). NASP best practices further recommend establishing school anti-bullying policies and comprehensive school-based approaches to bullying. This means that schools should consider other mental health factors, such as anxiety and depression, when developing bullying prevention, bullying policies, and school bullying interventions. Once prevention and policy are in place, schools should find a research-based intervention program that best fits their school’s needs.

When thinking about how the findings of this study relate to practice in a school setting, schools can put together some professional developments for teachers and staff to focus on issues of stereotypes. Additionally, schools should consider classroom presentations in order to address special education stereotypes within student populations. Arming parents with skills and resources to support their children and to help defend them against cyberbullying is critical to the success of bullying prevention and intervention.

**Conclusion**

The present findings contribute to the research on cyberbullying and bullying by closely examining middle school student perceptions across general and special education populations. The use of the qualitative interviews for this study shed a deeper insight into the thoughts of middle school students regarding cyberbullying and special education. Findings indicated that students receiving general education services and special education services may have some differing views on cyberbullying, including which group is more likely to be cyberbullied. Participants generally reported that parents are not able to help them deal with cyberbullying. The results of this study can help to inform discussions about school-based cyberbullying prevention and outreach.


National Association of School Psychologists (2012). Bullying prevention and


### APPENDIX A

**Interview Protocol**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question type</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guiding</td>
<td>Review Child Assent Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory</td>
<td>Your participation today is voluntary and you can stop the interview at any time. All I ask is that you provide honest answers and I am looking forward to hearing about your experiences. As a reminder, anything that we talk about today is confidential unless you tell me something about someone hurting you/someone you know or you hurting yourself/someone you know. If you would like to skip a question, you may do so. Do you have any questions before we get started?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Interview Questions | • Cyberbullying. What does that word mean to you?                        |
|                    | • Cyberbullying. What are the first thoughts that come to mind when you hear that word? |
|                    | • “Why do you think that you understand cyberbullying to mean XYZ?”     |
|                    | • “What behaviors might someone do when they are cyberbullying?”       |
|                    | • “Where do these behaviors occur?”                                    |
|                    | • “Why do you think student’s cyberbully?”                             |
|                    | • “Who do you think cyberbullies others?”                              |
|                    | • “Do you think students who are receiving special education services are bullies or victims? More so than their peers?” |
|                    | • “Is Cyberbullying a problem in your school? Is it a problem in our country? Why or why not?” |

Standardize cyberbullying.

“Let’s say that cyberbullying means this… Cyberbullying is defined as the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, which is intended to harm others (Baas et al., 2013)…”

• Do you think that definition is more the same as your or different? WHY?
• What do you think cyberbullying means now?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>“What behaviors might someone do when they are cyberbullying?”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Is there anything else about cyberbullying that you would like to add?”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

- In a couple minutes, briefly summarize the main points of the interview to the student and ask if the summary is accurate.
- When summary is completed, say, “Is there anything I’ve missed that you would like to share about cyberbullying?”

Once additional comments are addressed say, Thank you for participating in this interview with me.
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON
Parental Consent for Minor/Child to Participate in a Research Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Title:</th>
<th>CYBERBULLYING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GENERAL EDUCATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigator(s):</td>
<td>Noelia Polanco, M.S. Ed. Susan Davies, Ed.D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Study:</td>
<td>The present study uses one-on-one interviews to explore the perceptions of middle school students regarding cyberbullying in middle school. Interviews will take place at a location agreed upon by the parents and the investigator. Examples of locations include but are not limited to, the home of the participant or a private room at the local library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverse Effects and Risks:</td>
<td>Interview questions could raise unpleasant memories for the student. Students can decline to answer any question and will be debriefed at the end of the interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of Study:</td>
<td>Work for the present study began in August 2016 and will conclude in May 2018. The interviews of students will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality of Data:</td>
<td>All student information and interviews will be kept confidential. The only people who will listen to the student interview will be the researcher and her project supervisor, unless I am concerned about the safety of your child or someone that your child knows. When the data is reported, all student names will be changed. The taped recordings of the interview and the transcriptions will be stored in a locked container in the investigators home which will be kept in her office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Person:</td>
<td>Parents or guardians of participants may contact:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noelia Polanco M.S.Ed., <a href="mailto:polancon1@udayton.edu">polancon1@udayton.edu</a>, 937-903-7512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Susan Davies, Ed.D., <a href="mailto:sdavies1@udayton.edu">sdavies1@udayton.edu</a>, 937-229-3652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant you may also contact the chair of University of Dayton’s Institutional Review Board, Candise Powell, J.D., at (937) 229-3515, <a href="mailto:IRB@udayton.edu">IRB@udayton.edu</a>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student’s Full Name (please print)

Parent’s Full Name (please print)

Parent or Guardian Signature          Date