

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS:
DISTRICT LEVEL PERSPECTIVES ON ANTI-BULLYING POLICY AND PRACTICE
WITHIN SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA**

Malgorzata Gil
and
José da Costa
University of Alberta

Many researchers around the world point out that bullying in schools is aimed towards others, in many cases against students with disabilities. Bullying is a serious issue, which involves many students and is, by far, the biggest violence problem in schools in many countries. The researchers investigated how provincial legislation and jurisdictional policy in Alberta (Canada) related to anti-bullying policies within schools. The fundamental goal of this research was to develop an understanding of the relationships between anti-bullying policies and perception of how these policies were implemented in schools from the points of view of central office administration in two school jurisdictions. An analysis of policy documents from two districts in Canada provided no evidence of protections for disabled students specifically. Interviews with central office respondents suggested no need to establish special regulations. Interviewees believed that initiatives implemented in their schools were enough for ensuring that students behaved pro-socially toward all students, including disabled peers.

Violence and aggression is a serious problem in contemporary schools. The bullying phenomenon is a problem of international significance and is documented in the literature internationally (Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995; Craig & Pepler, 1998; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Pepler et al., 2006; Due et al., 2005; Nansel, et al., 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Reiter & Lapidot-Lefler, 2007; Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2005). Bullying violates the essential right of every child to live with a sense of security. Violence and aggression at school are asocial phenomena, which threaten the normal development of the every student. Many researchers, from around the world, point out that bullying in schools is aimed against *others*. Reports from various countries show that many students, especially those with disabilities, suffer from episodes of severe bullying.

As defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), a child with a disability refers to a child:

... with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic [sic] impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (IDEIA, 2004, Sec. 602, 3A)

Children with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and they have an increased risk for being victimized (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Yude, Goodman, R., McConachie, 1998; Sobsey, 1994; Martlew & Hodson, 1991; O'Moore & Hillery, 1989; Whitney, Smith, & Thompson, 1994). Since students with disabilities are often mainstreamed, they are more exposed to potential attacks from peers. The studies mentioned above suggest that students with learning problems are overly represented in the victim population. Students with disabilities often demonstrate a lack of social awareness which may make them more vulnerable to victimization (Unnever & Cornell, 2003). Classmates may be negatively biased towards children with disabilities or more generally towards children who are different (Bell-Dolan & Wessler, 1994).

There are currently many different definitions of *bullying*. Rigby (1996) noted that in England the common term is *bullying*, but the term *harassment* is more common in the United States. At present in

the specialist literature as well as in everyday life both terms are used interchangeably. According to Alberta Education (2008a):

Bullying is a relationship problem. It is the assertion of interpersonal power through aggression. Bullying involves: (a) repeated and consistent negative actions against another, (b) an imbalance of power between the bully and the target, and (c) contrasting feelings between the bully and the target as a result of the bullying episode where the child who bullies may feel excited, powerful and amused, while the target feels afraid, embarrassed or hurt

(<http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/safeschools/bullying.aspx>).

For this paper the authors use the definition of bullying which emphasizes that bullying is a *special type of aggressive peer interaction in which a powerful classmate repeatedly intimidates, exploits, and victimizes a weaker classmate* (Doll, Song, & Siemers, 2004, p. 161). Authors understand power, in this context to include physical as well as social aspects.

There are some factors that can increase the risk of children with disabilities being involved in harassment situations. These students bear a stigma related to their disabilities, making them obvious targets for harassment and students with disabilities in an inclusive environment may experience inadequate protection against the bullies in such environments (Reiter & Lapidot-Lefler, 2007). Certain students may react aggressively and become victim-bullies themselves (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993). Peer rejection is a social risk factor that contributes to victimization (Hodges & Perry, 1996). Attending special classes or requiring extra help in school can raise the danger of students with disabilities to be present in bullying situations (Dawkins, 1996).

A study by Whitney et al. (1994) suggested that bullying is often related to the student's disability. Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) stated that peer victimization is a precursor to school avoidance having considerably more impact as children move further along in their educational experiences. Every school is responsible for preventing and counteracting aggressive behaviours. A central goal of most, if not all, educators is the promotion of pro-social behaviours and greater safety in schools.

The central purpose in this paper concerns the protection of students with disabilities from the school jurisdiction point-of-view. In particular, the researchers explore the policy implications of protecting children, specifically children with disabilities, from bullying.

According to a 2003 report from the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), 25% of children with special needs (with physical, learning, intellectual, and emotional disabilities), aged 10 to 15, felt out of place at school, compared to 17.5% of children without special needs. Children with special needs, aged 10 to 11, reported that they were bullied more often than their peers: 10.6% stated that they were bullied *all or most of the time* (in comparison to 5% of peers) and an additional 12.2% stated they were bullied *some of the time* (as compared to 6.4% of peers). Fewer children with special needs (80.1%) reported that they received extra help from their teachers when they needed it *most or all of the time* than did children with no special needs (85.4%). Seventy-seven percent of children with special needs stated that their teachers treat them fairly *all or most of the time*, compared to 90% of children without special needs. These data suggest that children with disabilities are at an increased risk of victimization and marginalization at school.

Review of the Literature

Generally, McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig (2002) found that the victims may belong to different ethnic groups from the majority population among whom they live, study, and work. They may be exceptional physically or unusual in appearance (e.g., shorter, stouter), and/or exceptionally intelligent. However, Olweus (1991) maintained that the findings of his research do not support the *stereotype* that bullying victims have exceptional physical attributes. Later, he added that some of the victims suffer from *body anxiety*, fear of hurting themselves or of others hurting them (Olweus, 1993). Roland (1989) found that low self-esteem was a common characteristic among students who were vulnerable to harassment, noting that the victims may view themselves as deserving their fate, as if they convey the message that *I deserve to be a victim*. He also found that victims of harassment tended to belong to relatively poor social strata and achieved less well on intelligence tests. Roland's findings are supported by Stephenson and Smith (1989) who found a relationship between social discrimination and harassment. The victims were not popular among their peers and had low self-esteem. They were cautious, sensitive, and quiet. They were characterized by passive behaviour, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence.

Currently, a paucity of research exists about the phenomenon of bullying, with respect to (a) children and youth with physical disabilities (Yude, et al., 1998) and (b) children and youth with intellectual disabilities (Horner-Johnson & Drum, 2006). In this review, we explore the existing literature related to these areas but from the perspectives of visible and non-visible disabilities.

Children with Visible Disabilities

Very little research exists examining the relationship between bullying and students with disabilities (Mishna, 2003). Dawkins (1996) compared the rates and types of bullying in two groups of paediatric outpatients: one group of children with visible physical disabilities and a control group of children without visible physical disabilities. Results indicated that 50% of the children with visible physical disabilities were bullied at school at least once during the school term. Boys in both groups were more likely to be bullied than girls. Name-calling was the most common form of bullying.

Yude et al. (1998) looked at bullying of mainstreamed children with hemiplegia in England. They researched 55 mainstreamed 9 to 10 year-old children. First, the authors suggested that the association between the presence of hemiplegia and the peer relationship problems might have resulted from biases towards children with disabilities. Second, children with hemiplegia tended to lack social awareness and to have social skill deficits. Finally, hemiplegic children might instigate oppression due to their sensitivity to comments about their disability and their predisposition to become visibly upset to cry easily.

Nadeau and Tessier's (2006) Canadian study found that girls with cerebral palsy (CP) were consequentially less accepted and more rejected than comparison group girls while boys with CP did not differ from the same-sex peers in the comparison group. This study, which included 60 mainstreamed children (25 females and 35 males) with CP and 57 comparison children recruited from the classes of the children with CP who were matched to children with CP for sex, age, parents' education level, and family income, also found that peers reported children with CP experienced significantly more verbal victimization and marginally more physical victimization.

Social and personality variables are integral aspects of the phenomenon of bullying. One of the major characteristics of populations with intellectual disabilities, distinguishing them from non-disabled populations, are deprivations and disabilities in social adjustment and social skills and competencies (Basquill, Nezu, Nezu, & Klein, 2004; Jahoda, Pert, & Trower, 2006; Luckasson et al., 2002).

Children with Non-Visible Disabilities

It is necessary to remember that many children with disabilities do not necessarily look different from their peers. Disabilities that are less noticeable and require more time to observe and differentiate are defined as non-visible. Martlew and Hodson (1991) explored bullying as a part of a study that examined issues of social integration for students with mild learning disabilities (LD). They observed that children with mild LD had fewer friends and they were teased much more than the children without LD. Studies of students with LD indicated that these students tended to be: (a) more shy, (b) victims of bullying, and (c) sought significantly more help than average students (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Nabuzoka, 2003). A very important finding in this examination was that girls with LD were largely at risk for being bullied. Almost ten years earlier, Sabornie (1994) examined the social-affective characteristics, including victimization, of students with LD. This study showed that students with LD were being threatened, physically assaulted, or having their possessions removed from them with greater regularity than their non-disabled peers.

Children with LD are at greater risk to be bullied, and they are characterized as less socially skilled, less collective, more shy, and having fewer friends (Miguel, Firness, & Kavale 1996; Svetaz, Ireland, & Blum, 2000). They also tend to have difficulty staying focussed and they are often described as destructive, impulsive, and emotionally immature (Mishna, 2003). It is clear that children with LD are at increased risk for being bullied, but some research suggests they are also more likely to bully others (Kaukiainen, et al., 2002; Mishna, 2003). Kaukiainen, et al. (2002) study, with 141 grade five children from four classrooms in Finland (28 with LD and 111 without LD), found that children with LD were rated by peers as being low on social skills and significantly higher on bullying behaviour (21.4% of children with LD were nominated as bullies, versus 6.3% of children without LD). Bullying behaviour was associated with high self-concept only among boys without LD.

A relatively recent Canadian study was conducted by McNamara, Willoughby, Chalmers, & YLC-CURA (2005) in which comparisons were made among 230 youth with LD, 92 youth with co-morbid LD/ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), and 322 youth without LD or ADHD, matched for age, sex, and school. They found that students with co-morbid LD/ADHD reported the highest levels of direct and indirect victimization. Also a study by Baumeister, Storch, and Geffken (2008) confirmed that children with a co-morbid psychiatric diagnosis (LD/ADHD) reported greater peer victimization than those without.

Another study conducted by Unnever and Cornell (2003) included students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They investigated the influence of bullying and victimization in the public schools. Results from their survey indicated that students with ADHD were at an increased risk for being victimized by bullies: at least two or three times per month. The authors suggested that students with ADHD suffer from poor peer status. As well, they indicated that the poor social skills or mistaken behaviour of several students with ADHD could elicit aggressive responses from their classmates.

In New Zealand, Kent (2003) conducted a study of 52 youth aged 11 to 15 who were designated as hard-of-hearing (HOH). The survey assessed students' perceptions about school, being bullied or bullying others. Kent found that 41% of HOH students were reported to have statistically greater levels of isolation and peer victimization than all other students. Youth with HOH were found to be more vulnerable to peer victimization than other youth.

It is clear that students with visible disabilities who received their education in a range of settings (e.g., resource or remedial classroom, full-time special education classrooms, or inclusive, general education classrooms) are more often the targets of bullying than their non-disabled peers. The majority of studies in which gender analysis was conducted, suggested that boys are bullied more frequently than girls (Dawkins, 1996; O'Moore & Hillery, 1989). However, Nabuzoka and Smith (1993) suggested that girls with learning disabilities are more at risk of being bullied than boys with or without learning disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis for the analysis of anti-bullying policies at the jurisdictional level draws on: (a) theory of legitimate/illegitimate power (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Carver & White, 1994), and (b) theory of change (Weiss, 1972). Power permeates almost every part of social interaction. Legitimate power comes from the authority of one's formal position in the chain of command. It refers to the power attributed to an individual because of his or her relative position and the duties attached to the position within organization. It also includes the formal authority delegated to the holder of the position by the organization. It is usually accompanied by various attributes of power. In the present case, school boards have legitimate power and they can use this power, within the legal constraints imposed by the provincial government, to enact policies governing such attributes as anti-bullying. Power which emerges from control over valuable resources and the ability to administer rewards and punishments activates the Behavioural Approach System (BAS), but powerlessness activates the Behavioural Inhibition System (BIS) (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Carver & White, 1994). The BAS (Gray, 1990, 1994) stimulates approach behaviours in response to signals for reward or non-punishment. It may be associated neuro-physiologically with the motor programming system. The BAS is the *engine* of behaviour and the BIS is the *braking* system. Signals of punishment, non-reward, and inherent fear stimuli lead to behavioural inhibition and increased attention. The BIS may be considered both as a cognitive and physiological system (Fowles, 1988). *The BAS is theorized to mediate sensitivity to conditioned signals of reward or non-punishment. In contrast, the BIS is theorized to mediate sensitivity to conditioned signals of punishment or frustrative non-reward* (Cooper, Gomez, & Aucote, 2007, p. 296). Current research and thinking suggests that when individuals have more control over resources, their own and others', are more proactive (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002), act more (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), and are ready and able to negotiate more (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007) (i.e., the BAS is stimulated).

Responding to aggression in schools between students, school administrators have developed innovative programs and approaches to help resolve problems, prevent violence, and promote pro-social behaviours among students. An earlier study, by Shultz and da Costa (2007), reported 22 different programs, all presumably focussed on the reduction of bullying behaviours, had been implemented throughout Alberta schools in 2006 (e.g., Bully Beware, Bullying.org, Character

Education, I Believe in Respect, Lions-Quest, Rock Solid, Roots of Empathy, Stop Bullying Me, Team Excellence). If these programs work as advertised and are implemented, the results should demonstrate their power to address bullying problems in schools. The diverse approaches implemented in schools often seek to make short- and long-term changes by positively influencing those who participate in the intervention or interventions. These programs have the potential to offer many opportunities to transform students' attitudes and behaviours, intergroup relationship, and social institutions and policies; yet this potential is often not realized. Theory of change enables us to conceptualize why this is the case.

A theory of change refers to the causal processes through which change comes about as a result of a program's strategies and action (Weiss, 1972). A theory of change is a specific and measurable description of a social change initiative that forms the basis for strategic planning, on-going decision-making, and evaluation. Like any good planning and evaluation method, it obliges participants to be clear on long-term goals, identify measurable signs of success, and formulate actions to achieve goals. Weiss (1995) hypothesized that a key reason complex programs are so difficult to evaluate is that the assumptions underlying them are poorly articulated. Initiatives typically are unclear about how the change process will unfold and therefore little attention is paid to the early and mid-term changes. However, these short- and medium-term changes need to happen in order for a longer term goal to be reached. Weiss popularized the term *theory of change* as a way to describe the set of assumptions that explain both mini-steps that lead to the long-term goal of interest and the connections between program activities and outcomes that occur at each step of the way.

These two lenses serve as our *filters* for making sense of the data gathered from central office representatives in selected school jurisdictions. While these lenses serve to highlight salient characteristics, we are also aware that they serve as *blindness* causing us to ignore potentially important insights.

Method

Research Strategy, Problem, and Case Selection

To explore the phenomenon of *friendly schools for all* and pro-social behaviour of students towards their classmates with disabilities investigators have decided to conduct a series of case studies in the Alberta context. The present study reports on the initial investigation into school jurisdiction central office perspectives of anti-bullying policies. Using a case study approach enabled the researchers to draw on a variety of data collection instruments including surveys, multiple histories, and analysis of archival information. Yin (2003) suggested that case study should be defined as a research strategy, an empirical inquiry investigating a phenomenon within its real-life context.

To this end, the investigators interviewed superintendents' designates having the necessary expertise and insight of the district policies in which we were specifically interested. Additionally, the authors also analyzed documents related to the protection of students with disabilities. In this study the investigators used documents, classified by Wellington (2000) as openly published, which were *available free on application or via the internet* (p.112).

The following research question served to focus our study: How does legislation protect against bullying of students with disabilities in mainstream schools? To address this question the researchers selected two school districts (referred to here as District 1 and District 2) in Alberta in which children with disabilities are mainstreamed. While both school jurisdictions in this study are public, they are technically classified as Separate. In 1867, the British North America (BNA) Act, section 93(3), gave provinces joining confederation the power to establish separate schools by minority Catholic or Protestant religious groups. Since these school jurisdictions are public in the true sense of the word, all provincial regulations and legislation concerning schooling in Alberta are obligatory for both Public and Separate schools. Separate school districts are publicly funded school jurisdictions created through powers retained by Canadian provinces at the time of joining the Confederation as defined in the British North America Act of 1867 (also known as the Constitution Act, 1867) and re-affirmed in the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982 (also known as the Constitution Act, 1982).

Within these districts key central office persons, designated by the respective superintendents, with administrative responsibility for student safety, were interviewed for approximately one hour each in the participants' offices. The District 1 interviewee will be referred to by the pseudonym John while the District 2 interviewee by the pseudonym Linda. These school boards were purposely selected because

they were conveniently located and they represent different missions and ideas about schooling. Furthermore, one is a large (relative to Alberta school jurisdictions), urban school jurisdiction while the second is a smaller, sub-urban one (see table 1).

Table 1
School District Demographics

	District 1 ¹	District 2 ²
Student population	5000-10000 ³	20000-40000
Teaching staff (certificated)	300-600	1500-2500
Support staff (classified staff)	150-300	750-1500
¹ District 1.(2007). <i>District Annual Education Results Report 2006/07</i> , p.1.		
² District 2.(2008). <i>Districts Satisfaction Survey Results 2007/08</i> , p.20.		
³ Ranges are provided for the demographic information to protect the identities of the jurisdictions.		

Two methods for the collection of the data in a mixed-methods approach were used: (a) interviews with the key central office representatives and (b) interpretation of government and school district documents (e.g., policy documents and annual reports prepared for government). All documents analyzed for this study were identified as relevant by the participants as addressing student safety or anti-bullying policy. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. Interview questions were provided in advance of the interview sessions to enable interviewees to develop thoughtful and complete responses to questions. The questions were focused on enabling the authors to explore the relationships among the constructs.

Documents were subjected to content analysis using themes as the unit of analysis in a constant comparative grounded theory approach as described by Strauss and Corbin (2007). As themes, grounded in the evidence, emerged from various documents, evidence from all of the documents supporting or extending the themes was sought out.

Results

Legislation and Policy Concerning Safety at Schools

Alberta Education supports schools that are safe caring, orderly, positive, productive, respectful, and free from the fear of physical and emotional harm, because a safe and caring environment contributes to successful schools (Alberta Education, 2008b). The main characteristics of a safe and caring school are: (a) safety and security, (b) positive relationships among students and staff, and (c) positive social and behavioural expectations. The mission of the Alberta Education's Safe and Caring Schools Initiative (2008b) is to encourage and assist members of the school community in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and supports needed to ensure that all Alberta schools are safe and caring. Anti-bullying policies for schools in District 1 and District 2 have to be and are compliant with all provincial legislation contained within the Alberta School Act. Specifically, the Alberta School Act contains sections mandating that student conduct in schools is the responsibility of the school district through its principals, teachers, and the students themselves. The School Act in Alberta states that principals of schools must [...] *maintain order and discipline in the school and on the school grounds and during sponsored or approved by the board* (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a, Section 20(f)). The School Act also places great responsibility on teachers to ensure that order and discipline existing in schools, it states:

A teacher while providing instruction or supervision must [...] maintain, under the direction of the principal, order and discipline among the students while they are in the school or on the school grounds and while they are attending or participating in activities sponsored or approved by the board [...]. (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a, Section 18(1(f)))

Furthermore, students are obligated to follow and respect school regulations; the Alberta School Act also states that a student shall *comply with the rules of the school* (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a, Section 12(d)) and *respect the rights of others* (Section 12(f)).

Provincial regulations concerning safety at schools expect some corrective interventions for students who represent inappropriate behaviour in the classroom, in the school, on school grounds, or while attending a school board approved activity:

A teacher or a principal may suspend a student in accordance with subsection (2) or (3) if in the opinion of a teacher or principal (a) the student has failed to comply with section 12, or (b) the

student's conduct in injurious to the physical or mental well-being of others in the school. (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a, Section 24(1))

Section 25(1) further extends the powers of the school board with regard to student behaviour; this section states:

On considering the report provided to it under section 24(6)(b) and any representations made to it under section 24(9), the board may expel a student if (a) the principal has recommended that the board expel the student, and (b) the student has been offered another education program by the board. (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a)

The School Act goes on to state that *a board shall ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board is provided with a safe and caring environment that fosters and maintains respectful and responsible behaviours* (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a, Section 47(8)).

The participant Alberta school districts reported on in this paper are the part of the public education system and they have members representing their interests on the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA). The ASBA created the document entitled *A Vision and Agenda for Public Education* (2000a) which states that the Alberta system of public education must be founded on a commitment to *educate all children well* (p.1). It is essential that public education fosters and supports the intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual development of each child. In order to achieve this goal, there are some of necessary conditions that must be in place. Schools must provide safe and caring school environments in which children, staff, and parents are secure: *The ASBA believes that reasonable and appropriate discipline (order) in classrooms and class areas from grades 1 through 12 is not only desirable but necessary if the product of our schools is to become law-abiding citizenry* (ASBA, 2000b, p. 1).

Arising from the School Act and heavily influenced by local context (i.e., beliefs underlying Separate Schools' philosophies), district level policies and regulations are created, which translate into actual administrative regulations, and a student code of conduct. The Board of Trustees of District 1 *expects students to exhibit socially responsible and respectful behaviours.... Students shall conduct themselves in a manner that demonstrates respect for the dignity others ...* (District 1, 2002, I-140). The codes of conduct from the two jurisdictions were analyzed and found to be designed to assist students to live by the principles of a school rooted in Christian Scripture and Spiritual beliefs. Not surprisingly, both school districts were committed to providing the best possible education for their students. Among their identified goals were the creation and maintenance of a safe and inviting learning environment. Districts recognized the need for learning environments that are well ordered, safe, developmentally appropriate, and non-threatening. Both school districts had very high expectations for their students. These expectations were recognized by the districts to encourage all students to manifest responsible behaviour benefitting every person. In both districts, all students were expected to respect and adhere to the schools' expectations and understand the consequences of their own activities. The student conduct policies served to promote positive attitudes and acceptable behaviours in schools. Appropriate student behaviour was seen as essential in achieving goals for student achievement and the development of caring, compassionate, self-reliant and productive citizens. Student conduct policies were based on the principles of respect for oneself and for one another (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a, Section 12(f); District 1, 2002, I-140-AR; District 2, 2000, 104.4).

Corrective interventions reflecting Christian social justice principles protecting the dignity of both the individual person and the common good involve the administration of fair and consistent disciplinary procedures. Corrective measures or disciplinary action, including suspension or expulsion, depending on individual circumstances, were considered when student behaviours violated the school or district code of conduct and/or the School Act. Some examples of unacceptable behaviours included: (a) verbal, physical, sexual, or emotional threats or assaults; (b) discrimination or harassment; (c) disruptive behaviour; and (d) bystander encouragement or involvement in instigating or escalating aggressive behaviour (e.g., taunting, fighting). Analysis of the Districts' documents confirmed that failure of a student to meet the expectations for student conduct could result in one or more of the following consequences: (a) making appropriate apologies and making restitution, (b) losing privileges for a period of time, (c) being temporarily excluded from the class, (d) serving an in-school or out-of-school suspension, (e) receiving assistance from the police liaison officer, and (f) being expelled from the school. In the event of student misbehaviour, students and parents had the right to offer an

explanation, and to be informed about consequences of misbehaviour (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a, Sections 24, 25; District 1, 2002; District 2, 2000, Interviews, 2008).

Documentation from the school jurisdictions and the School Act confirmed that all students have the right to be treated with dignity, respect and fairness by others students and staff. Furthermore, they shall be provided with a learning environment that is free from discrimination, harassment and abuse of any kind (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a; District 1, 2002; District 2, 2000). Children with disabilities were not specifically identified in provincial legislation nor in either of the two districts' policy documents as requiring special protections.

Legislation and Policy Protecting Students – District Perspectives from Interviews

Based on the many studies focusing on the bullying phenomena in schools, especially with regard to students with disabilities, the researchers explored safety issues inherent in the schools' policies during their interviews. According to John:

Administrative regulations talk about expectations with regards to bullying behaviours or how to discourage such behaviours. In the code of conduct there is specific wording that allows teachers to judge if a student is in breach of those regulations or the code of conduct and what consequences will look like.

Linda also stated that *We have no specific policies regarding bullying, but we are re-vamping the school conduct policy.* At another point she stated that *In general, our [...] schools' policies are moderately effective.* John elaborated on the notion that existing policies were adequate for addressing bullying behaviour because these policies exist within a general culture that is intolerant of bullying, he stated: *The schools maintain a proactive culture, building programs and putting them in place to prevent bullying from starting.* Both interviewees reported that they had seen considerable benefit from the programs in place in their respective schools. Both respondents also noted that the practices in place were effective in decreasing bullying behaviours through active character education programming. They reported their schools are very vigilant with respect to anti-social behaviours. Both respondents also stated that their principals and schools' staffs are proactive in implementing strategies and consequences that they are empowered to use to reduce anti-social behaviours. But as Linda stressed: *You can write many policies, but if there no action, it falls apart.* She went on to say that: *We foster the idea that everyone is responsible for every child. Every staff member, from the custodian up, is responsible for every student.*

Schools in both districts have implemented various pro-social programs (e.g., Roots of Empathy, Knowledge and Employabilities) Both John and Linda were sure that the programs made their schools friendly for all. Within the health curriculum, as a part of the Alberta Education mandated program of studies in every grade, there are learner outcomes based on active citizenship. This ensure that all students participate in classes having learning objectives focussed on working well with others, and getting along with others, and understanding the needs of others; how well students integrate what they have learned has not been empirically established by the school jurisdictions.

Linda and John both conceded that in spite of implementing programs and actions aimed at avoiding bullying in schools, it still happens. Neither saw their school jurisdictions' schools as bully free, but both emphasized that they work very hard at achieving bully-free learning environments. There are steps in place to support the victim. This is made clear through the teachers and assistants – students have considerable access to support. The teachers' role is to communicate very clearly what the process is and what they can do to advocate for students and what they can do to assist students to advocate for themselves. School staffs, in general, are aware of the need to advocate for every child. This was mentioned specifically as a focus in one the districts (John's Interview, 2008). Students could speak with school counsellors as well with any adult or student colleague with whom they were comfortable. Students were seen to be generally supportive of their peers if they were perceived to be in need (Linda's Interview, 2008). As identified in the policy documents of both school jurisdictions, the student who is a victim of any bullying incident can expect to have support from a caring adult. Both jurisdictions' program plans identified this type of support under strategies: speak to the person doing the bullying, and then speak to an adult (John's and Linda's Interviews, 2008). Student victims were also seen as needing to be involved in problem solving so they could gain strategizing skills and coping techniques to solve problems that might emerge amongst themselves (John's Interview, 2008).

Interview respondents from both jurisdictions indicated that, within the parameters established by the Alberta School Act and district policy, each school had the ability to develop its own specific discipline process (John's Interview, 2008); namely, the series of steps taken if a student is judged to be in breach of the school code can be unique to a school. This could also include specific student reprimands, correction, and consequences. However, school conduct policies tended to be very similar across schools, typically addressing different consequences for severe and minor infractions (John's and Linda's Interviews, 2008). Minor consequences were typically dealt with by having the school communicating with home, and then referring the student to the office. Consequences could also be progressive, for example, if students caught being abusive could maintain two months without a suspension (i.e., a temporary exclusion from a class or the school), their previous offences could be expunged from their school record (Linda's Interview, 2008). In junior-high schools, expulsion (i.e., permanent exclusion from the school or school jurisdiction) was not typical, so suspension would be the most extreme response. Students could be expelled for demonstrating repeated bullying behaviours; however, the School Act wording prevented the school jurisdiction from expelling students unless it had an alternate education program available for them (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2003a, Section 25(1)(b); John's Interview, 2008).

The safe development of every student in both school districts seemed to be the most important for both interview respondents. John stated that *Our first priority is to foster emotional, behavioural, physical, and intellectual well being in all students. So we begin with the physical, social, and emotional, in order to get to the intellectual.* And he also stated that *The education system acknowledges that if a child is feeling victimized, they can't learn.*

With respect to promoting anti-bullying policies, both interview respondents indicated that their jurisdictions would continue to dedicate resources to professional growth for staff to help students cope with bullying and reduce bullying behaviours. One of the interview participants suggested that school jurisdictions need to get better at giving teachers professional development activities so that the teacher can be better at negotiating, modeling, and bringing these behaviours to a conscious level (John's Interview, 2008). In District 2, recognition of the need to provide additional resources which could help staff and students to prevent aggressive behaviours at schools while supporting them in implementing pro-social behaviours among students was made.

There is not enough funding to have support when you think you could do more. When you cut back funding at a school, it's the counselling time that falls. A school resource office time would be wonderful. (Linda's Interview, 2008)

The representatives from both school districts were aware that inclusiveness and close contact can be sometimes dangerous for students with disabilities.

The school district promotes education of students with disabilities in regular classes, but do also offer segregated sites.... In programs where students with disabilities are in regular classes, the model of accepting disabilities and honouring inclusivity is very good. Individual Program Plans are created for students with disabilities and lots of attention is paid to behavioural programming, because find that one challenge with enrolling these students in regular classes is that if they are ever bullied or marginalized, they tend to bully and marginalize. (John's Interview, 2008)

Most of the time we try to keep them [students with disabilities] in regular classes so they are a part of our lives, and so they are considered part of the community. Positive relationship between average students and students with special needs can't be formal when they are segregated classrooms. Of course, inclusivity and close contact can be dangerous for students with disabilities sometimes; as they are usually the ones bullied or preyed upon. (Linda's Interview, 2008)

The role of parental support is central in the schools' efforts to keep students, particularly those with LD, safe from bullying behaviours.

We have two education situations – first at school giving knowledge and models of behaviours, and second at home which is implementing pro-social behaviours, and if bullying is not taken seriously by the parents, then it doesn't make sense to the students. (John's Interview, 2008)

In District 2, Linda noticed that:

Bullying even happens online now, and it affects life at school, but parents don't think the school should deal with it because it's happening while the student is at home. This kind of situation can be dealt with in the conduct policy because it affects life at school (Interview, 2008).

District Survey Results

All districts in Alberta are obligated to submit to government and make public their education results reports. The annual education results reports were prepared under the direction of the school boards in accordance with their responsibilities under the School Act (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2008a) and the Government Accountability Act (Alberta Queen's Printer, 2008b). In addition to providing clear and concise information for stakeholders, the school districts use the results to develop strategies for education plans to help ensure that all students can acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to be self-reliant, responsible, caring and contributing members of society. These results reports highlight the progress, accomplishments, and results achieved in the past year as a result of implementing the jurisdiction education plan (District 1, 2007; District 2, 2008).

According to the information gathered during the interviews, students are safe at schools, are learning the importance of caring for others, are learning respect for others, and are treated fairly at schools. An interesting observation emerged through the data analysis of the annual results reports; standing in stark contrast to the positive claims made by the jurisdictions in their annual results reports were a relatively large number of students, in both districts, who did not feel particularly safe at school. The investigators found that 9% (approximately 575) of students in District 1 and 6.5% (approximately 2080) of students in District 2 felt unsafe in their school buildings. The authors estimated, based on the education results report from District 1, that approximately 1250 students (just fewer than 20% of the total student population) perceived themselves to be subjected to ongoing harassment, intimidation and/or bullying in their school (District 1, 2007, p.35). Similar data were not available for District 2.

In the same district, District 1, 19.6% (about 1200) of students felt that student discipline was not handled fairly (District 1, 2007, p.35); in District 2, approximately 16.3% (about 5216) of students felt this way (District 2, 2008, p.11). Parents' perspectives painted a less bleak picture of student safety at school, survey results indicated that 95% of parents of students in District 1 (2007, p.35) and 93.9% of parents of students in District 2 were satisfied that their child's school provided a safe environment (District 2, 2008, p. 8). Moreover, in District 2, 94.7% of parents agreed that their child's school's discipline policy and practice demonstrated reconciliation, forgiveness, and an understanding of the human person as essentially good (District 2, 2008, p.11).

In the districts' opinions, high levels of satisfaction were reported by each of the student groups as well as by the parent group. These results provide outcome measures necessary for district accountability, information for setting goals, identifying target areas for growth, and recognizing areas of strength. While districts are committed to providing a safe learning and working environment for all members of their communities, it is curious that such a large proportion of students still report not feeling safe.

Discussion and Conclusions

Provincial regulations form the basis for policies which guide school life in both of the participant districts in this study; in fact, the same regulations apply to all publicly funded school jurisdictions in Alberta. The Alberta School Act and the Government Accountability Act determine the main directions for school administrators and leaders in Alberta. Unfortunately, none of the policy documents analyzed provided any evidence of particular regulations or legislation concerning safety of children with disabilities. In fact, all of the documents analyzed treat all students, regardless of LD, in the same way. This, despite the fact, as pointed out in Nabuzoka and Smith (1993), Yude et al. (1998), Sobsey (1994), Martlew and Hodson (1991), O'Moore and Hillery (1989), and Whitney et al. (1994), that children with disabilities are more likely to be the targets of bullying.

Representatives from the districts were aware of some bullying issues in which students with disabilities are involved, but they do not perceive the need to create detailed rules to prevent them. Their argument for this perspective was that existing policies applied to everyone – everyone was entitled to be treated with dignity and respect.

Integrating all students in classrooms, introducing new programs, and upbringing students in accordance with the Christian values are the main ways, described by the respondents, to achieve the

complete harmony between average and disabled peers. We found no evidence that, at the jurisdictional level, the power imbalances among students were considered in the conceptualization of district policies and implementation of school-based programs. Programs and approaches were accepted and used on the basis of face-validity of their developers' claims. As was the case in Shultz and da Costa's (2007) findings, no evidence was found of systematic evaluation of the anti-bullying programs implemented in the school jurisdictions was found in the present study. Anti-bullying programs are typically implemented and assumed to achieve what they purport to achieve with respect to reducing bullying in schools. Drawing on theory of change, there is no reason to believe that these programs will have any short or long-term effects since there is no systematic implementation on multiple social levels (i.e., individual, the classroom, the school, the home, and the greater community) of the program goals.

In the opinions of the district representatives interviewed, for students who are bullied, if these are students who also have disabilities, total help and support are already guaranteed through the current policies. The main kind of support for them is through interaction with school staff (e.g., teachers, principal, and counsellor). The school jurisdictions' representatives both believed their policies to be sound; however, they believed greater financial resources targeting anti-bullying initiatives would help them to provide services to better address related issues.

Interestingly, annual survey results gathered from students, parents, and staffs suggest that issues of safety on school grounds and in school buildings may not be as positive as was suggested through the interview data and even some of the statements made in the annual survey results reports themselves. The researchers are alarmed that in a one year period approximately 1250 students in one district alone reported being involved in harassment or bullying in their schools.

In this research, no evidence was found to support belief that students with disabilities should be accorded extra or more rights and privileges in schools beyond their non-disabled peers. Not surprisingly, given the view that additional policy protections are not required to protect children with disabilities from bullying, the authors also did not find any evidence of programs at the jurisdiction level to mitigate against bullying of students with disabilities specifically. Reflecting on the notions of power relations among children and teenagers and the various studies pointing to the fact that students with LD tend to be victimized more frequently than non-LD students, we are surprised by the belief expressed to us that current policies address the needs of all students – disabled or not.

The present study only provides insights from provincial and district policy documents and from the vantage point of leaders in the districts' central offices. It does not provide insights to questions concerning safety of students with disabilities at the level of the schools. It will be crucial to conduct research at schools to be sure that understandings of anti-bullying policies, particularly as they might apply to students with disabilities, are explored and understood.

Areas for Further Research

Despite the progress that has been made on understanding the importance anti-bullying policies in schools, pressing needs exist for research in many areas. Foremost among those, in the authors' opinion, is the need to research the understanding and perception of these policies by principals, teachers and, most importantly, students. Keeping child development stages in mind, such work needs to be conducted in elementary schools, junior high schools (or middle schools), and high schools. It is also critical that understandings of the relationships between anti-bullying policies and the perception of the effects of these policies by students, teaching and support staff, and school leaders (e.g., principals and vice-principals) are developed. Given the volatility of children transitioning through adolescence, it seems most useful to first explore how students in junior-high schools view anti-bullying policies made by school boards and how these policies impact their social behaviours. Such research should explore how bullies and victims view their roles and how legitimate and non-legitimate forms of power affect their relationships. It will also be important to investigate how junior high school students with disabilities perceive they are affected and protected by existing anti-bullying policies.

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