

Special Educators' Perspectives and Experiences with Workplace Bullying

Kristin A. Pierson-Malenky

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Kristin A. Pierson-Malenky

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Slippery Rock University

Department of Special Education


A Dissertation written by
Kristin A. Pierson-Malenky

Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, Slippery Rock University, 2008


Master of Early Childhood Education, Edinboro University of Pa, 2012

Doctorate of Education, Slippery Rock University, 2023


Approved by

 Title: Professor, Special Education
Dr. Richael Barger-Anderson, Ed.D., Dissertation Chair

 Title: Professor Emeritus, Elementary Education
Dr. Carmine Decarlo Ph.D., Dissertation Committee Member

 Title: Professor, Secondary Education and Foundations
Dr. Jason Hilton, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee Member

Accepted by

 , Dean, College of Education,
Dr. Keith Dils, Ed.D. Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine K-12 special educators' perceptions and experiences with workplace bullying. Specifically, this study focused on the experiences of educators in PSEA's Midwestern Region. Their perceptions and experiences are presented sequentially, through key cruces that evolved through the interview process.

The participants in the study were five special educators, in various teaching positions, and at varying points in their careers. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 30 minutes via Zoom. This interview was a semi-structured format, discussing their experiences and perceptions of workplace bullying in their K-12 special education positions.

The intention of this research was to gather perspectives of the participants about the growing phenomenon of workplace bullying, thus lending itself to a phenomenological research design. From each question in the interview the researcher extrapolated key cruces through multicyclic coding analysis. Creswell (2007) and Tracy (2013) suggest involving participants in the review process to ensure the accuracy and intentions of their interview responses. Therefore, following the interviews, each participant received an electronic copy of the transcribed interview and reviewed it for precision. This goal of this study is for participants' voices to uncover potential connections or truths to help understand the phenomenon of workplace bullying. These findings may transfer to other occupations or fields also struggling with workplace

bullying. The population sample is unique to my personal experience, but the overarching goal spreads further than K-12 special education departments.

The combination of cruces revealed in Chapter IV, can be grouped into four key areas for the purpose of further discussion. These provide a solid foundation for understanding the participants responses concerning their experience and perceptions on workplace bullying. The four key areas are workplace environment and administrative applications, similarities and differences between special educators and general educators, experiences with workplace bullying and social structures in the workplace, and personal reflections participants wished to share. This study concludes that workplace bullying is occurring in all five participants districts in various formats. The participants are calling for administration to assist in creating a safe, productive, and positive work environment for all building members.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Harry and Christine Pierson, and to my daughters, Evalina and Nina Malenky.

Mom and Dad, you are the most supportive people that I know. You have always encouraged me to pursue my dreams and supported me in my pursuits along the way. Becoming a parent humbles you. It opens your eyes to just how much your own parents loved selflessly and deeply. Your fierce loyalty and selfless acts helped to bring me to this point in my educational journey. For all you have done, and continue to do for me, and my children, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Words cannot truly express the gratitude I feel, but know in your hearts that I looked up to you then and look up to you still.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Currently 63% of American workers are affected by, or aware of, workplace bullying (Namie, 2017). Two-thirds of the American workforce are affected in some way by a silent phenomenon that is just recently being brought to the forefront of the American workers' attention. This concept is not new. Adults have experienced bullying in the workplace for years. In the late 1970's and 1980's researchers started to look closer into the concept of workplace harassment, which they referred to as mobbing (Brodsky, 1976). This was some of the foundational work concerning workplace bullying. This research, combined with the initial work of Carol Brodsky kick-started a movement to look deeper into the ideas presented. From this awareness some work and texts emerged as across the globe heightened concern began to grow (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). It was not until the early 2000's that Americans began to correlate experiences in America with those of workers overseas (Hecker, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Workplace bullying is now a rising research topic in the United States (US) as the phenomenon continues to sweep the country. Bullying has become a topic of interest across multiple populations, namely in schools, in an effort to reduce bullying and school violence among students. Now, over the last three decades, the interest in workplace bullying concerning adults in their career-based environments has gained popularity and our understanding of this detrimental social problem has advanced exponentially in a short amount of time (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; Sutton, 2007). Although the body of

existing research still remains higher in Europe and Australia, North America is starting to join their overseas counterparts in researching this growing phenomenon.

This phenomenon is highly prevalent in the public sector (Namie, 2017). Studies have concluded that educators are among this group of public sector workers who experience workplace bullying (Fox & Stallworth, 2010). Researchers, however, have not yet explored groups of educators most affected, or at-risk, for workplace bullying in K-12 settings. Studies have highlighted higher educators and risk factors (May & Tenzek, 2018), but the population of educators currently in K-12 schools working in special education positions has not been explored.

This study aimed to gain insight and perspective into K-12 special educators' experiences with workplace bullying and how these experiences may impact the local education setting. A deeper understanding of special educators' experiences and perspectives can then be used for districts attempting to improve their workplace environments for their workers. Specifically, the study explores the potential factors creating an at-risk level of targeting for special educators currently employed in public school districts.

The research questions explored were:

- What are the experiences of K-12 special educators related to workplace bullying in PSEA's Midwestern Region? and,

- How do K-12 special educators perceive experiences of workplace bullying and the impact those experiences may have on the local education setting?

Theoretical Context

Workplace Bullying is as much a social movement as it is a workplace improvement initiative because of the potential health and economic consequences suffered by individuals (Namie, 2005). The international anti-bullying movement exists as a result of the negative effects bullying can have on a target's health.

Due to the social nature of the topic, the focus and analysis of the research within this study is not rooted in objectivity. Rather, via a phenomenological analysis, the researcher drew upon the perspectives that were presented by special educators participating in the study. From the constructivist standpoint it is imperative to analyze social actions from the actor's standpoint in an attempt to see the world through the participant's eyes (Tracy, 2013). With this framework in mind, the researcher aimed to formulate meaning through experiences and events that individuals have lived. In this study, the data and understanding of the problem were derived from the participants' lived experiences, shared perspectives and overall "voice" concerning workplace bullying.

Existing Research

In the late 1980's, researchers started to look closer into the concept of workplace harassment, which they refer to as mobbing. This was some of the foundational work concerning workplace bullying. This research, combined with the initial work of Carol

Brodsky kick-started a movement to look deeper into the ideas presented. From this awareness, some work and texts emerged across the globe as heightened concern began to grow (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). It was not until the early 2000's that Americans began to correlate experiences in America with those of workers overseas.

Research is still richer in European countries, but the United States is continuing to build its body of research. The Workplace Bullying Institute, formed by Drs. Gary and Ruth Namie, continues to study trends and prevalence of workplace bullying in the US. Together they have built a network of US individuals working to research and illuminate the phenomenon that Europe has been working to stifle for decades.

The work of Drs. Gary and Ruth Namie have a profound influence on the current body of research and continued research force in the United States. Reviewing this literature has highlighted the prevalence of the phenomenon along with descriptors of workplace bullying and environments of high occurrence. Current research has also illuminated the aspects of power and inferiority (Patterson et al., 2018) in relation to workplace bullying.

Significance of the Study

Special educators are among those who work with the most at-risk population of students in a school. It is essential for all workers to feel comfortable and safe while at work for numerous reasons. Namely, workers who are comfortable in their work environments are more productive (Namie, 2005). When a worker is targeted by a bully, productivity is jeopardized (Sutton, 2007). Bullies undermine legitimate business interests in their process. They keep work from getting done (Namie, 2005). Special

educators are arguably those with some of the most challenging tasks to face while at work. It is pertinent that workers, namely special educators, feel comfortable, accepted, and confident in their positions. The education of the students in their care is dependent on their performance day to day. As noted earlier, 63% of American workers are affected by workplace bullying in some way. Educators, those entrusted with delivering instruction to the future of our country, must not be burdened with this phenomenon. We must find ways to implement the findings of current research on workplace bullying to assist in the development of organization and public policy addressing workplace bullying (Fox & Stallworth, 2010). Through narrative exploration and analysis, policies and procedures may be questioned, and training programs may need to be established (May & Tenzek, 2018) to reduce bullying activities in the educational workplace. In order to bring this controversial topic to light, the voices and perceptions of those living through these experiences need to be heard.

By investigating the ways in which workplace bullying is experienced and perceived by special educators, the literature base will be extended, and a new field of research may expand, namely that of researching groups of teachers who may perceive their experiences and understandings related to topics of workplace bullying, and how this knowledge may be subsequently utilized to highlight potential groups at higher-risk of target rate and develop safe guards and policy against this behavior. With this established, the overarching goal of this study was to highlight the experiences and perceptions of special educators concerning workplace bullying.

Delimitations

This study took place from June 2021 through November 2021. Individuals interviewed in the study consisted of current K-12 special educators in small to mid-sized public school districts in Western PA. Large districts were not included as obtaining participants would have been unattainable with the current sampling method utilizing other local unions from the researcher's home region.

Only current special educators were included in the interview process to assure current perspectives were gathered. Previous educators, general education teachers, and preservice teachers were not included as the researcher sought to obtain current perspective on workplace bullying from special educators and these additional perspectives would be not directly related to the research questions.

The Western PA region was the only PA region utilized to gain a sufficient sampling but not oversaturate the data. In addition, sampling a larger population would not be feasible in the researcher's time frame.

A qualitative study was used as the voice and perspective of educators are the researcher's interest concerning the research topic and questions. A quantitative perspective would lack participant voice, a key element in the study.

Assumptions

It is assumed that all participants answered all interview questions openly and honestly. It is also assumed that those who wished to clarify their intent or responses utilized the time frame for transcription review and resubmission.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this dissertation the following terms are utilized in context with the operational definitions listed below.

- *Mobbing* – Bullying that usually begins with an unresolved conflict and may spin out of control to the detriment of an individual at the mercy of a group (Hecker, 2007). Mobbing is typically a group of individuals going after one target.
- *Target* - The individual, or group of individuals on the receiving end of bullying.
- *Workplace bullying* - Situations where an employee repeatedly, over a prolonged time period, is exposed to harassing behavior from one or more colleagues and where the targeted person is unable to defend him or herself against the behavior (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018)

Conclusion

The phenomenon of workplace bullying is highly prevalent in the public sector (Namie, 2017). Educators as targets have been somewhat explored (Fox & Stallworth, 2010; May & Tenzek, 2018) in prior research. Specific research concerning smaller populations, or types of educators, is limited. In this qualitative study the voice and perspective of current K-12 special educators concerning the phenomenon of workplace bullying was explored. The need for this research stems from social context as well as a health and wellness standpoint. The emotional and physical effects of assholes are devastating because they sap people of their energy and self-esteem (Sutton, 2007). Healthy Workplace Initiatives must be established, implemented, and followed. As

mentioned previously, we must find ways to implement the findings of current research on workplace bullying to assist in the development of organization and public policy addressing workplace bullying (Fox & Stallworth, 2010). Through narrative exploration and analysis, policies and procedures may be questioned, and training programs may need to be established (May & Tenzek, 2018) to reduce bullying activities in the educational workplace. This investigation can build on the current literature base and expand it to include potential at-risk groups.

The following chapters will give an overview of the types and prevalence of bullying found in the current literature base, a review of the methodology chosen for this study, data analysis, findings, limitations, and potential implications for future research.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Purpose

As noted previously, this study aimed to gain insight and perspective into the special educator's experience with adult workplace bullying. The research questions explored were:

- What are the experiences of K-12 special educators related to workplace bullying in school districts in PSEA's Midwestern Region? and,
- How do K-12 special educators perceive experiences of workplace bullying and the impact those experiences may have on the local education setting?

With this purpose in mind, a review of literature on the current body of existing research related to workplace bullying was needed to determine the current research, or lack thereof, relating to adult workplace bullying, specifically in the realm of education. Workplace bullying is a relatively new phenomenon to the United States, and thus an overview of global research is also analyzed in relation to the topic.

A Brief History of Workplace Bullying Emergence

Carroll Brodsky, considered by many to be the first researcher/psychiatrist to study the topic of workplace bullying, sometimes referred to as workplace harassment, initially defined the concept in his pioneer text *The Harassed Worker* as, "Persistent attempts on the part of one or more persons to annoy, wear down, frustrate or elicit a reaction in another. Harassment denotes continual behavior that provokes, presses,

frightens, humiliates or in some other way creates unpleasantness in the recipient” (Brodsky, 1976). For over a decade, however, little research and interest sprung from Brodsky’s work. In the late 1980’s researchers, mainly from Northern Europe and Australia, started to look closer into the concept of workplace harassment, which they refer to as mobbing. This kick-started the movement once more to look deeper into the ideas presented more than a decade prior. From this awareness, works have emerged as global concerns began to grow (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). It was not until the late 1980’s that the first peer reviewed scientific work emerged concerning this nearly 20 year old phenomenon. Researchers Hoel et al. (1999) explored incidences of bullying, victim profiles, effects of bullying, explained bullying, and potential remedial actions. It was not until the early 2000’s that Americans revisited the work of Brodsky and began to correlate experiences in America with those of workers overseas. Although it is uncertain as to what caused this lag in interest, one can presume the sensitivity of the topic looked over the heads of many in fear of tackling the elephant in the room.

Following the increased interest in the phenomenon (Blase & Blase, 2002; Bowling & Beehr, 2006), the methodological quality of studies has improved, and research designs have steadily become more sophisticated through the increased use of prospective research designs, multilevel studies, and meta-analyses (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Once termed workplace harassment, or workplace mobbing, workplace bullying is on the rise as a research topic again here in the United States as the phenomenon continues to sweep the country. The descriptions and specifics concerning terminology will be discussed further in the next section. Now, over the last three decades, the interest in workplace bullying has gained popularity and our understanding of this detrimental

social problem has advanced exponentially in a short amount of time (Namie, 2017; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Although the body of existing research still remains higher in Europe and Australia, North America is beginning to see an upward trend in research concerning workplace bullying and its effects on targets (Blase & Blase, 2006; Sutton, 2007).

Workplace Bullying Definitions and Terminology

Over the decades workplace bullying has had several names and terminologies associated with the phenomenon. Many of these are seen as descriptors that all fit under the umbrella of workplace bullying. Some of the terms commonly associated with, or used synonymously with workplace bullying are: incivility, mobbing, harassment, victimization, and social undermining (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). Often the usage of term depends on the global factors associated. Geography plays a role in terminology with regards to workplace bullying. In Northern Europe and Australia, researchers often call this phenomenon workplace mobbing or workplace harassment. In the United States and Canada, it is more commonly referred to as workplace bullying.

In addition, the specifics of the mistreatment may play a role in the terminology and descriptors used to detail an event or situation. All of the terms, however, are found to be under the over-arching term workplace bullying. Each with unique characteristics and differences, they fit under the same umbrella of mistreatment of an individual or group. A brief description of the differences held between mobbing and bullying as derived from current research are described below along with some brief descriptions of bullying terminology as current research utilizes it. Although the literature associates

mobbing and bullying closely their differences are worth noting. Terminology also varies across research, but commonly utilized vocabulary is discussed below.

Perpetrator

Typically the “bully” is referred to as a perpetrator. These are the individuals who are seeking out others to mistreat at work. Perpetrators may be management, coworkers, or subordinates. Commonly, the perpetrator is male, although female on female workplace bullying has been recorded. Namie et al. (2019) asserts that all perpetrators are looking to control another person in the situation and exercise tactics in the workplace to gain this control.

Target

Research describes the individual, or group of individuals on the receiving end of bullying, as a target or targets. Target indicates that they were selected by the perpetrator and thus shifts blame to the perpetrator and away from the target. For many years, targets were referred to as victims. Leaders in the workplace anti-bullying movement suggest that this term is considered derogatory by shifting the blame for the situation to the target and suggesting they were a “victim” for a particular reason. Although targets may share commonalities, it is important to note that research wants to continue to focus the “blame” on the perpetrators, as they are the ones who are engaging in misbehaviors in the workplace (Namie et al., 2019).

Mobbing

As with most of the research on workplace bullying in the early years, the term mobbing comes from European studies to describe workplace harassment and bullying. Mobbing is said to differ from basic workplace incivility as most of these can be resolved to some extent of satisfaction for the individuals involved. Mobbing, on the other hand, usually begins with an unresolved conflict and may spin out of control to the detriment of an individual at the mercy of a group (Hecker, 2007). The key distinguishing factor between bullying and mobbing is that mobbing is typically a group of individuals going after one target. We may consider this “ganging up” on someone. Mobbing involves group of individuals all working together to terrorize and take down a target. An example provided by Hecker (2007) notes that a worker experiencing mobbing may notice some or several of their coworkers beginning to use body language and facial expressions that are disrespectful and speak in unkind tones. This mimics the passive aggressive nature often seen with perpetrators and their targets. They may then exclude that target and give them the silent treatment or leave them out of conversations and group meetings (Hecker, 2007). Thinking back to childhood, examples of mobbing can occur on the playground. Think of a time when a group of boys was teasing a girl, perhaps chanting something at her over and over until she reaches a breaking point and runs away crying. If this activity happens over and over again, the girl is a target of mobbing. With anti-bullying movements in schools today, and curriculums taught to students with regards to bullying, this common scene from the past may not be as prominent. Students are aware of acts that constitute as bullying and are taught from an early age how to be civil and kind in the school environment. With these curriculums in place, bullying is on the forefront at many

school and in conjunction with Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support Systems (PBIS systems) many students are fortunate to never be involved, or witness, a belittling incident such as mentioned above. PBIS aims to change school environments by creating improved systems, practices and procedures that promote positive change in student behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2008). With no laws against workplace bullying, however, adults can engage in these practices with no legal ramifications.

Workplace Bullying

Bullying is seen as a combination of verbal abuse and behaviors that are humiliating, intimidating, or threatening to a target. The defined characteristics of workplace bullying clearly highlight bullying as a unique, and highly detrimental, form of aggression at the workplace. Workplace bullying, a term coined by British researcher Andrea Adams, is defined as situations where an employee repeatedly, over a prolonged time period, is exposed to harassing behavior from one or more colleagues and where the targeted person is unable to defend him or herself against the behavior (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Bullying differs from mobbing as it is often a 1:1 ratio. Although groups may bully, typically the control sought through bullying is from one individual over another. As a result of the “prolonged time period” it is important to highlight that workplace bullying is not a single episode of conflict in the workplace, but rather a form of habitual abuse where the exposed employee is submissive to the perpetrator (Einarsen, 1999; Nielsen et al., 2015; Sutton, 2007). Another definition highlights the factor that workplace bullying is “status-blind”. Workplace bullying has been defined as "status-blind" interpersonal hostility that is deliberate, repeated and sufficiently severe as to harm the targeted person's health or economic status (Namie, 2003). This definition highlights

the fact that status may not play a role in the bullying and thus anyone can become a target. International consensus among researchers currently defines workplace bullying as repeated mistreatment by one or more perpetrators of an individual or group (Namie, 2007). This definitions incorporates all of the ways bullying may occur to incorporate all variations of the experience.

Workplace bullying has had several names and terminologies associated with the phenomenon. Several definitions have also been identified for mobbing and workplace bullying. For this review the terms perpetrator, target, mobbing, and workplace bullying will be used throughout the discussion. Workplace bullying will be defined as repeated mistreatment by one or more perpetrators of an individual group (Namie, 2007).

Workplace Bullying Types

Adult workplace bullying can be witnessed in many ways and may not be initially realized by the perpetrator, or target, as bullying. It may be viewed as otherwise harmless malicious activity or two-faced personalities that one must accept and deal with. “We must understand that bullying is different from harmless incivility, rudeness, boorishness, teasing and other well-known forms of interpersonal torment” (Namie, 2003). Unique personalities exist within the workplace and moments of rudeness and teasing may occur. The acts of bullying, however, dig much deeper than these antics. Many adults are still weary to describe the mistreatment they endure as actual bullying. In actuality, however, many of the examples individuals report as unwarranted or toxic work relationships actually constitute as adults acts of bullying. “A person who is targeted may notice an abrupt and significant change in their social work environment. A once socially

supportive work environment takes a subtle but remarkable turn and becomes hostile and unsupportive” (Hecker, 2007).

It is also important to understand that once bullying takes shape in an adult working environment it is typically no longer a physical form of harassment, but rather a mental and emotional destructor. Although the effects of bullying can harm an individual physically, the descriptions and events most notably described are not in the form of physical harm from the bully. No longer are targets being pushed at recess, but rather they are excluded and shamed publicly in an effort to humiliate and potentially eliminate them from the work environment. Although one would assume adults are mature enough to not partake in deeming acts, or at least recognize when they witness or experience a bully in action, many adults are still unaware of what actually constitutes workplace bullying (Namie, 2017). According to Dr. Gary Namie (2007), who extensively researches workplace bullying, workplace bullies can often be classified into four types. These descriptors can help others to understand what workplace bullying may look like in their work environment. All four themes constitute as mistreatment and bullying of another individual. The Screaming Mimi, Constant Critic, Two-Headed Snake, and Gatekeeper Bully (Namie, 2007) each depict different aspects of workplace bullying and what forms the bully may utilize in targeting others.

Screaming Mimi

The Screaming Mimi bully aims to publicly humiliate the witness or instill fear typically through public displays of yelling or screaming at the target (Namie, 2007) and accounts for approximately 9% of perpetrators (Namie et al., 2019). This is the individual who belittles or reprimands another in a meeting. They may point their fingers in

another's face, get in close proximity to display power, raise their voice higher than their counterpart, and act in a demeaning way towards another. This is most frequently done in the presence of others so that the bully exhibits and exerts their power in an attempt to instill fear in targets as well as bystanders (Namie, 2007).

Constant Critic

The Constant Critic bully, or the stereotypical nitpicker, which accounts for approximately 29% of perpetrators (Namie et al., 2019). Behind closed doors these individuals aim at career destruction, planting self-doubt in the target. They may deem targets incompetent and unfit for their position (Namie, 2007). Often these individuals make comments to others in the workplace belittling the target in some way. The end goal is career destruction and instilling in others that the target is useless, unfit, or unable to do their job as well as the bully (or other non-involved colleagues). The targets work may be called into question and minutely criticized (Hecker, 2007). They may be assigned a burdensome workload in an attempt to point out that they cannot handle their job (Hecker, 2007).

Two-Headed Snake

Additionally, there is the "Two-Headed Snake bully" who desires to destroy targets by rumor and divide apart teams in order to "conquer" the target (Namie, 2007). This perpetrator type accounts for approximately 36% of workplace bullying (Namie et al., 2019). Strength comes in numbers. When a target is singled out from their peers they are left alone to face their mistreatment. This bully often spreads rumors they know will upset those closest to the desired target in an effort to break apart workplace unity. This is

the individual who gossips in the lunchroom, coffee area, restroom etc. but stops as soon as the target is in close proximity. Exclusion, or “The Silent Treatment”, are also utilized by this bully (Hecker, 2007; Sutton, 2007). When dealing directly with the target s/he is passive aggressive as to keep their true intent unclear (Namie et al., 2019).

Gatekeeper Bully

Finally, the Gatekeeper Bully withholds information and/or resources to allow the target to succeed and accounts for 26% of perpetrators (Namie et al., 2019). He or she may steal credit and/or play favorites in an attempt to isolate/exclude or torment the unfavored target (Namie, 2007). This is often thought of as an act by an administrator, however, senior team members and equals can also utilize the gatekeeper strategy if they play favorites with an administrator in order to set up the eventual demise of a peer. Gatekeepers may allocate unrealistic deadlines, provide no support or training, and/or require the target to place work over family and or health obligations in an attempt to set the target up for failure (Namie et al., 2019).

The above-mentioned descriptors emerge among the literature to explain how bullying may manifest, or present itself, in the workplace. These descriptors can help others to understand how workplace bullying may take form in the workplace. This, however, is not an exclusive list, as unique situations will arise (Hecker, 2007; Namie, 2003; Namie, 2007; Namie, 2017; Namie et al., 2019; Sutton, 2007). The following sections will explain the power struggle present in bullying and bullying prevalence in the workplace.

Bullying is a Power Struggle

Bullying results from an imbalance of power and a need for control over another individual. Power is a central concept in the definition of workplace bullying, as without an imbalance of power, many behaviors would not be considered “bullying” behaviors (Berlingieri, 2015). Research has shown that the behaviors associated with bullying often result from a power difference between the bully and the target with the aim at reinforcement of the targets lower status within the group (Balanovic et al., 2016). This power struggle is often witnessed between leadership and employee, or administration and employee, due to the power dynamics. There are numerous studies, such as one by Blase and Blase (2002) which explore teachers as targets at the hands of school principals, resulting in a range of negative and stress induced physical and emotional responses. Because power is often correlational with workplace bullying, many studies to date have investigated predominantly managers and peers as the main perpetrators (Schat et al., 2006).

The “typical” dynamic, however is not always the case in regards to bullying. Outliers exist and power dynamics are not always the distinguishing factors. Bullying can be exhibited by people of differing age, gender and background (Balanovic et al., 2016). In a study by May and Tenzek (2017) the researchers explored bullying at a university level in which professors became the targets of their students. Research on this phenomenon, known as “upward bullying” has found that specific sources of power are utilized in combination by staff members to bully their managers (Patterson et al., 2018). Although not the norm, the professors reported that the acts of bullying resulted in fears of personal safety and safety for other students (May & Tenzek, 2017).

Little attention has been given to date to equal status member bullying such as colleague on colleague or teacher on teacher (Fox & Stallworth, 2009). Even less attention has been paid to determining if in the educational workplace the title of special educator plays a factor in a targets potential to be bullied. Although many studies have explored how workers of the public sector are often targets of bullying, specifics concerning special educators have not been investigated (Fox & Stallworth, 2009; Hecker, 2007). The need for this research exists to continue to move forward with this current anti-bullying movement. Could something predispose special educators to be targeted over their general education peers? If workplace bullying is about control and power, how can these elements be transferred into an equal status situation in the workplace?

Prevalence of Workplace Bullying

Despite the fact that the majority of the adult population spends more waking hours at work than at home (or anywhere else), the manifestations of adult bullying in the workplace is widely dismissed (Adams, 1992). The question now becomes, “Is adult workplace bullying actually occurring at a rate worth investigating?” Statistics point to yes. An early estimate of bullying's prevalence in the U.S. comes from a survey that randomly sampled Michigan residents in 2000. In the mid 2000's, researchers found that 16.7% of respondents reported a severe disruption of their lives from workplace aggression (Namie, 2003). In more recent studies it was found that a startling 37% of American workers have been bullied at work, primarily having been sabotaged, yelled at, or belittled by their bosses (Namie, 2007). This concluded that approximately one in three workers are struggling with the phenomenon of workplace bullying.

In a 2017 national survey by Dr. Namie's Workplace Bullying Institute it was found that 19% of the sample had been bullied at work, either in the past or currently. An additional 19% of workers had witnessed workplace bullying occurring and 25% were aware of the phenomenon but had no personal experience nor had the witnessed bullying at their workplace. In sum, 63% of American workers are affected/aware of workplace bullying. In contrast, 37% of Americans are unaware of a phenomenon that is affecting approximately two-thirds of the American workforce. In 70% of the cases the perpetrator was male and 66% of targets were women (Namie, 2017).

The above percentages suggest that of the approximate 161,616,000 workers in the United States in 2017, based statistics by the Bureau of Labor, 30 million American workers have been, or are currently being, bullied at work. Another 30 million have witnessed this workplace bullying phenomenon (Namie, 2017). To put this number into perspective, the number of individuals who are currently bullied and/or have witnessed others being bullied sums to 60.3 million Americans. This total is the same as the total population of six western US states: Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico (Namie, 2017).

After a beginning look into the phenomenon Adams (1992) wrote the stirring words that, "In every organization, every company, someone is likely to be experiencing the difficulties imposed by bullying behavior" (p.5). After two radio programs concerning workplace bullying she received letters filled with painful revelations and phone calls with distressing details.

These recent results suggest that this phenomenon is not ending, and many are still unaware of the growing incivilities of the US labor force. The cost of workplace

bullying can be great for the target and the organization (Sutton, 2007). How can we afford these costs for this many individuals?

Consequences of Workplace Bullying

Health Effects on Targets

Consequences of bullying can be serious for any individual or organization. Approximately 40% of targets may suffer adverse consequences as a result of bullying (Namie, 2017). The most notable consequences include harm to health, social, or economic well-being. (Namie, 2007). “A person who is targeted may notice an abrupt and significant change in their social work environment. A once socially supportive work environment takes a subtle but remarkable turn and becomes hostile and unsupportive” (Hecker, 2007). Social isolation has been recognized as a major risk factor for morbidity and mortality for more than twenty five years (Cacioppo et al., 2014). An international anti-bullying movement exists because of the severity of effects on a target’s health. Epidemiologists have linked exposure to an abusive work environment with several negative health consequences, all of which are stress related (Namie, 2007). Feeling ostracized and alone can leave individuals in serious states of depression or suicidal ideation. Suicide is a leading cause of death across the globe. Among many potential causes, exposure to workplace bullying has been proposed as a predictor of both suicidal ideation and suicide (Nielsen et al., 2015). Additional physical effects of stress targets may experience include chest pain, nausea, headaches, migraines, increased blood pressure, nightmares, memory loss, poor concentration, tremors, etc. (Namie et al., 2019). Emotionally, the individual may experience anxiety, depression, blame, self-doubt, anger, guilt, grief, and mood swings as a consequence of workplace bullying (Namie et al.,

2019). Increased cortisol (stress hormone level) can be linked to additional health effects such as increased blood sugar, decreased thyroid hormone, suppressed immune system, increase in abdominal fat, decreased muscle tissue and more (Namie et al., 2019).

Scientific research has linked stress to brain trauma, specifically related to the brain's plasticity. "Repeated stress causes atrophy of dendrites in the CA3 region, and both acute and chronic stress suppress neurogenesis of dentate gyrus granule neurons. Atrophy is accompanied by deficits in declarative, episodic, spatial, and contextual memory performance" (Namie et al., 2019). There is an abundance of scientific research on the physical harm that stress places on an individual. For the purpose of this review, it is important to form the connection between workplace bullying causing increased levels of stress for individuals, and, as a result, this stress causing potentially severe and life threatening consequences for targets (Namie, 2007; Sutton 2007). Hopelessness, depression, and anxiety is often felt by targets after lengthily episodes of bullying (Sutton, 2007).

Employers have the power to eliminate abusive conduct in the workplace. Evidence suggests, however, that employers rarely take steps to assist the target. Approximately 70% of the respondents in Workplace Bullying Institute's (WBI) 2017 survey noted that the employer either did not investigate a claim or investigated with no change and nothing happening as a result of investigation (Namie, 2017). Since laws against workplace bullying and mobbing do not exist in the United States, the consequence of legal action to employers does not act as a determinant to help provide relief to targets (Hecker, 2007).

With a lack of support from employers, targets often experience interference with work production due to the effects of bullying (Namie, 2007). Effects related to memory and lack of concentration may attribute to the loss of production that targets may experience. New York has attempted to pass a healthy workplace bill to combat the issue of lacking legal ramification for institutions failing to recognize or support their workers through workplace bullying. To date, most institutions are left to their own determinations as to how to proceed with issues that arise in their environments. Since this is typically left to administration, who often reject the notion of any issues occurring, often policies are pushed to the wayside. In turn, management can deem the target is ineffective and terminate the target instead of addressing the original issue. Often, a target is sacrificed in an effort to dismiss, or stop the situation, from continuing or escalating further (Namie, 2007). This allows the workplace to wash their hands of the situation, while the employee is left, often times, in dire situations. The future may be trending towards new legislation as 77% of individuals in the WBI's 2017 national survey either fully supported or somewhat supported a law against workplace bullying (Namie et al., 2019).

Economic Effects on Targets

In addition to harm of health, bullying in the workplace can bring economic harm to the individual and the workplace. Individuals who are targets often do not see an end to the bullying until they are terminated or quit for their health's sake (Namie, 2007). In 54% of cases, bullying stops only when the target loses her or his job (Namie, 2017). Given the nature of bullying, it is understandable that many of those exposed consider leaving their job (Salin & Notelaers, 2017), and studies have established a link between

exposure to bullying and intention to leave (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). As a result financial strain causes additional stressors for the target. Family relationships and marriages are often tested as a result of a targets past experience and job loss. Individuals may turn to alcohol and/or smoking, leading to additional financial strain (Adams, 1992). Health care costs can also escalate as a result of stress, anxiety, depression, and addictions (Sutton, 2007). If an individual quits their job as a result of bullying (Namie, 2007) loss of benefits and wages can cause dire financial strain.

Effects on the Organization

Financial strain also occurs for the organization. The targets absenteeism may cost the employer along with flayed productivity and a lack of teamwork to get tasks accomplished. Should the target experience adverse health effects as a result of bullying, the employer may face medical bills or an extended leave of absence by the employee. If the target chooses to speak up, the employer may face legal or arbitrational costs. If termination or resignation occurs the employer then experiences higher turnover rates. This in turn leads to the costs of hiring new employees including the training of new workers (Namie et al., 2019). Paired with tangible costs and loss are the intangible costs employers pay when losing employees as a result of workplace bullying. When targets are lost at the cost of bullying the employer may be losing one of its best and brightest employees. Also, the employer may face negative public relations if the target chooses to voice their experiences and label the employer as a negative work environment (Namie et al., 2019). In an effort to protect all employees, and the company's financial interests for the future, organizations must examine the climate in which they expect people to work (Adams, 1992).

Public Sector Prior Studies and Examples

Public sector service workers are among those groups who experience high instances of the above mentioned types of workplace bullying. High numbers of healthcare, social service workers, and educational occupations reported Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms as a result of workplace experiences (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996). Researchers continue to study why bullying tends to be more prominent in the social services than in corporate America. Some debate if the connections could come from the personality traits and “types” of workers who enter these fields. The teachers, nurses, police, firefighters, social workers, librarians, and many more can easily be deemed the “helpers” of the community. Often these individuals have a desire to help and serve over personal economic interests. The tendency to want to help others, although highly honorable, may be what is leading the public sector as the group of workers with the highest instances of workplace bullying. Individuals who have chosen to devote a work to service in their community often exert common characteristics of being likely to trust others until exploited, trying to cooperate when team assignments are given, and showing empathy and concern for others (Namie, 2005). Personal qualities that are highly admirable may be associated with this massive group of the workforce becoming frequent targets of bullying at work. Lessen and Frankiewicz (1992) reported that successful special education teachers displayed enthusiasm, fairness, and empathy. With this in mind, those who seem to be even more empathetic, helping, and willing to do anything at the sake of others in an education setting are the special educators. These individuals work with a particularly challenging population of students and attempt daily to help their class succeed.

Knowing what we do about personality traits and helpers, one could postulate that some individuals in the building are at higher risk of becoming targets than others. The field is rich with research concerning the health care industry, namely nurses, who are experiencing workplace bullying. Academic literature and media outlets are rich with studies and coverage concerning the issue of student bullying, however, very little exists on bullying experienced by teachers (Fox & Stallworth, 2010).

With this in mind, there is also a small body of research to suggest that teachers are often targets. There is a need to look at specifics, and to determine who may need supported over others. Once the at-risk group is identified, the end hope would be that some change would come about for the work environment of these individuals. The results of studies concerning nurses and teachers are reviewed below, and the numbers are again staggering at the rate at which the public sector worker is reporting exposure and awareness to the phenomenon of workplace bullying. Although the existing body of research aids in defining the concept of workplace bullying, describes types of bullying, characteristics of targets/perpetrators, and consequences as a result of maltreatment, there is still a lot we do not know about the phenomena of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

Healthcare

“According to a 2004 survey of physicians by the American College of Physician Executives, over half reported that behavioral codes designed to curb abusive or disruptive physicians (present in about 75% of the workplaces surveyed) are inconsistently enforced” (Namie, 2005). Healthcare workers, namely nurses, often experience workplace bullying from their physician bosses and are considered highly

vulnerable to workplace bullying (Lewis et al., 2017). Namie (2005) notes that, “They disrupt and torment staff who endure their boorish irresponsible conduct on a daily basis. Worse yet, they toxify the workplace that patients rely upon for healing. Institutional administrators are too timid to confront them” (p. 15). In a study conducted by Joao and Portelada (2016) of Portuguese nurses, the results indicated that 88.94% of the participants referred to having experienced, at least some aggression conduct, and among these, 18.28% recognized themselves as victims of mobbing. The mistreatment typically came from a manager or superior. In this study, it was reported that nurses reported mobbing/mistreatment from head nurses 42.44% of the time and doctors accounted for 29.03% of the time. Co-workers of equal status were reported as the bully 31.07% of the time (Joao & Portelada, 2016). Also, worth noting, was the time period or interval of the bullying/mobbing. The targets reported that 58.99% of them were experiencing this mistreatment for over a year (Joao & Portelada, 2016). Similar to what we see in numerous occupations, the bullying is swept under the carpet, especially if the physician, or head nurse is good at their job. Others are quick to see the success and turn a blind eye to the negative qualities of an individual. Numbers rule the system and if the perpetrator, no matter the occupation, is bringing in good “numbers”, then all else tends to be overlooked. Research by Amy Edmondson (2004) found that the most effective nursing units actually reported more errors due to leadership supporting that errors are natural and normal to document (Sutton, 2007). The opposite was true in units with nearly zero errors. The employees were driven by fear, and therefore the documented mistakes were nearly nonexistent (Edmondson 2004; Sutton, 2007). The asshole boss, therefore, has

polished “numbers” and employees who are working in an unforgiving environment where fear runs rampant (Sutton, 2007).

Education

Educators are public sector employees who studies reveal are facing numerous challenges concerning workplace bullying and violence. Brooker and Cumming (2017) found that early childhood educators in Australia felt the pangs of workplace bullying through “dark leadership” practices. These workers felt structural tensions that led to job dissatisfaction through examples such as coercion, emotional blackmail, and horizontal violence (p. 121). Fahie (2014) asserts that although mutual collaboration and cooperation is essential among teaching staff, a bullying dynamic present in the workplace can seriously undermine the potential for teamwork at the individual level as well as the overall school culture. Collaboration and teamwork are essential components of success across a range of workplace environments, but are highly valued in educational settings where educators strive to teach these same collaborative skills to students. Stressors such as abusive environments and bullying suffocate the rich collaborative and cooperative environment educational institutions strive to achieve.

Often, however, like in many public sectors, bullying can be an imbalance in a social group, where one member attempts to “overpower” another. Such is the case when bullying happens between educators in a school setting. Research is even scarcer on adult bullying in schools when teachers are caught in a situation that is within their power hierarchy or “member on member”. Similar to bullying experienced by targets from leadership, teachers bullied by other teachers have reported negative outcomes in concern to emotional and physical well-being along with job dissatisfaction including anger,

depression, tension, anxiety, panic attacks, and feelings of inadequacy (Black, 2003). In addition to physical and emotional effects, consequences of bullying can affect the learning environment with detachment, alienation, absenteeism, and potential turnover if the target resigns (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). Loss of productivity from targets and witnesses of bullying can also occur as well as expensive lawsuits and settlements. These bullied targets are often the most talented employees. They are often driven from the workplace disrupting productivity, fostering resentment, and placing a high price tag on turnover and replacement (Namie, 2007).

As mentioned previously, though the existing body of research aids in defining the concept of workplace bullying, describes types of bullying, characteristics of targets/perpetrators, and consequences as a result of maltreatment, there is still a lot we do not know about the phenomena of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). “An understanding of the cultural, organizational and other contextual factors impacting workplace behavior is crucial towards progress in responding to ill-treatment in the public sector, meaning narrow, ‘blame the worker’, approaches to prevention will not be effective in the long run” (Lewis et al., 2017, p. 311). This phenomenon carries severe consequences to targets at a psychological, social, and physical level, and it undermines the labor environment (Joao & Portelada, 2016). Although workplace bullying and mobbing may not be illegal in the United States it is unethical and should be countered with trainings and policies highlighting insight and sensitivity (Hecker, 2007). If change is to be made it should be asserted that first a raised awareness of what workplace bullying looks like must occur. Also, targets must be supported and perpetrators must be challenged. In order for successful work environments to run free of harassment,

intimidation and maltreatment, a call to supervisors and policy makers to support targets must be made. If a change is to occur, many voices must be heard. This means more than posting a policy on a wall or website, although this is admirable, alone, without acting and enforcement, it is useless (Sutton, 2007). Often, these written words not enforced and/or routinely violated, are worse than useless (Sutton, 2007).

Gaps in the Existing Research

With the common knowledge concerning special educators and counselors, those who have been witnessed going the extra mile with students, it is surprising that there has not been more extensive research looking closer at these groups. This group of individuals are the quintessential “helpers” in a school. They are warm and empathetic (Lessen & Frankiewicz, 1992). The profession of teaching is often viewed as a labor of love (Schwab et al., 1986). Although all teachers are deemed helpers, these special educators take their position a step further and help those most in need and in dire situations. This position in itself makes an individual vulnerable to a wide range of issues and emotional turmoil. The unfortunate reality of life in the classroom have made teaching a stressful occupation (Schwab et al., 1986). Do these individuals carry a larger target? Due to their position, do they feel they are at a uniquely higher risk than their peers for becoming targets of workplace bullying?

With the weight of the phenomenon on their shoulders are they able to continue to perform their daily duties to their full potential? Research points to no. These educators are susceptible to developing chronic feelings of emotional exhaustion and fatigue and losing the feelings of accomplishment on the job (Schwab et al., 1986). Imagine heading to work on Monday with a sickening feeling of anxiety in the pit of your stomach because

all you can think about is another week of being belittled and undermined at work (Adams, 1994). Targets often begin to believe remarks about personal incompetence. Do we want our special educators to believe they are not fit for their position? To begin questioning all they have been educated for years to do? These can be common occurrences concerning special educators and job burnout. The absence of a support group, or those who provide emotional support and comfort can lead to burnout (Schwab et al., 1986). Studies on the existence of burnout in the special education population point to several likely contributing factors, but those connected to potential targeting are little colleague social support, high professional expectations, lack of sense of accomplishment and punishment by administrators (Schwab et al., 1986). With the futures of the children they teach in their hands, educators need to be working at full potential. Special educators already have an uphill battle with teaching some of the most vulnerable and challenging population in the school. We need these educators to be set to do “what they do best”, not questioning their abilities, instruction, and interventions daily.

Conclusion

This study aimed to gain insight and perspectives specifically into special educators’ views on bullying in the school environment and how these experiences may impact the local education setting. Evidence supports that this group of individuals often feels burnt out and ostracized from their peers, and may offer unique insight and perspective into the realm of adult bullying in K-12 environments, an area scarce in current research (Edmonson & Thompson, 2000).

Studies over the years are continuing to prove that adults as targets of workplace bullying in public sectors is on the rise. In the mid 2000’s, researchers found that 16.7%

of respondents reported a severe disruption of their lives from workplace aggression (Namie, 2003). In more recent studies it was found that, “a startling 37% of American workers have been bullied at work, primarily having been sabotaged, yelled at, or belittled by their bosses” (Namie, 2007). This concluded that approximately one in three workers are struggling with the phenomenon of workplace bullying. No matter the type of bully, adults are continuing to be the targets of their coworkers across multiple environments. This study aimed to gain the insight and perspectives of current special educators concerning workplace bullying and their experiences with it.

Due to the need to utilize personal narratives to explore and unwrap the experience and perceptions of special educators concerning workplace bullying a qualitative study was chosen to build on the current research base. The thoughts, words, and personal experience of those immersed in the educational culture today can best shed light on this looming danger to our current special educators in the field. Constructivism is the theoretical framework that was utilized with question posing, data collection, and analysis of this dissertation. From the constructivist standpoint it is imperative to analyze social actions from the actor’s standpoint in an attempt to see the world through the participant’s eyes (Tracy, 2013). This approach feels that other conventional approaches are falling short in capturing the participant voice from lived experiences, thus uncovering their understanding of the phenomenon. The focus and analysis of the research within this study is not rooted in objectivity or positivistic frameworks; rather, by use of phenomenological analysis, the researcher drew upon the perspectives that are presented by the special educator participants. Chapter Three will continue to explain the

structure and process for participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and derived results from participant voice and perspectives.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Introduction

This study aimed to gain insight and perspective into the K-12 special educators' experiences with workplace bullying. A deeper understanding of special educators' experiences and perspectives can then be used for districts attempting to implement Healthy Workplace Policies and overall anti-bullying movement reforms within their institutions. Guiding research questions for this study were:

- 1.) What are the experiences of K-12 special educators related to workplace bullying in school districts in PSEA's Midwestern Region? and,
- 2.) How do K-12 special educators perceive experiences of workplace bullying and the impact those experiences may have on the local education setting?

This chapter details the interpretive qualitative research design and the methodology utilized to investigate the K-12 educators' experiences and perceptions related to workplace bullying. Qualitative methodology was the best approach for an in depth analysis of this topic as the data herein is contained within the perspectives of those working in the field currently, and their current experiences. Researchers utilizing qualitative methods seek a complete understanding through lived experiences of a smaller sample to provide descriptive detail (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

Constructivism is the theoretical framework that was utilized with the question posing, data collection, and analysis of this dissertation. Paul (2005) asserts the imperative nature of grounding a research study in a theoretical framework so the

questions and analysis of data are transparent to the reader. Constructivism is an interpretive paradigm in which researchers construct meaning through communication and interaction. From the constructivist standpoint it is imperative to analyze social actions from the actor's standpoint in an attempt to see the world through the participant's eyes (Tracy, 2013). Constructivists view humans as meaning-makers and thus formulate meaning through experiences and events that individuals have lived. This study was focused on the meanings and information constructed from the lived experiences and perspectives of its participants.

While a positivist approach would be focused on finding one single truth the constructivist approach is seeking to understand the why by use of participant voice (Tracy, 2013). As Lincoln (2005) states, "Constructivists aim to counterbalance the strong behaviorist and measurability foci of experimental social science with a reemphasis on the immeasurable forms of meaning, and...deep understanding of the meaning-making processes" (p.61). This approach feels that other conventional approaches are falling short in capturing the participant voice from lived experiences, thus uncovering their understanding of the phenomenon. The focus and analysis of the research within this study is not rooted in objectivity or positivistic frameworks; rather, via a phenomenological analysis, I drew upon the perspectives that are presented by the special educators that participated in the study. This study then lent itself to a phenomenological research design. Phenomenologists, in contrast to positivists, believe that the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise (Hammersley, 2000). Utilizing a framework in which my emersion in the environment and predisposed presumptions are openly evident,

kept this research transparent and authentic. The intention of this research was to gather perspectives of the participants about the growing phenomenon of workplace bullying.

Ethical Considerations

The protection of participants was achieved through informed consent and measures to ensure confidentiality. All participants submitted a signed consent form along with an audio/video release form (Appendix A). A recruitment email (Appendix B) was sent detailing the study and the confidentiality procedures. Following approval, each participant received a demographic survey (Appendix C) via google form to obtain personal information and particular details about his or her background information. After the participants completed the demographic survey and consent forms, thus consenting to an interview, it was determined that they acknowledged and understood the purpose of the study and that participation would not bring about physical, personal, or legal harm and minimal social or psychological risk.

Data Sources

Participants

Participants for the study were a sampling of current K-12 special education volunteers from school districts from Pennsylvania State Education Association's (PSEA) Midwestern Region. Perspective individuals were those who are currently working in the field of special education under the titles of Learning Support, Autistic Support, Emotional Support, Speech and Language, or other titles under the Special Education umbrella. Those individuals who responded to the recruitment email sent via their union president, and volunteered as participants, were interviewed to gain insight into experience and perspectives with workplace bullying. Potential participants were

informed of the nature of the study via email (Appendix B) and asked for their willingness to participate in the study. Those individuals who were willing to participate in the study will then be sent a demographic survey (Appendix C) and informed consent forms. Participants will be asked to complete and return these items prior to the interview. After confirming consent to participate, a mutually agreeable date and time was established. A semi-structured interview about experiences and perceptions concerning workplace bullying followed. A semi-structured interview process was utilized to gain participants insights and detailed records of any workplace bullying scenarios. Interviews were conducted across a range of participants employed in PSEA's Midwestern Region. A PSEA uniserve rep was utilized for recruitment assistance via purposeful sampling. The sample was sought to obtain additional information in generating conceptual categories. The goal being the interviewed participants help the researcher formulate theory (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Seeking information through a "gatekeeper" for purposes of gaining entry is encouraged in qualitative research (Bailey, 1996; Holloway, 1997). This individual was well-informed of those who teach K-12 special education in this region, while also being able to provide some initial demographic information of potential participants such as county/district of employment and current position within the district. Emails detailing the study were distributed to potential participants in my home school district, along with colleagues and peers from other Western PA districts. This purposeful sampling process generated the initial sample. The goal was for snowballing to then occur and increase the sample size as a result of further interest and word of mouth from initial recruited participants. The use of

a PSEA representative was favorable over district administration due to the sensitivity of the research topic.

The aim of the research is not to generalize from the population of the sample, but rather to include a range of individuals with varying personal experiences and explore their perspectives and responses concerning bullying dynamics in the workplace until saturation is achieved. A set number of participants was not expected, but rather interviews continued until gathered information yields minimal return and no additional information is being added to the current body of research (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Saturation was reached with the minimum number of five participants to achieved desired outcomes.

Instrumentation

Interviews took place via a virtual platform, Zoom, as necessitated by the global pandemic and to further assure no physical harm to participants during the summer/fall months of 2021. All interviewed participants consented to audio/video recording. Ethical concerns were taken into account as the topic at hand could bring about emotional distress and is sensitive to various individuals. Participants were told to withdraw at any point from the study if the interview process is causing emotional disturbance or stress/anxiety. The interview audio was then transcribed verbatim. Interviews remained private and confidential. Only the researcher had access to the interview footage and the recordings remained on a password protected device.

A semi-structured interview format was utilized along with an interview guide to allow for open ended response and reporting of personal experiences. The goal was for emic, emergent understanding to blossom without strict interview questions (Tracy,

2013). With the sensitivity and emotional nature of the topic, a semi-structured interview format was the best choice to allow participants viewpoints to be heard while tapping content and emotional levels concerning the topic (Tracy, 2013). Participants were given the opportunity throughout the interview, and at its conclusion, to assure the information gathered is properly interpreted. This participant validation is believed to help assure the internal authenticity of the study. To achieve this, participants were be given the opportunity, if wanted, to view the transcribed responses and edit as needed, following the transcription process. The following interview guide/list was utilized to springboard discussion as needed. Not all questions were used in every interview and the order of presentation occasionally shifted based on participant narrative.

- When did you decide to pursue work in the field of special education?
- What is your most profound moment, or accomplishment, as an educator?
- What does a typical workday in your position entail?
- What positions have you held throughout your educational career?
- Imagine you were the principal in your district, what would you change about the climate of the school for the staff?
- How could change benefit your current school climate?
- Tell me what you have noticed in regards to a disconnect between general and special education teachers?
- How do you think you are perceived differently than your peers by administration?
- How do you think your general education colleagues distinguish your position and duties differently from theirs?

- How does your work day vary from that of your general education colleagues?
- Tell me about similarities and differences between social groups or teams of teachers in your building.
- Tell me how you would define intimidating or threatening behaviors among colleagues?
- Tell me about a time where you, or another special educator may have felt excluded, intimidated, or ostracized by other colleagues in the building?
- Tell me anything you wish others knew about your position and experiences that you have not already shared?
- If we were to change roles, what questions would you have asked that I may have omitted from our conversation today that others should know?

Site

Data was gathered for the study via participant interview. The interviews were held via Zoom in lieu of the pandemic, thus making the site a virtual meeting platform. Participants were aware of the interview site via Zoom and were provided informed consent to participate in the virtual interview. All interviews were password protected with a unique meeting name and code for each.

Potential sites include all districts in the PSEA midwestern region. This region includes districts in Beaver, Butler, Clarion, Lawrence, and Mercer counties. Recruitment emails were sent to local union presidents contained within this region/counties, and sites were determined based on potential participants responding the recruitment email. The PSEA midwestern region was chosen based on accessibility of other local union presidents for dissemination and ease of recruitment purposes. Should the study's

findings reflect a need for further research, the remaining regions of Pa could be researched further.

Explication of the Data

Data was gathered for the study via participant interview. The interviews were held via Zoom in lieu of the pandemic. The oral responses of the studies participants were transcribed utilizing the voice recognition accessibility tool via Google docs. Once transcripts were collected, they were manually coded for key words, ie first level codes for organization. Reoccurring words were identified and highlighted on the original transcripts utilizing the Writer's Highlighter add-on for Google Docs. This first-level coding focuses on "what" was present in the data (Tracy, 2013).

Following this initial manual coding cycle, secondary-cycle codes were identified by returning to the original aim of the study and research question and interpreting/determining patterns within the first level codes (Tracy, 2013). These codes were achieved after interpreting the raw data and considering the existing body of research on workplace bullying. Manual coding methods such as tabletop categories suggested by (Tracy 2013) will be utilized throughout the coding process. All coding was manual as no software was utilized for this process, with the exception of Writer's Highlighter add-on for Google Docs.

Finally, information from each interview was placed into a document under the codes to determine emerging themes from the data. This will lead to a determination of similarities in participant's responses and the relationships between participant responses that lead to the study's findings regarding perceptions and experiences with workplace bullying. If two or more participants describe the same phenomenon, this was considered

an emerging theme. These emergent themes, or cruces, were utilized to describe the findings of the study.

Trustworthiness

In this study, trustworthiness was achieved through credibility, authenticity, and transparency/self-reflexivity. Good qualitative research is genuine and vulnerable (Tracy, 2013). Qualitative research is also open and honest about the activities leading to the research and what events led it to transpire. An honest and authentic awareness of one's own identity and motivations for conducting this study was shared to help readers assure that the researcher has considered their role, presumptions, assumptions, and impact on the study (Tracy, 2013).

Transparency/Self-Reflexivity

“Issues of bias and rigor are present in all research involving people” (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The issues that arise of relationships between researcher and respondents/settings can lead to the potential for bias (Robson & McCartan, 2016). For this study, it bears mentioning that the researcher is a current educator in a public K-12 elementary school in the PSEA Midwestern Region. The researcher has worked in this position for fourteen years and is in constant contact with educators of special education students along with general education teachers. The researcher has been involved in the local association since hire, and formerly served as a building representative for my elementary school. It is this daily exposure and background information that led to the current study. A heightened awareness of adult workplace bullying in one of the researcher's previous districts has led to the questions at hand. Thus, they are very familiar with some of the research subjects and the background knowledge many of them

share, due to the nature of the profession. In addition, PSEA has a shared interest in the topic at hand, proceeding with training some of their local LEAs and two association members from one of my previous districts, myself included, on the topic of workplace bullying. This shared interest has provided a springboard for the current review of literature and further investigation of any possible connections between special educators being targeted more often than their general educator colleagues. Due to the situation in one of the researcher's previous districts, they have witnessed this connection and question if this is something that occurs elsewhere as well. Currently, the former district of mention is working on a Healthy Workplace Policy. The information from this study could further solidify the need for voices from other districts to be heard, and policies such as these to be implemented in other work environments. The issue of respondent clarification to assure accuracy is addressed below.

Credibility

Creswell (2007) and Tracy (2013) suggest involving participants in the review process to ensure the accuracy and intentions of their interview responses. Therefore, following the interview, each participant received an electronic copy of the transcribed interview and reviewed it for precision. In addition, member reflections, or a sharing of findings after data is analyzed with the participants, was utilized to share findings and understandings with the participants themselves. Participants were cautioned of potential emotional responses as a result of reviewing the recall of lived experiences of their own, and others, voices concerning workplace bullying. If necessary, participants and readers were advised to consult with their union representation if they feel they have been a target of workplace bullying. Interviewing multiple participants from varied perspectives

such as age, gender, or special education title can help achieve credibility (Tracy, 2013). The following chapters contain the findings from the study along with a discussion of the findings, as well as limitations of the study and implications for future research. The findings of this study will be compared to studies similar in nature to determine the level at which the findings from this study are comparable to the findings in other workplace bullying studies.

Authenticity

The intention of this study was to gather perspectives from participants about the growing phenomenon of workplace bullying. If I am to uncover perspectives and experience from individuals currently in the field, the best way to do so is to hear it from the individuals who live it daily. Phenomenological research focuses on understanding how individuals view themselves and the world around them (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Due to the nature of the study, I am also interwoven into the study concerning my perceptions, biases, and views. My views and biases are noted and explained as they are part of my lived experience and cannot be separated from my study or interpretations. I am seeking to reveal insight and understanding of individuals' experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016) concerning workplace bullying. This study was structured for participant's voices to tell the story and their experiences to help understand the phenomenon of workplace bullying.

Transferability

The goal of this study was for participants' voices to uncover potential connections or truths to help understand the phenomenon of workplace bullying. These findings may transfer to other occupations or fields also struggling with workplace

bullying. The population sample is unique to my personal experience, but the overarching goal spreads further than K-12 special education departments. The hope is that naturalistic generalizations, or readers feelings as if they have “been there,” occur for readers regardless of occupation (Tracy, 2013). The findings can be compared to previous research in numerous fields to determine if commonalities exist. This study can then add to the current body of research concerning workplace bullying.

Limitations

Although limitations of the study will unfold further as the study is conducted, an understood tradeoff of the phenomenological methodology is the lack of reproducibility in an effort to gain insight into the unique and individual experiences of each of the participants (Patton, 2001). Each individual’s experiences and perspectives are unique and may not be exactly replicable in future studies. This limitation is evident before any data is collected based solely out of the chosen design. However, the study’s intent was to extrapolate data from the words of the humans living the experiences and thus is valued over the risk of being replicable.

An additional limitation that may arise is the difficulty in recruitment of participants. Some individuals may be skeptical about divulging personal experiences to a peer, or have their experiences and/or perspectives shared in scholarly work with a concern of potential ramifications.

Finally, being a current educator who is immersed in the field may provide some unintentional bias based on personal experience and perspectives on the research topic. This may also lead to participants being hesitant to share fully all experiences and perspectives in regards to my current position.

The following chapters contain the findings from the study. Emergent cruces drive a discussion of the findings. Additional limitations of the study and implications for future research conclude the discussion.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Introduction

Research participants were interviewed with the goal of gaining information in regards to the two guiding research questions:

- 1.) What are the experiences of K-12 special educators related to workplace bullying in school districts in PSEA's Midwestern Region?
and,
- 2.) How do K-12 special educators perceive experiences of workplace bullying and the impact those experiences may have on the local education setting?

Data extrapolation uncovered common themes (ie cruces) that are listed in sequential order as they were presented to the study participants. The oral responses of the studies participants were transcribed utilizing the voice recognition accessibility tool via Google docs. Once transcripts were collected, they were manually coded for reoccurring key words and phrases, ie first level codes for organization. Reoccurring words/phrases were identified and highlighted on the original transcripts utilizing the Writer's Highlighter add-on for Google Docs. Then, returning to the original aim of the study and research question, patterns within the first level codes uncovered guiding cruces that were utilized as categories for delivering findings. Once the cruces were identified, a summary of similarities, or differences, in participant response were noted. All coding was manual, as no software beyond Google Docs was used.

After the initial coding cycle, it was apparent that all participants, regardless of age, position, or district had experiences with workplace bullying. Once the data was again combed through, additional connections became apparent as many participants had similar experiences within the workplace regardless of their demographic differences. Participants responses were often similar to their peers and reflected much of the terminology present in the current body of research. Participants verbally described situations with shockingly similar phrasing that allowed the analysis to drive itself. These similarities of participant voice are what brought light to the findings in this chapter. In addition, these findings ran consistent with the current body of research on workplace bullying. This connection will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Appendix C can be utilized to view a list of the interview questions utilized with participants, which were developed and presented to gain insight into the participants level of experience and perspective of workplace bullying. Demographic questions and results are also available in Appendix C. Commonalities, the reoccurring cruces, will be presented followed by brief text descriptions and supporting data from the interviews. Including this commentary from the participant interviews will add an additional level of depth and connection leading to the cruces identified. At the conclusion of the chapter a summary will provide an overview of the experiences and perceptions extrapolated from each interview.

The information in this chapter will follow a sequential format modeled after the structure of the interview. All five participants were asked fifteen questions related to their current roles as K-12 special education educators, as well as their experiences and perceptions with workplace bullying. These findings will provide the reader with each

question, followed by an overview of responses and key cruces that emerged from each. Finally, interviewees will be identified by letter number combination to keep anonymity. Labeling such as P1, thus denoting participant one, and so on, will be used throughout the results. In addition, the pronoun “they” will be utilized for each participant regardless of preferred gender, to add an additional level of anonymity. In the following section the participant introductions and demographic information is presented in written format, along with charts highlighting demographic information provided by the participants in the pre-interview demographic survey (Appendix C).

Participant Information

This information serves to provide highlights of current teaching placements/experiences as well as former educational roles of the participants in the study. “They” is utilized to promote gender anonymity and non-bias. The participant information below was generated through the information presented in the Demographics Survey (Appendix C) along with the first four interview questions which gained information about current teaching position and what each participant’s workday entails.

Participant One

P1 is a K-5 emotional support teacher and former learning support teacher. Prior to teaching emotional support P1 served as a learning support teacher. P1 falls in the age range of 21-30. P1 has experience co-teaching with a general education teacher.

Participant Two

P2 is a K-5 learning support teacher. The entirety of their career has been in learning support classroom in various grades K-5. P2 falls in the age range of 41-50. P2 has experience with co-teaching with a general education teacher.

Participant Three

P3 is a K-5 learning support teacher. Prior to their current position they were a K-5 Emotional Support teacher in the same district. Their original position was a learning support teacher in another Mid-Atlantic state. P3 is in the 21-30 age range.

Participant Four

P4 is a K-5 Autistic Support/Life Skills teacher, prior to their current position, P4 served as a Multiple Disabilities and Emotional Support teacher. P4 is in the 21-30 age range.

Participant Five

P5 is a secondary level, 7-12, special education teacher. They serve across multiple grades in a high school setting. This is P5's only teaching position thus far in their professional career. P5 is in the 21-30 age range.

Findings

As mentioned prior, the information within the study's findings will follow a sequential format modeled after the structure of the interview. All five participants were asked a total of fifteen questions. These questions were either related to their current roles as K-12 special educators (demographic information), or their experiences and perceptions with workplace bullying. These findings provide the reader with each

question, followed by an overview of responses and key cruces that emerged from each. Participant voice is provided to enhance the authenticity of the guiding cruces. This connection is essential for understanding how the participant's responses drove the findings and understandings of the study. Finally, as a reminder, interviewees will be identified by letter number combination to keep anonymity. Labeling such as P1, thus denoting participant one, and so on, will be used throughout the results. "They" will continue to be utilized for each participant regardless of gender preference, to add an additional level of anonymity.

In the succeeding chapter, a summary of the key points or cruces will be provided, as well as any limitations or possible future research. In this chapter, however, each question pertaining to perspective and experience will be listed with a goal of understanding how each crux was revealed via participant responses. The following eleven questions from the interview provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees. The questions will be presented in sequential order, as they were to the participants during the interviews.

Question Five: *Imagine you were the principal in your district, what would you change about the climate of the school for the staff?*

When asked about changes to the climate of the school if they were the principal in their buildings three cruces were evident. Interviewees stressed:

- (A) The importance of time, activities, and engagement in collaboration with peers,
- (B) Emphasized the need for the workplace to be a positive environment of respect, value, and rapport to report to daily and,

(C) Stressed the need for administration to be approachable, having someone to go to for help that would listen and be supportive when needed.

Crux A: Collaboration and engagement with peers is a necessity, along with the time to do so.

Three of the participants (P2, P4, and P5) noted the need for time to collaborate and engage with peers on a regular basis. P2 addressed the need for time to collaborate, while P4 and P5 stressed the need for engaging with peers and fostering relationships across departments (ie grade levels and special education/general education). P2 stated, “I would work on giving the staff more time to plan with each other and less busy work. I would encourage co-teaching when possible and when it’s appropriate.”

P4 expressed the need for collaboration across special education and general education by means of collaboration as well. According to P4, “I think for me, I would be trying to figure out a way to better communicate with the gen ed and special ed. I think that’s a battle I face myself.”

P5 also noted a need for collaboration across disciplines and departments, “The first thing I would do, is do some sort of activity where across departments they had to do something to work together.” P5 continued to explain this by making the connections for all employees having value to the students they teach. “I would really want to work on building those relationships and opportunities for those relationships to build across departments so that way they all can see the value that they have for students” (P5).

The discussion from P2, P4, and P5 all stressed the importance of collaboration between colleagues, with an emphasis on the time for this collaboration to occur stressed by P2.

Crux B: The workplace should be a positive environment of respect, value, and rapport.

P1, P2, and P5 all commented on their work environment as an area for possible change. The participants noted they would like to feel valued, respected, and appreciated, thus allowing for a positive place to report to daily. P1 stated, “I just wish that there was a little bit more understanding.” P2 echoed this sentiment stating, “Just having a positive place to go to work every day that people, you feel appreciated and that you’ve done a good job.” P5 shared this perspective noting, “So that way everyone can kind of see all the work that is kind of behind the scenes, and kind of have a higher level respect for one another.”

The above participants shared that they would change the level of value and respect they feel in their current climate.

Crux C: There is a need for approachable and supportive administration who are willing to listen.

Two interviewees (P2 and P3) both stressed the need for approachable administrators and a place to go for help when needed. P3, specifically, stated, “I would make sure I was very approachable, I think that would be my biggest thing.” They continued to express, “Something to change about the climate would be just like, always open to have a discussion and be a listener. A listener would be helpful” (P3). P2 added

the importance of the supportive administrator, “If you are struggling, knowing there is somewhere to go to get help for whatever you need.”

Participants, to varying degrees and emphasis, would encourage climate change and growth in the areas of colleague collaboration, positive work environment, and supportive administration.

Question Six: *How could change benefit your current school climate?*

This question was listed in the original interview question list but was not asked during the interview process as interviewees elaborated throughout their response to the preceding question that the changes they suggested to the school climate would positively benefit their peers and themselves.

Question Seven: *Tell me what you have noticed in regards to a disconnect between general and special education teachers.*

When asked about perceptions and experiences with disconnect between general educators and special educators many topics came to light, but the overarching crux was:

(A) General educators and special educators may not understand the extent (ie. responsibilities and requirements) of each other’s jobs.

Crux A: General understanding of job requirements and responsibility are unclear.

A general understanding that all teachers, special or general educators, are busy was noted. Three participants, however, expressed that the level of this understanding may not always be clear to others, thus leading to a disconnect between them and their colleagues. P2 stated, “I don’t know that general ed always has an idea of what is

involved on the end of the special ed teachers. Everybody has to teach, obviously, and everybody has to grade, but what goes into IEP's and re-evals." P2 continues to explain:

So ya, I do feel that maybe they (general educators) look in our rooms and they see that maybe there are five kids in there at the table and they are like, "oh, that's not so bad," but they aren't realizing that those five kids are in three different levels even if they are all in the same grade, they still aren't necessarily taught the same thing. Or, you have to modify for one some way, and then modify for another in another way. Just there is a lot that goes into the whole special ed. And it is draining, it can be very draining. Then we have got the parents, and the meetings, and when they are not happy there is more than one meeting. (P2)

P3 echoed this sentiment expressing, "I don't necessarily know if we know the extensiveness of each other's jobs. Like I don't know if they know how much paperwork I have." In a similar fashion P4 stressed underscoring as a disconnect they notice.

According to P4, "Underscoring. A lot of gen ed teachers think that we are given all of this time and we don't do anything. They don't necessarily realize how much you kind of have to be like a mini lawyer in special ed." P4 continued to stress that they have witnessed their peers clearly state that they do not need to listen to P4 and that they don't understand what they do all day. P4 shared the vocalicity of others making the disconnect immediately identifiable for them.

Question Eight: *How do you think you are perceived differently than your peers by administration?*

When presented with the above question two conflicting cruces were evident. Some interviewees stressed:

(A) Special Education teachers felt a lack of recognition and value from their administrator and,

(B) Special Education teachers felt that their administration was very supportive and valued them as an equal.

Crux A: Administrators view some teachers of special education as more expendable and less valued than their general education colleagues.

Two participants (P1 and P3) noted they felt a lack of value and worth from their administration. P1 addressed the issue based on class size and expendability of support services, along with additional daily responsibilities added to special educators' schedules. P1 noted, "I think that the idea that we have less kids, or we're not teaching all day long, so we don't have that many responsibilities...and then we're given more responsibilities during the day like bus duty, or um cafeteria duty." P1 continued, "Or they will pull paraprofessionals to fill in, or they'll pull teachers to fill in, cause they think, that our job is, I don't want to say easy, but we have less commotion going on than gen ed does."

P3 noted that their value and worth as a teacher of special education, in comparison to general educators felt in question. In an example concerning budget P3 stated, "Even like budget wise, like I would get less of a budget and that makes you think. Like am I a real teacher here? I think often the feeling is, "Am I a real teacher here?" P3 gives another example concerning Teacher Appreciation Week, "My first year teaching, for Teacher Appreciation Week, they didn't include us. That was devastating to me as a first-year teacher. Like, I was pouring my heart and soul into this and you don't see me as a teacher!"

Crux B: Administration places a high value on teachers of special education and may meet them as equals.

Three of the participants (P2, P4, and P5) explained that they felt very supported by their administration. These participants felt there was either no difference, or that they were more supported, than their general education counterparts. P2 stated, “I do think that our administration is pretty good about thinking that we are equals.” In addition P4 noted, “I, personally think I have a supportive admin... I don’t necessarily think I am perceived differently.” Both P2 and P4 felt supported and equal to their counterparts. P5 felt additional support and extra permissions, above and beyond their counterparts, was given to special educators. P5 explained, “By my principals, I think they look at special ed teachers closer to an equal than they do other departments... I think the big thing is that we are given more leeway to be more flexible through trust.” The support P5 felt was evident when stating, “Principal level, phenomenal, really respect us, really trust us, will give us even extra permissions.”

Participants had opposing views concerning their perception from administration. Some felt extremely supported, equal, and taken care of. Others felt they were not “real teachers” and that their work, support staff, and day was less supported than their general education peers.

Question Nine: *How do you think your general education colleagues distinguish your position and duties differently from theirs?*

When asked how their position may be distinguished differently from that of their general education peers one crux became evident: Interviewees acknowledged:

(A) Participants explained that their colleagues view their room as a place for play and less academic instruction

Crux A: General educators view fewer students and non-academic activities as less important than direct academic instruction, and may verbalize snide remarks about the situation.

P1 and P3 explained that individuals who walk by their room may not get the whole picture of what is going on, and therefore assume that academics do not occur in their classrooms. P1 stated, “I believe that there's some that think that when the kids come down to my classroom they're playing. That I give them multiple breaks, which I do, but they're typically sensory breaks, and what they need.” P3 explained this situation as:

Sometimes I think that they feel we do less academics because everything is at a much slower rate. Like when I taught emotional support for engagement, I turned everything into a game. I had so many games to increase engagement. And I know, well maybe it was more like colleagues that I feel like they thought, “This girl is not even teaching any academics”. I definitely feel like judgment was passed on how many games I played or how many rewards. Depending on my position I have had so many rewards systems and people would walk by and make snide remarks like, “Your kids are always playing with Legos”, Well ya, because they earned it and it is a reward to keep them working. So ya, people have definitely made snide comments about that. (P3)

Participants expressed concern with their colleagues making remarks about their instruction and what is happening in their classrooms. In general, they expressed that their general education peers seem to express they feeling that the students seem to play and take breaks too often, and that academic instruction isn't occurring as it should. Snide remarks had been made to one participant.

Question Ten: *How does your work day vary from that of your general education colleagues?*

Some participants responded to the above question while presented with question seven, as they described how they are perceived differently from their general education colleagues in terms of how their work day differs. Those who did not respond to the question while answering question seven answered separately. Combined, the commonalities that arose were:

- (A) Special educators felt their day was more flexible than their general education colleagues and,
- (B) Special educators expressed that their class size and variation of instructional levels differed from their peers.

Crux A: Teachers of special education have more flexibility in their day (schedule) than teachers of general education.

P1 and P5 highlighted the flexibility in their schedules that their general education counterparts do not necessarily have. P1 noted, “I do have a little more flexibility in my day than general education teachers do because if a student needs my help I can leave my paraprofessionals there.” P5 echoed a similar sentiment when stating, “We can skip an inclusion class and it doesn’t matter much. The gen ed teachers can’t necessarily skip a class and have it not affect much.” Participants explained that not being assigned to whole group instruction for an entire day allows for flexibility in their schedule.

Crux B: A teacher of special education’s day includes instruction of multiple subjects at multiple instructional levels, simultaneously, regardless of assigned student grade level.

P4 explained how special educators may have multiple levels of instruction within multiple groups at the same time. In a conversation of how their day differs from their peers, P4 highlighted the differences in special education differentiation versus general education differentiation. P4 described their day as, “I have four different grade levels, but within those grade levels you have different needs. I may have three third graders but I could have one at kindergarten level, and one at a 5th grade level who is higher.” P1 shared a similar experience noting, “I have multiple groups at the same grade level because behaviorally they cannot be in the same group.” P1 described how different groupings may be needed based on behaviors or instructional level. “Sometimes I have to put Kindergarten and 1st grade together and then do it skills based.”

In contrast, not all special educators reported the different levels of instruction as being a difference. P3 explained that they have only one grade level in their classroom and differentiate similar to a general education teacher. “I am very grateful I am just one grade learning support. In the past I have been in emotional support K-5 and it is such a challenge, but currently I only have one grade”, stated P3.

Question Eleven: *Tell me about similarities and differences between social groups or teams of teachers in your building?*

When presented with question eleven, three participants described how being a special educator does not seem like a similarity to them in forming a team. Oppositely, three participants expressed a lack of cohesiveness between the special educators in their buildings (with one explaining that things have improved just this year). Two participants described attitude/philosophy as a similarity they notice among teams of teachers. These results can be described as:

(A) Special educators do not feel a common bond with other special educators. Ie, being a special educator is not a factor in forming a team of teachers in the building, and

(B) Attitude and teaching philosophy bring people together as a team or social group in the building.

Crux A: Teachers of special education do not feel part of a team or social group in their work environments.

P1 explained that this may be due to scheduling. Whereas grade level teams have common plan and class times, special educators operate on their own schedules. P1 noted, “The special education teachers or the ESL teachers, or the gifted teachers, don't typically have a group because their schedules are so different.” Due to this P1 stated that special educators “team” with those they provide support for, “They kind of gravitate to those teachers that they may provide the most push in support for, or the teacher that they spend the majority of their time with.” P2 also described the lack of teaming between special educators. “I feel our special ed team is not cohesive at all. Like I don't have a team that I can go to,” explained P2. In addition, P2 also noted that this may be due to scheduling when stating, “It is probably just because, well we don't have a common planning. We are all teaching something different.” P5 explained that this was a similar situation in their district up until recently. P5 explained how an additional educator has changed the cohesiveness of their team. “Last year I would have said it was like everyone for themselves in the special ed department. We had one new girl this year in our building, which has made a difference in that culture.”

Crux B: Educators with similar personalities and teaching philosophies tend to gravitate together.

P3 illustrated this concept stating, “People who have similar teaching philosophies - are they student centered? Are they the marigold vs. the oak tree? Are they the positive people, like the positive people tend to flock towards each other.” P4 expressed a similar explanation, “I think that personalities make a huge difference. Like who gravitates to who, and who you get along with. You kind of learn who you click with and who, not only that, but who you can trust really.”

Multiple participants expressed how scheduling may cause the lack of cohesiveness between them and their special education counterparts. This is a different than their general education peers who have grade level schedules. In addition, two participants highlighted personality and attitude as a similarity in teams or social groups as more of a determining factor than grade level itself.

Question Twelve: *Tell me how you would define intimidating or threatening behaviors among colleagues?*

Question twelve yielded a wide range of responses from the participants. Each seemed to have a different take on what they felt was intimidating or threatening. Participants each detailed what they felt was intimidating based on experience, as many shared why they defined behavior this way after sharing their response. P1 and P4 both shared that they define these behaviors as passive aggressive tones, comments, and questions. P2 and P5 both expressed verbal responses directed at an individual in a face-

to-face setting. P3 shared that withholding of information and being demeaning towards others is intimidating to them. The results can be described as:

- (A) Special educators feel passive aggressive behaviors, directed at them, but behind their back from others, are intimidating and threatening,
- (B) Special educators feel verbal confrontation is intimidating and threatening, and
- (C) Special educators feel withholding of information is threatening and intimidating.

Crux A: Special educators feel that passive aggressive behaviors, such as questioning, is intimidating and/or threatening.

P1 explained that tone and inflection have a connection in passive aggressive behaviors they have witnessed. P1 emphasizes that how something is said may be as important, if not more important than what is said. P1 stated, ““People saying, why are you writing your goals this way? Instead of, ‘This is how I do it, why did you do it this way?’, but more in the passive aggressive tone.” That would be probably the biggest one that I see. P4 also cited passive aggressiveness as a threatening or intimidating behavior. P4, however, explains this as being a “behind the back” situation instead of the tone used in a forward conversation as P1 explained. P4 commented, “I have seen people being passive aggressive for sure in regards to different situations. Or maybe for something where they agree or disagree with me they wouldn’t come to me up front, they would go to somebody else.”

Crux B: Special educators feel that verbal and physical confrontation is threatening and intimidating behavior from colleagues.

P2 asserted that raised voices, pointed fingers, and threats of going to the union are all verbal and physical confrontation that are threatening or intimidating to colleagues. P2 noted that tone is also connected, as did P1, when the behaviors are face-to-face. P2 explained, “Just a mean tone of voice, yes, that’s what I would say.” P5 echoed this sentiment in explaining, “Ok so with colleagues I think that a lot of it is going to be verbal, because that is what can get passed easier throughout the day.” P5 continued to explain that often little remarks, in front of students, creating a balance of power can be intimidating and threatening.

Crux C: Special educators feel withholding of information and lack of support when requested to be intimidating and/or threatening.

P3 was the only participant who shared an experience in which withholding of information, or the absence of confrontation, was a threatening/intimidating behavior. P3 shared, “When colleagues make you feel less of a teacher or less of a person, because of the choices you are making as a teacher, that is intimidating.” P3 described how this behavior is intimidating because it is demeaning. In addition, P3 emphasized, “If you're asking for help and no one is helping you. There have been many situations where I have been not in a good place and ask for help, and someone says no.” P3 asserted that withholding of support and help can be intimidating along with withholding of praise.

Participants expressed their definitions for threatening and intimidating behaviors among colleagues from the experiences they have witnessed. Threatening or intimidating behaviors look different from one individual to the next. What feels threatening to one, may not to another. Passive aggressive comments and tone, verbal and physical

confrontation, and withholding of information and support were all identified as intimidating or threatening behaviors witnessed by the participants of the study.

Question Thirteen: *Tell me about a time where you or another special educator may have felt excluded, intimidated, or ostracized by other colleagues in the building.*

In contrast to the previous questions where, at times, participants did not have an example to share, or reference, relating to the question, each participant was able to detail a time when they, or a colleague, felt ostracized, intimidated, or threatened while in the workplace. Some participants described more than one time, or event, in which someone felt they were treated differently because they were a special educator. The overwhelming response, by four of the five participants, was that they, or someone they work with, felt left out at work. In addition to feeling left out, P1 also described an event where a co-worker felt intimidated because others were “rallying the troops” against her. P2 described a situation in which a co-worker was continually second guessing their decisions due to another colleague. The results can be described as:

- (A) Special educators feel excluded, ostracized, or are left out at work, because of their position as a special educator,
- (B) Special educators have felt intimidated by others gathering support from additional teachers against them, and
- (C) Special educators have felt intimidated, and/or threatened by coworkers, who make them continually second guess their work and decisions.

Crux A: Special educators feel left out at work because of their position in the faculty.

P1, P2, P3, and P5 all detailed separate examples of special educators feeling excluded or ostracized in the workplace. The verbiage used by all four participants when detailing the past events were that the individual felt “left out.” P3 described being left out of key information. They noted that if general educator’s communication is lacking, teachers of special education are sometimes left out of knowledge needed to support their students. P3 explained, “They are all talking and forget to tell you. If you aren’t in proximity, you often get left out of key information, whether intentionally or not.” P3 and P5 explained how daily activities and “simple” things are often where they feel left out. P5 stated:

Ya, there are definitely times where, like professional development days when we don’t have kids; they will kind of leave special ed out of a lot of things. Or even something as simple as going out to lunch when you have time that you can go together. That kind of thing has been a distinction where we get left out, or, even when like making decisions. There are a lot of times that special ed is not accounted for and it hurts our kids. (P5)

P1 described a time where an individual was left out of decision making by others in the building, because they didn’t agree with their suggestions concerning a student’s services. P1 noted, “That special education teacher was kind of left out by the other teacher getting, or rallying troops.”

Crux B: Special educators feel threatened or intimidated by groups of individuals “rallying” against them.

In addition to being excluded from decision making, the individual P1 described above also felt threatened by a “rallying of troops” against her. In this case, other teachers joined with the general educator. P1 explained, “It became like a rallying of a group to

get more on the general education teachers' side. It was kind of like a ganging up kind of a situation.”

Crux C: Special educators feel intimidated and/or threatened when others at work make them second guess themselves.

P2 described a situation in which an individual felt that others were continually questioning their work and decisions, thus making them continually second guess themselves. P2 described the situation as, “The person really made them uncomfortable and made them second guess themselves. It was like anything the (special ed) teacher did, was never good enough or never right.” P2 continued, “I’ve witnessed that and it was very hurtful to that teacher.” P2 noted that since the instance above the teacher has left the district. P2 stated, “It was not entirely because of what happened, but it definitely contributed to them leaving.” In addition, P2 clarified, “A berating, belittling, kind of attitude” is used when communicating with peers.

Participants shared various examples of when individuals felt intimidated, ostracized, and or threatened in the workplace. Overwhelmingly, the response went to feeling ostracized, or “left out,” at work for various reasons. The exclusion of others happened in four of the five participants previous experience, and varied across grade levels from K-12. In addition to feeling left out, participants also described how special educators felt they were being “ganged up on” by general educators in a threatening or intimidating way. Finally, a participant shared how causing a special educator to continually question their decision making left them feeling intimidated and ostracized, eventually being a contributing factor in them terminating employment in their current

position. The responses from this question align with the current research base on bullying in the workplace presented previously.

Question Fourteen: *Tell me anything you wish others knew about your position and experiences that you have not already shared.*

Each participant shared their opinion on what they felt was pertinent information for others to know about working as a special educator. Responses varied, but three of the five educators shared how they wished others knew special education is a hard, but rewarding, position. Other information shared was that special educators need to advocate for their mental health, and that trainings for faculty on what special educators do, and a deeper understanding of their students, would be valuable for everyone in the building. The results can be described as:

- (A) Special educators want others to know that working as a special education teacher is hard,
- (B) Special educators want others to know that their profession is a rewarding one,
- (C) Special educators need advocates, and to advocate for, their mental health based on what the face in their position, and
- (D) Specified training on what a special educator does, and a deeper understanding of their student population, would benefit the faculty of a school district.

Crux A: Being a teacher of special education is hard.

P1 and P5 both shared how working as a special educator is hard work. The participants gave different examples of how they perceive their position as being difficult. P1 explained the challenges of working with multiple grade levels and the time constraints for planning associated with this multi-grade classroom practice. P1 stated, “I wish they knew that special ed is hard.” P1 continued to explain what makes special education a difficult position:

You have multiple grade levels and you have planning going on and it takes a lot of time and a lot of patience. When a lesson plan for the week, that is being asked of us to be turned in, typically is maybe 3 or 4 pages, if that, in gen ed, special eds are typically, well right now, mine are 14 to 15 pages long because of the amount of subjects I teach and the differentiation for each kid. Sometimes I feel like we are robots just working, and I think we are given task, and task, and task, and we have to follow this by this time and by this time, it’s hard.

P5 also explained how being a special educator is hard. P5 explained how communication lines are not always clear and how a special education certification places you under the special ed umbrella, but shouldn’t mean completing multiple jobs simultaneously. P5 stated:

We can get pushed into certain situations just because we have a special ed certification. I was put into a situation where I was substituting for a life skills teacher, and dealing with my caseload last year. Um, simultaneously, and people were like blown away. I feel like that happens more frequently just because I have a special ed cert. I feel like people need to understand that. That it is not just like “Oh you have job security you can get put wherever they want you.” I also wish people understood that when you have multiple administrators you are kind of left stuck in the middle of whose directive to follow.

P5 went on to explain that general educators typically only report to a principal. Special educators, on the other hand, have a building principal and a special education director to report to. Often communication and expectations do not align and this makes the problem of whose directive to follow a challenge for special educators.

Crux B: Special education is a rewarding profession.

Although special education work can be viewed as hard, it can also be seen as rewarding. P1 and P2 shared how they wished people understood how rewarding their career choice has been thus far. P1 stated, “It’s a very rewarding thing to be in.” P2 also commented why the position can be seen as rewarding. P2 stated, “Special ed is the greatest job there is; it is so rewarding.” P2 then further explained:

I mean we see growth in general ed, and it is wonderful. But what you see, working with a kiddo after multiple years, really gives testament to what you’ve done and how you’ve worked with them. For example, it is amazing when you get a child who doesn’t know their name, doesn’t know their colors, doesn’t know their shapes and you watch them, through the years to be able to finally, to be able to read, and add, and subtract... it’s amazing, it’s awesome.

Crux C: Special educators need mental health supports in place.

P3 wanted others to know about the mental health struggles special educators can go through in their career. P3 noted that the job is challenging (like P1 and P5) but focused on sharing that because of this distinct challenge, educators need a support system and to advocate for themselves as well. P3 explained, “I asked and asked for help, no help was given. When things got really bad, I would think, anybody who saw me in the hallway knew I wasn’t ok. You could look at me and see I wasn’t ok.” P3 continued, “Unless you make bold statements, people don’t listen. It is ok to ask for help and to keep asking for help until you are heard and to try to do that in multiple ways. And don’t give up.” P3 now advocates for colleagues based on their personal experience. P3 concluded, “I am an advocate for the mental health of my special education friends. And when things are not working, then we need to work together to either brainstorm as a group what can we do to help each other.”

Crux D: A deeper understanding of special educator roles and special education students is needed.

P4 stressed the need for training to better understand colleagues and all students in the building. P4 suggested, “I just wish, whether you know at in-service or elsewhere, that trainings were provided so outside teachers who don’t necessarily work with my kids understood them more.” P4 explained that an understanding was essential to help positive relationships in the building to foster.

Participants shared their view on what they wished others knew about their position as a special educator. Opinions expressed were that the job of a special educator is a hard but rewarding one, mental health must be prioritized, and that training to better understand other roles in the building and student populations would be beneficial. These views will be revisited in Chapter V, as current educator input is valued in future research and recommendations concerning workplace bullying.

Question Fifteen: *If we were to change roles, what questions would you have asked that I may have omitted from our conversation today that others should know?*

Four of the five participants were able to provide an additional question they would have asked if they were the interviewer. Three of these four participants all asked a question pertaining to when educators noticed the workplace bullying (what time in their career was the target) and who they noticed was most likely to deliver the behavior. One participant, P1, suggested this as:

It would be interesting to note those that felt that they may have been left out or that they were ganged up on. What was the age of that special education teacher. Whether they were in their first five to ten years, or 10 to 15 years, or if they were veteran special ed teachers on the receiving end.

P5, suggested a similar question, “On a scale, or range, when did you recognize this? Was it earlier in your career, in the middle, or at the end. Like did your years of experience affect how those interactions changed.” P3 suggested asking the question from both perspectives.

It would have been interesting to include the individuals who are experiencing this, that feel left out etc. how many years of experience they have as a teacher. And also then maybe an age group of the people who have been those who withhold or leave out and they receive that behavior from. For me, early third for those who are left out or info is withheld. The people who are withholding, definitely the end. Like they have done the same thing over and over again, and now I am coming in and saying, “Let’s try this, let’s try that,” and there is definitely hesitancy to try anything new.

In addition to wanting to know what age groups are on the delivering and receiving end of workplace bullying, P4 stated they would have asked about workload and management of the heavy load placed on special educators.

I would say mostly differentiating instruction for multiple grade levels. I mean I know it is one thing for one grade level, but when you have four, five, six, different grade levels. How do you approach it? How do you work with one to two paras? With push in and pull out, and with scheduling how do you make it work with all of that? And how do you manage other adults? Which sometimes is more difficult than the kids themselves.

Summary

It is evident that Chapter IV provides a detailed description of participant responses and perspectives relating to workplace bullying, and their experiences with such behaviors within their districts. This chapter has addressed the questions posed to participants, followed by the guiding cruxes uncovered through participant response and discussion. The use of participant voice has been captured and thus reflects participant’s unique experience related to the questions. These cruxes represent the lived experiences

and perceptions of the five participants in each of their individual roles of special educators in K-12 public school districts within the PSEA Midwestern Region. The guiding cruces revealed after analysis of participant voice is summarized below.

Participants expressed their perceptions and experiences concerning the workplace and administration during the interview. Discussion revealed that participants felt the workplace should be a positive environment of respect and rapport where individuals feel valued. Within this environment, time to collaborate with peers and having an approachable and supportive administration are a must. In regards to value, the view of special educators is conflicting as some participants noted they felt administrators viewed them as equals and some special educators felt less valued and more expendable than their general education peers. Regardless of the perception felt from administration, many participants noted that job requirements and responsibilities are often unclear.

Participants then voiced their perceived similarities and differences between themselves and their general education colleagues. Participants voiced that although their day may consist of teaching multiple subjects and grade levels, and differentiating instructional levels at the same time, their general education colleagues often view their non-academic responsibilities, and flexible schedule, as less important than direct instruction. General educators often verbalized snide remarks and comments pertaining to the differences in the structure of their workdays.

Next, participants shared experiences with social structure and workplace bullying within the school environment. Responses revealed that participants did not feel they are a part of a “team”, or social group. The participants have experienced, or witnessed, various forms of threatening or intimidating behaviors in the workplace including, but not

limited to, passive aggressive questioning, verbal and physical confrontation, and withholding of information and lack of support. In addition to behaviors that participants found to be intimidating or threatening, they also noted additional forms of “bullying” they have witnessed or experienced. Feelings of being left out or ostracized based on their position, feeling threatened by groups of individuals rallying against them, and others making them question or second guess themselves, were all mentioned as ways bullying had been witnessed by the participants.

Finally, participants shared what they wished others knew about their position. In summary, participants wanted others to know that being a special educator is a hard, but rewarding position. Due to the nature of the work, and the burnout often associated with the position, special educators need mental health supports in place. In addition, a deeper understanding of what a special educator does, and an understanding of the students they serve, would benefit the school environment. As an extension/follow-up to the study, three of the participants expressed they would like to know when other educators noticed workplace bullying (at what time in their career were they, or others, targets) and who they noticed was most likely to deliver the behavior. The key cruces and summarized in Table 1 at the conclusion of the chapter.

Overall, the participants in this study have had personal, or witnessed, experiences with workplace bullying. Types of bullying witnessed was varied, but all fell within the major categories of the current body of research. In addition, participants noted similar concerns for their field, along with similar questions as to which age groups are on the receiving and delivering end of these workplace behaviors. This could help further research in finding a cause, or additional information on the “why” and “who” of

workplace bullying. Connections between these findings and the current research will be discussed in the final chapter. The following chapter will again discuss major findings from Chapter IV in relation to their connection with the current body of research. In addition, it will address limitations of the study and suggest potential areas of further research related to workplace bullying.

Table 1

Summary of Key Cruces

Workplace Environment and Administrative Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration and engagement with peers are a necessity, along with the time to do so
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The workplace should be a positive environment of respect, value, and rapport
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for approachable and supportive administration who are willing to listen
Similarities and Differences between Special Educators and General Educators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General understanding of job requirements and responsibility is unclear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrators view some teachers of special education as more expendable and less valued than their general education colleagues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration places a high value on teachers of special education and may meet them as equals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General educators view fewer students and non-academic activities as less important than direct academic instruction, and may verbalize snide remarks about the situation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers of special education have more flexibility in their day (schedule) than teachers of general education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A teacher of special education's day includes instruction of multiple subjects at multiple instructional levels, simultaneously, regardless of assigned student grade level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers of special education do not feel part of a team or social group in their work environments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators with similar personalities and teaching philosophies tend to gravitate together

Experiences with Workplace Bullying and Social Structures in the Workplace

- Special educators feel that passive aggressive behaviors, such as questioning, is intimidating and/or threatening
- Special educators feel that verbal and physical confrontation is threatening and intimidating behavior from colleagues
- Special educators feel withholding of information and lack of support when requested to be intimidating and/or threatening
- Special educators feel left out at work because of their position in the faculty
- Special educators feel threatened or intimidated by groups of individuals “rallying” against them
- Special educators feel intimidated and/or threatened when others at work make them second guess themselves

Personal Reflections Participants Wished to Share

- Being a teacher of special education is hard
- Special education is a rewarding profession
- Special educators need mental health supports in place
- A deeper understanding of special educator roles and special education students is needed

Chapter V

Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will present four aspects of the research study. First, a summary of the study will be presented. Next, conclusions derived from the cruces revealed in Chapter IV will be discussed along with their connections to the current body of research and implications for the field. Finally, recommendations for further research will be suggested.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of the study was to gain insight and perspective into the K-12 special educators' experiences with workplace bullying. Specifically, the guiding research questions for this study were:

- 3.) What are the experiences of K-12 special educators related to workplace bullying in school districts in PSEA's Midwestern Region? and,
- 4.) How do K-12 special educators perceive experiences of workplace bullying and the impact those experiences may have on the local education setting?

The focus and analysis of the research within this study was a phenomenological analysis; I drew upon the perspectives that were presented by the special educators that participated in the study. This study lent itself to a phenomenological research design. Phenomenologists, in contrast to positivists, believe that the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend

otherwise (Hammersley, 2000). Utilizing a framework in which my emersion in the environment and predisposed potential bias were openly evident kept this research transparent and authentic. The intention of this research was to gather perspectives of the participants about the growing phenomenon of workplace bullying via participant interview. The findings from this study provide personal accounts of the experiences and perceptions with workplace bullying from K-12 special educators. The combination of cruces revealed in Chapter IV, extrapolated from participants interview response and manually coded for emerging cruces, can be grouped into four key areas for the purpose of further discussion. These provide a solid foundation for understanding the participants responses concerning their experience and perceptions on workplace bullying. The four key areas are:

- (A) Workplace environment and administrative implications,
- (B) Similarities and differences between special educators and general educators,
- (C) Experiences with workplace bullying and social structures in the workplace,
and
- (D) Personal reflections participants wished to share

Each of these key areas will be discussed using information from participant interviews and, if applicable, its connection with the body of existing research. Constructivism is an interpretive paradigm in which researchers construct meaning through communication and interaction. From the constructivist standpoint it is imperative to analyze social actions from the actor's standpoint in an attempt to see the world through the participant's eyes (Tracy, 2013). With this in mind, and the phenomenological analysis in which I drew

upon the perspectives that were presented by the special educators that participated in the study, researcher insights and findings will be woven into the summary of key findings.

Conclusions

Workplace Environment and Administrative Implications

Discussion revealed that participants felt the workplace should be a positive environment of respect and rapport where individuals feel valued. Responses revealed, however, that this is not always the case. P1, P2, and P5 all commented on their work environment as an area for possible change. The participants noted they would like to feel valued, respected, and appreciated, thus allowing for a positive place to report to daily. P1 emphasized, "I just wish that there was a little bit more understanding." P2 echoed this sentiment stating, "Just having a positive place to go to work every day that people, you feel appreciated and that you've done a good job." The desire for more understanding and feeling appreciated set the tone that not all special educators feel valued and appreciated in their current positions.

Within this environment, time to collaborate with peers and having an approachable and supportive administration were noted as a must. Three of the participants (P2, P4, and P5) noted the need for time to collaborate and engage with peers on a regular basis. P2 addressed the need for time to collaborate, while P4 and P5 stressed the need for engaging with peers and fostering relationship and communication across departments (ie grade levels and special education/general education). Again, the request for this time to collaborate and open lines of communication suggests this is an area that is lacking in their current placement.

In reference to administration, participants stated the importance of support and guidance. Two interviewees, P2 and P3, stressed the need for approachable administrators and a place to go for help when needed. P3, specifically, asserted, “I would make sure I was very approachable, I think that would be my biggest thing.” P2 stated, “I would work on giving the staff more time to plan with each other and less busy work.” In the end, the time allocated for collaboration, the activities to support collaboration, and the support system needed comes from administration. Participants were in agreement that strong and supportive leadership was needed to make their buildings a healthy, positive place to be, something they don’t always have. Fahie (2014) asserts that although mutual collaboration and cooperation is essential among teaching staff, a bullying dynamic present in the workplace can seriously undermine the potential for teamwork at the individual level as well as the overall school culture. Participants were quick to note that they needed increased collaboration to improve their work environment. They called for administration to set aside time and to assure that this collaboration fosters positive outcomes. It is of utmost importance for the faculty to have a supportive administration, addressing employee needs, and assuring a positive work environment for all faculty and staff.

Similarities and Differences Between Special Educators and General Educators

Participants voiced their perceived similarities and differences between themselves and their general education colleagues. Participants stated that although their day may consist of teaching multiple subjects and grade levels, and differentiating instructional levels simultaneously, their general education colleagues often view their non-academic responsibilities, and flexible schedule, as less important than direct

instruction. P3 expressed, “I don’t necessarily know if we know the extensiveness of each other's jobs. Like I don’t know if they know how much paperwork I have.” In a similar fashion, P4 stressed underscoring as a disconnect they noticed. According to P4, “Underscoring. A lot of gen ed teachers think that we are given all of this time and we don’t do anything. They don’t necessarily realize how much you kind of have to be like a mini lawyer in special education.” P2 clarified, “I don’t know that general ed always has an idea of what is involved on the end of the special ed teachers. Everybody has to teach, obviously, and everybody has to grade, but what goes into IEP’s and re-evals.” The participants expressed they felt that their peers may not have a general understanding of what each other does on a daily basis. They also expressed that their peers often get defensive about their job requirements based on what they see as they pass their classrooms. The participants noted that what a person sees when they walk by is not the total picture, and this leads to tension throughout the teaching staff. This is a perceived area of concern as often passive aggressive remarks and gossip stem from these observations. This idea goes back to communication and collaboration. The participants called for administration to schedule time to collaborate and discuss with peers. Due to participants feeling they are misunderstood by their peers, their call for collaboration is a call for help to open lines of communication throughout the faculty in the future. Multiple teachers made it very clear that special educators do not feel “heard.”

In addition, participants noted that general educators often verbalize snide remarks and comments pertaining to the differences in the structure of their workdays. P1 and P3 commented that individuals who walk by their room may not get the whole picture of what is going on, and therefor assume that academics do not occur in their

classrooms. P3 explained, “People would walk by and make snide remarks like, “Your kids are always playing with Legos”, Well ya, because they earned it and it is a reward to keep them working. So ya, people have definitely made snide comments.” These snide remarks are consistent with Namie’s “Constant Critic” Bully. Behind closed doors these individuals aim at career destruction, planting self-doubt in the target. They may deem targets incompetent and unfit for their position (Namie, 2007). Often these individuals make comments to others in the workplace belittling the target in some way. The end goal is career destruction and instilling in others that the target is useless, unfit, or unable to do their job as well as the bully (or other non-involved colleagues). Participants expressed concern with their peers making remarks about their instruction and what is happening in their classrooms. In general, they expressed that their general education peers seem to express the feeling that the students seem to play and take breaks too often, and that academic instruction is not occurring as it should. Targets often begin to believe remarks about personal incompetence. This can lead to anxiety and health consequences for targets as referenced in Chapter II. Emotionally, the individual may experience anxiety, depression, blame, self-doubt, anger, guilt, grief, and mood swings as a consequence of workplace bullying (Namie et al., 2019).

Experiences with Workplace Bullying and Social Structures in the Workplace

Responses uncovered that participants did not feel they are a part of a “team,” or social group in the workplace. Often participants noted they feel left out, or on their own in various activities. P2 described the lack of teaming between special educators. “I feel our special ed team is not cohesive at all. Like I don’t have a team that I can go to.” P1 also noted, “The special education teachers or the ESL teachers, or the gifted teachers,

don't typically have a group because their schedules are so different.” This lack of teaming presents a unique need for these educators to feel as if they “fit in” somewhere. In an effort to fill this void, P1 clarified, “They kind of gravitate to those teachers that they may provide the most push in support for, or the teacher that they spend the majority of their time with.” This means, however, that teachers of different subjects and of different grades are those who the special educators gravitate to. This does not constitute as a “team,” but does provide some positive relationships during the year. In the following year, however, if the general education teacher does not have a special education student in their room, that relationship may falter and the special educator is back to square one trying to develop new connections year after year. The absence of a support group, or those who provide emotional support and comfort can lead to burnout (Schwab et al., 1986). The constant need to rebuild new relationships can be exhausting and can leave educators feeling like they never fit in anywhere.

All participants have experienced, or witnessed, various forms of threatening or intimidating behaviors in the workplace including, but not limited to, passive aggressive questioning, verbal and physical confrontation, and withholding of information and lack of support. Passive aggressive behaviors were highly prevalent experiences for the participants. P1 explained that tone and inflection have a connection in passive aggressive behaviors they have witnessed. P1 emphasized that how something is said may be as important, if not more important than what is said. P4 also cited passive aggressiveness as a threatening or intimidating behavior. P4, however, explained this as being a “behind the back” situation instead of the tone used in a forward conversation as P1 explained. P4 stated, “I have seen people being passive aggressive for sure in regards

to different situations. Or maybe for something where they agree or disagree with me, they wouldn't come to me up front, they would go to somebody else." Again, these behaviors can lead to gossip, feelings of isolation, and lack of trust and comradery between coworkers.

Verbal and physical aggression was also witnessed in the workplace. P2 asserted that raised voices, pointed fingers, and threats of going to the union are all verbal and physical confrontation that are threatening or intimidating to colleagues. P2 noted that tone is also connected, as did P1, when the behaviors are face-to-face. These behaviors are consistent with the "Screaming Mimi" bully who aims to publicly humiliate the witness or instill fear typically through public displays of yelling or screaming at the target (Namie, 2007). P2 noted that they had witnessed these actions in the hallway and they made the target very uncomfortable, often in tears, over differences of opinion or services. Again, this vocal assertion of power is consistent with Namie's (2007) Screaming Mimi as he explains that this is the individual who belittles or reprimands another in a meeting. They may point their fingers in another's face, get in close proximity to display power, raise their voice higher than their counterpart, and act in a demeaning way towards another. This is most frequently done in the presence of others so that the bully exhibits and exerts their power in an attempt to instill fear in targets as well as bystanders (Namie, 2007).

Finally, P3 shared an experience in which withholding of information, or the absence of confrontation, was a threatening/intimidating behavior. This is a powerful example of the "Gatekeeper Bully." This bully withholds information and/or resources to allow the target to succeed (Namie et al., 2019). He or she may steal credit and/or play

favorites in an attempt to isolate/exclude or torment the unfavored target (Namie, 2007). P3 stated, “When colleagues make you feel less of a teacher or less of a person, because of the choices you are making as a teacher, that is intimidating.” P3 described how this behavior is intimidating because it is demeaning. In addition, P3 shared, “If you're asking for help and no one is helping you. There have been many situations where I have been not in a good place and ask for help, and someone says no.” This is also consistent with traits of the “Two-Headed Snake” Bully (Namie, 2007). Exclusion, or “The Silent Treatment,” are also utilized by this bully (Hecker, 2007; Sutton, 2007). P3 explained that withholding of support and help can be intimidating along with withholding of praise. Special educators feel that even when asking for help, this help is withheld from them. This leads to feelings of hopelessness and isolation.

In addition to behaviors that participants found to be intimidating or threatening, they also noted additional forms of “bullying” they have witnessed or experienced. Feelings of being left out or ostracized based on their position, feeling threatened by groups of individuals rallying against them, and others making them question or second guess themselves, were all mentioned as ways bullying had been witnessed by the participants. P1, P2, P3, and P5 all detailed separate examples of special educators feeling excluded or ostracized in the workplace. The verbiage used by all four participants when detailing the past events were that the individual felt “left out.” Often these activities were not work related, but rather social situations where the special educator was not included or invited. P3 and P5 described how daily activities and “simple” things are often where they feel left out. P5 detailed, “Even something as simple

as going out to lunch when you have time that you can go together. That kind of thing has been a distinction where we get left out.”

P1 described a time where an individual was left out of decision making by others in the building, because they did not agree with their suggestions concerning a student’s services. This situation described how one educator was rallying troops against another to push them out. P1 explained, “That special education teacher was kind of left out by the other teacher getting, or rallying troops.” This is a mirrored example to research on Mobbing. The key distinguishing factor between bullying and mobbing is that mobbing is typically a group of individuals going after one target. We may consider this “ganging up” on someone. Mobbing involves group of individuals all working together to terrorize and take down a target. An example provided by Hecker (2007) notes that a worker experiencing mobbing may notice some or several of their coworkers beginning to use body language and facial expressions that are disrespectful and speak in unkind tones. This mimics the passive aggressive nature often seen with perpetrators and their targets. They may then exclude that target and give them the silent treatment or leave them out of conversations and group meetings (Hecker, 2007). In a similar fashion, the individual P1 described above also felt threatened by a “rallying of troops” against her. In this case, other teachers joined with the general educator. P1 clarified, “It became like a rallying of a group to get more on the general education teachers’ side. It was kind of like a ganging up kind of a situation.”

Finally, participants had noted feeling intimidated or threatened when other individual make them second guess themselves. P2 described a situation in which an individual felt that others were continually questioning their work and decisions, thus

making them continually second guess themselves. P2 explained, “The person really made them uncomfortable and made them second guess themselves. It was like anything the (special ed) teacher did, was never good enough or never right.” P2 emphasized, “I’ve witnessed that and it was very hurtful to that teacher.” P2 stated that since the instance above the teacher has left the district. P2 clarified, “It was not entirely because of what happened, but it definitely contributed to them leaving.” One of the effects of workplace bullying is often the target choosing to terminate their position in the workplace to leave the situation. Individuals who are targets often do not see an end to the bullying until they are terminated or quit for their health’s sake (Namie, 2007). Given the nature of bullying, it is understandable that many of those exposed consider leaving their job (Salin & Notelaers, 2017), and studies have established a link between exposure to bullying and intention to leave (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). When special educators second guess themselves productivity goes down and districts suffer. Often, these targets leave the workplace in an effort to stop the abuse. These bullied targets are often the most talented employees. They are often driven from the workplace disrupting productivity, fostering resentment, and placing a high price tag on turnover and replacement (Namie, 2007).

Personal Reflections Participants Wished to Share

Participants shared what they wished others knew about their position. In summary, participants wanted others to know that being a special educator is hard, but a rewarding position. Due to the nature of the work, and the burnout often associated with the position, special educators need mental health supports in place. Similar to bullying experienced by targets from leadership, teachers bullied by other teachers have reported negative outcomes in concern to emotional and physical well-being along with job

dissatisfaction including anger, depression, tension, anxiety, panic attacks, and feelings of inadequacy (Black, 2003). In addition to physical and emotional effects, consequences of bullying can affect the learning environment with detachment, alienation, absenteeism, and potential turnover if the target resigns (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). After hearing the participant's stories, it became evident that special educators need support systems in place along with mental healthcare available to them. In addition, a deeper understanding of what a special educator does, and an understanding of the students they serve, would benefit the school environment. This need could be addressed through professional development opportunities mentioned in the implications section.

Implications

It is essential for all workers to feel comfortable and safe while at work for numerous reasons. Workers who are comfortable in their work environments are more productive (Namie, 2005). As noted earlier, 63% of American workers are affected by workplace bullying in some way. Educators, those entrusted with delivering instruction to the future of our country, must not be burdened with this phenomenon. We must find ways to implement the findings of current research on workplace bullying to assist in the development of organization and public policy addressing workplace bullying (Fox & Stallworth, 2010). Through narrative exploration and analysis, policies and procedures may be questioned, and training programs may need to be established (May & Tenzek, 2018) to reduce bullying activities in the educational workplace.

Many participants called for time to collaborate and work directly with their general education counterparts. The implementation of weekly PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) could benefit this collaborative process and help open lines of

communication in the future. Common planning time benefits both the special and general educators' communication and, in turn, may also result in a sense of community and belonging that the special educators expressed they wished was present in their work environment.

Professional development for faculty members was also suggested as a way to bridge the gap between special and general educators. Administration setting aside time for explicit training in regards to special education students, as well as team building activities for faculty and staff, would aid in a sense of coherence and understanding.

Participants also voiced a concern for approachable and understanding administrators. Professional Development training on workplace bullying for administrators to recognize and intervene appropriately may help special educators who feel intimidated and unsupported by their academic leaders. This training could be a requirement not only for administrators, but for all employees, therefor setting the standard for a healthy and positive environment in which all workers feel safe and thrive.

Limitations

Participant Choice

Findings from the participant interviews were consistent with the current body of research, and all five participants had experienced personally, or witnessed, workplace bullying in their educational career. This was surprising, and unsettling. Although the sample size was five, I suspected not all individuals would have experiences to share in which they, or a colleague, had experienced this treatment in the workplace. The fact that participants were recruited may have influenced this result. It is possible that only those

individuals who had experiences with workplace bullying chose to participate in the study to tell their story. The opposite may also be true in that some individuals may be skeptical about divulging personal experiences to a peer, or have their experiences and/or perspectives shared in scholarly work with a concern of potential ramifications, and therefore chose to not participate in the study.

Sample Size and Recruitment

The participants were limited to K-12 educators in PSEA's Midwestern Region. In order to further solidify results, and make larger connections with the current body of research, the study could be expanded to a larger geographical region for a pool of participants within the state of Pennsylvania or beyond.

In addition, the study's recruitment email was sent to PSEA local presidents to forward to their K-12 Special Education membership. It is unknown how many districts chose to forward the recruitment email and how many did not forward the email to their membership. This was a condition I could not control, and may have skewed the findings to a limited number of districts based on recruitment follow through from districts. Future studies should attempt to control that all potential participants receive recruitment materials to have more breadth and depth in the participant pool.

Design of the Study

An understood tradeoff of the phenomenological tradition is a lack of reproducibility in an effort to gain insight into the unique and individual experiences of each of the participants (Patton, 2001). Each individual's experiences and perspectives

were unique and may not be exactly replicable in future studies. This limitation was evident before any data was collected based solely out of the chosen design.

In addition, participants' experiences and perceptions concerning workplace bullying were exposed to many uncontrolled variables, such as amount of K-12 special education teaching experience, certifications held, and positions held under the special education umbrella. Finally, with qualitative research, limitations exist when the interpretation of the researcher is the center of the interpretative process. A phenomenological study requires the researcher to interpret results while simultaneously being immersed in the context of the study, and thus constructing meaning from the findings. Being a current educator who is immersed in the field may have provided some unintentional bias based on personal experience and perspectives on the research topic. This may also have led to participants being hesitant to share all experiences and perspectives in regards to my current position.

Additional Areas of Research

As a follow-up to the study, three participants expressed they would like to know when other educators noticed workplace bullying (at what time in their career) and who they noticed was most likely to deliver the behavior. A future study could shed light on how to build relationships, open lines of communication, and at what part of educators careers they may be most vulnerable to being a target of workplace bullying. With this identified, supports could be put into place to assist educators and retain workers due to a positive work environment.

This study was limited in demographics. A replication of this study in another state would help to assess the transferability of results of the current study. It is possible that the experiences reported were specific to a geographical region. A replication elsewhere could help to determine how widespread the phenomena exists for teachers of special education in other regions and/or states.

This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of special educators with workplace bullying. To further understand the phenomena, a future study could focus on the general educator's experiences and perspectives with workplace bullying. This would add to the body of research on bullying in the workplace, as well as shed light on potential transferability in the general educators lived experiences.

Finally, there was limited existing research on the phenomenon in higher education known as "upward bullying." The studies that did exist were not focused on specific areas in higher education, but rather experiences of higher educators being targets from students. Participants in the above-mentioned study, concerning student bullying and lack of institutional support, create an opportunity for better resources to be available so that targeted professors feel comfortable, confident and safe doing their job (May & Tenzek, 2017). This is also true concerning workplace bullying between colleagues. It would be worth noting if specific departments in upper academia experience this behavior more than others from students, or, like in the current study, from their university peers. These results would extend the transferability of the current findings to a higher education setting, in addition to in the K-12 setting. Adding an additional survey for members, utilizing a mixed methods approach, along with an interview narrative, would add additional depth to the results. There are numerous school

safety surveys that students take to assess risk and frequency of events. Utilizing something similar with university faculty, paired with narrative, could be useful in further understanding.

Conclusion

The participants in the study worked with a range of students from K-12 in varying positions under the special education umbrella in PSEA's Midwestern Region. All current special educators in this study have experienced, or witnessed, workplace bullying in their school environments. They have witnessed, or felt, left out, isolated, intimidated, and threatened at times throughout their educational career in various ways.

In response to their perceptions and experiences with workplace bullying they have voiced their concerns for more allocation of common planning time, professional development, and understanding and support from administrators. They have expressed that special education is a hard, but rewarding job. Participants advocated for mental health supports in place to support them in their challenging placements. They have also self-advocated for more awareness and training in regards to special education services and the students they work with. They have voiced an evident disconnect between themselves and their general education colleagues, citing location, lack of teaming, and lack of administrative common planning time and sources for possible disconnect.

Four participants in this study wished to understand more about the age, and years of experience, of targets versus that of the bully. Future studies should look to find ways to minimize the presence, and extent, of workplace bullying in school environments.

They could also explore possible commonalities in the age/years of experience of targets to minimize workplace bullying among this group of vulnerable individuals.

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Appendix A

Audio Visual Release Form



**Special Education Department
College of Education**

Audiotape/Videotape Release Form

Special Educators Perspectives and Experiences with Workplace Bullying

Kristin Pierson-Malenky (724) 699-5167 or (724) 794-2960 Ext. 4106

We request the use of audiotape/videotape material of you as a part of our study. We specifically ask your consent to use this material as we deem proper, specifically, for news releases, professional publications, websites and pictorial exhibits related to our study. We also emphasize that the appearance of these materials on certain media (websites, professional publication, news releases) may require transfer of copyright of the images. This means that your image may be used by other individuals. Regarding the use of your likeness in audiotape/videotape, please check one of the following boxes below:

- I do...
- I do not...

Give unconditional permission for the investigators to utilize audiotapes/videotapes of me.

Participant Signature

Print Name

Date

PLEASE NOTE: Even should you choose not to allow your image or voice to be used, we can still benefit from your inclusion as a research study participant.

Appendix B

Recruitment Email

Appendix B

Recruitment Email

Greetings,

The purpose of this email is to determine your willingness to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to highlight the experiences and perspectives of K-12 special educators in regards to workplace bullying. You are being asked to be a part of this project because of your role as a current PSEA member and K-12 special educator in a school district with PSEA's midwestern region.

During the interview, I will be asking you questions about your current work environment. Following review of the transcript, you will be able to clarify anything from the initial interview as necessary and make any edits if needed.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet virtually for a period of approximately 20 **minutes during October 2021** at a time that is agreeable to you. If you are willing to participate, please email me at **kap8006@sru.edu** indicating that you agree to participation, as well as indicating five (5) dates between 5:00 PM-7:30 PM that you are available **during the month of October**.

Finally, and only if you are willing to participate, please complete the Demographic Survey Google Form included in this email. Please complete the document to the best of your ability by completing the appropriate fields. Then, be sure to submit responses and send back your reply email with available meeting times. Participants will receive a \$10 gift card for their dedicated time and assistance with this study. **Please note that only the first 20 individuals to complete the demographic survey and schedule a time for the virtual interview will be able to participate in the study.**

If you have any questions at all regarding this study, please feel free to reach out to me through the contact information below. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Richael Barger-Anderson, at richael.barger-anderson@sru.edu with any questions. Thank you in advance for your help and time.

Google Form Demographic Survey:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfaY1IZSxGjZr70mrzPJZrFQ-BBdpfBR2eZiy0dVV1b5du3Zg/viewform?usp=sf_link

Sincerely,

Kristin Pierson-Malenky, Doctoral Student, Special Education

Slippery Rock University

Kap8006@sru.edu

724-699-5167

Appendix C

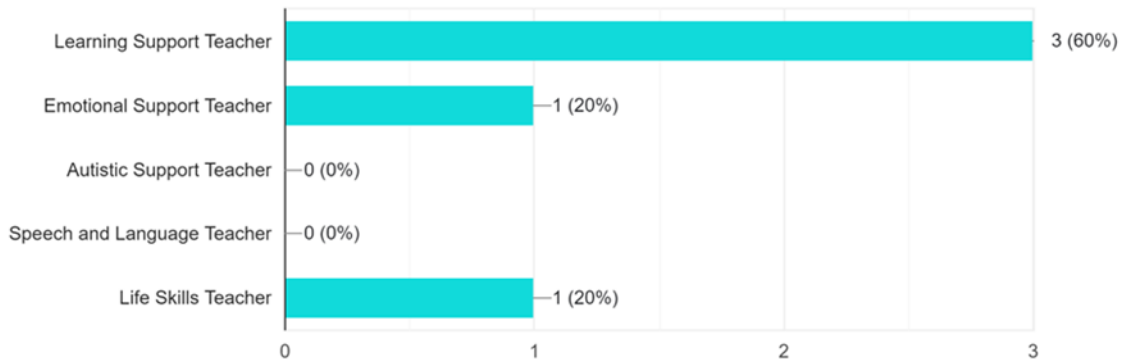
**Demographic
Interview Questions and
Responses**

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfaY1IZSxGjZr70mrzPJZrFQ-BBdpfBR2eZiy0dVV1b5du3Zg/viewform?usp=sf_link

The above link will access the demographic survey and the following screenshots display the results from the current study:

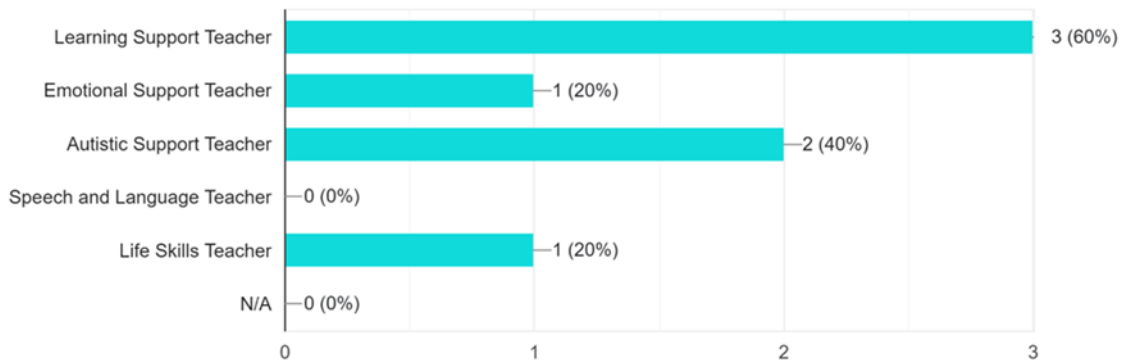
Current Position - Please check all that apply

5 responses



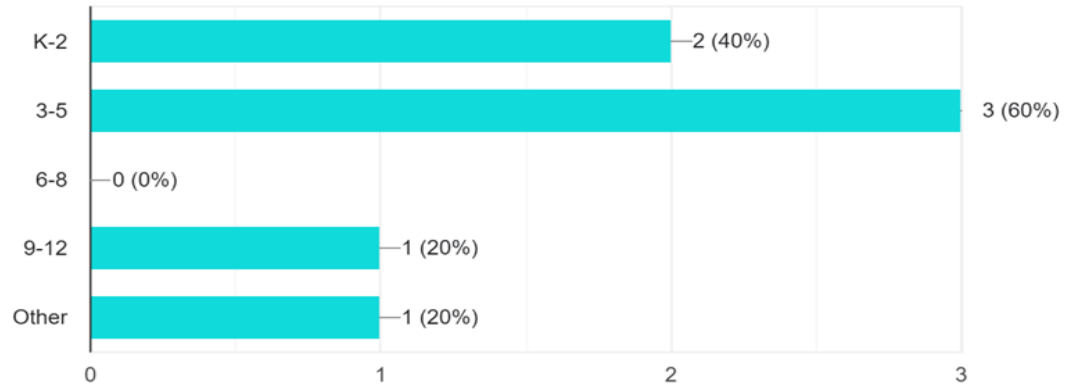
Past positions - Please check all that apply

5 responses



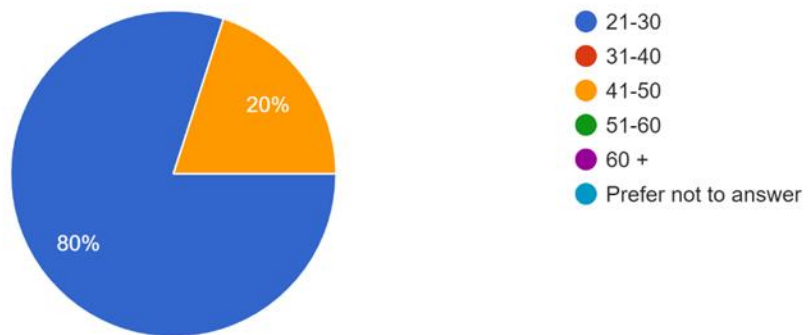
Current Grade Level Range - Please check all that apply

5 responses



Current Age

5 responses



Potential Interview Questions:

- When did you decide to pursue work in the field of special education?
- What is your most profound moment, or accomplishment, as an educator?
- What does a typical workday in your position entail?
- What positions have you held throughout your educational career?
- Imagine you were the principal in your district, what would you change about the climate of the school for the staff?
- How could change benefit your current school climate?
- Tell me what you have noticed in regards to a disconnect between general and special education teachers?
- How do you think you are perceived differently than your peers by administration?
- How do you think your general education colleagues distinguish your position and duties differently from theirs?
- How does your work day vary from that of your general education colleagues?
- Tell me about similarities and differences between social groups or teams of teachers in your building.
- Tell me how you would define intimidating or threatening behaviors among colleagues?
- Tell me about a time where you, or another special educator may have felt excluded, intimidated, or ostracized by other colleagues in the building?
- Tell me anything you wish others knew about your position and experiences that you have not already shared?
- If we were to change roles, what questions would you have asked that I may have omitted from our conversation today that others should know?