Parents’ perspectives on bullying: How do they understand and respond to their children’s victimization in elementary school?

by

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Abstract

When young children are bullied, the parents who care for them are also affected. Yet their experiences are understudied. This qualitative phenomenological study explored elementary school bullying from the parent’s perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted with six mothers to explore how parents understand bullying as well as to gather descriptions of their experiences supporting their children and interacting with school personnel. Three inter-twined themes emerged from the phenomenological analysis: “personal responsibility”, “difference” and “isolation”. Parents in this study tended to take on a high degree of personal responsibility for their children’s social plights and strongly felt their role was to support their children and stop the bullying. All the children were diagnosed or had a suspected diagnosis of ADHD, anxiety or a learning disability. Parents indicated that their child’s difference and inability to fit into the school environment made them vulnerable to bullying. Parents experienced feelings of isolation as they tried to fulfill their parental responsibility. Although the findings suggest these parents were concerned with their children’s ability to feel a sense of belonging at school, in communicating with school personal about the bullying, they avoided expressing concerns about belonging and focused on individualistic interventions for themselves and their child. This suggests that educators build awareness and dialogue about the power dynamics that play out between parents and teachers, and amongst children who are perceived as different.

Keywords: Belonging; Bullying; Difference; Elementary School, Parent; Phenomenology
To my mother, with love and gratitude.
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# List of Acronyms

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<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASD</td>
<td>Autism Spectrum Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>Educational Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP</td>
<td>Individualized Education Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ</td>
<td>Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer</td>
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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Max van Manen (2014) suggests one of the best places to start a phenomenological study is with personal experience. My research interests arose out of my own experience raising my children. Entering the graduate program in Educational Psychology as a mature student with two young children, I regularly found myself reflecting on my own parenting practices as I was exposed to various perspectives on how people learn. Being a parent has been one of the most significant experiences that has shaped who I am. Facing the challenges and duties involved in parenting can be wonderfully rewarding, but it is not always straightforward, and this thesis has been inspired by my children who have been, and continue to be, my best teachers.

My childhood experience of school was a positive one. As someone who has always loved to read, I felt suited to school. Though I would not have been called a popular student, my academic interests motivated me and I felt successful at school. After having children, I assumed they would follow a similar path. However, as early as kindergarten, I could see my gregarious, talkative and independent son showing signs that he was having trouble adapting to the school environment. He was not meeting academic expectations and had trouble finding a peer group that he fit in with. Over the course of the next few years, he was diagnosed with a reading disability that provided some insight into what supports he might benefit from, but did not address other concerns I had about his social challenges within his peer group. This experience sparked my interest in bullying, even though I was not definitively convinced that my son was being bullied. The research indicates that parents’ historical involvement with bullying predicts their current views on bullying, whereby parents with no previous experience of victimization are less likely to recognize that their child is bullied (Cooper & Nickerson, 2012).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Although bullying is an extremely well-researched phenomenon, most of the research on school bullying focuses on the children involved in the bullying dynamic
(Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010). The research on parents and bullying tends to investigate the characteristics of parents or the home environment that correlate with children’s involvement in bullying. For example, one’s parenting style, work hours, or the child’s attachment have all been identified as risk factors for children’s involvement in bullying (Healy, Sanders & Iyer, 2015; Christie-Mizell, Keil., Laske, & Stewart, 2011; Klomek, Kopelman-Rubin, Al-Yagon, Berkowitz, Apter, & Mikulincer, 2016). This research presents valuable insights into areas of intervention that could support bullied children, but it also tends to present parents as sharing responsibility for their child being bullied (Herne, 2016).

The experience of parents is not strongly represented in the bullying literature, and a 2014 systematic review of qualitative research on parents’ experiences of their child being bullied yielded only 13 studies across North America, Europe and Australia (Harcourt, Jasperse & Green, 2014). This review identified variations in how parents defined bullying, strategies for coping, the negative effects of bullying, issues around awareness and support for bullying and issues relating to the responsibility for dealing with bullying. The systematic review also revealed that the included studies did not examine the impact of bullying on the parents and the fact that parents did not typically learn about their child’s experience of bullying from the school.

Given the limited research on the lived experiences of parents of bullied children, and my own personal experience of having concerns that my child was being bullied, I decided to explore how parents of young children make sense of the experience of having a child that is bullied. Parents of children in early elementary school may have limited exposure to school policies and practices, and the experience of supporting a bullied child in elementary school will likely be different from supporting an older child. Unlike most of the studies included in the systematic review conducted by Harcourt, Jasperse and Green (2014), I did not seek to independently verify through teacher or child reports that the child was bullied. I was focused on learning what it was like for parents to go through that experience with their children. I intuitively wanted to refrain from a survey of parents on their assessment of roles and responsibilities that positioned parents against teachers or school personnel. My own history as a parent made me wonder if there were others who had similar experiences. What was it like for them? How did they navigate these situations? Could I and others learn from their experience? What insights could be gained by genuinely listening to parents? The phenomenological
method surfaced as a relevant methodology for my goals, as it focuses on the pre-reflective experience of the participants (van Manen, 2014). By deconstructing the descriptions of lived experience, phenomenological analysis allows one to understand how a phenomenon is experienced.

1.2. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate how parents of elementary school children describe, understand and respond to the experience of their child being bullied. To gather information on parents’ lived experience, I used five research questions to initially guide the study:

1. How do parents understand bullying?
2. What do parents believe are the reasons their child is involved in bullying?
3. How do parents understand their role in relation to their child’s involvement in bullying?
4. How do parents respond to their child being involved in bullying?
5. What are their perceptions of the efficacy of those responses?

The significance of this study is that it provides insight into the lived experience of parents who believe their child is being bullied at elementary school. Parents can play an important role in supporting their bullied children (Bonnet, Goosens & Schuengel, 2011; Healy, Sanders, Iyer, 2015; Vassallo, Edwards, Renda & Olsson, 2014). Parents who have meaningful input into how schools approach bullying may ultimately facilitate better support for young children who are bullied at school. The evidence suggests that families and schools disagree about where the responsibility lies to prevent, intervene and resolve cases of bullying (Harcourt, Jasperse & Green, 2014). To effectively tackle concerns about bullying in elementary schools, the lived experience of parents should be understood so families and school personnel can meaningfully collaborate to resolve concerns about childhood bullying.

In chapter 2, I include a review of the literature that provides a foundation on which the current study stands. Chapter 3 describes the research design and the phenomenological method that was employed. Chapter 4 summarizes the three themes
that emerged from the data. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the relationship of the findings to previous research, as well as their pedagogical significance.
Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

When young children are bullied at elementary school, their parents can play a significant role in supporting and advocating for them (Hale, Fox & Murray, 2017; Healy, Sanders & Iyer, 2015). The literature primarily focuses on the children involved in the bullying dynamic, as professional educators are interested in the detection, investigation and/or treatment of these children. A gap in the existing body of bullying research is the experience of the parents of these children since they are likely impacted by their child’s negative experience at school. Investigating the experience of parents acknowledges the reality of the adults who care for the bullied children. As has been noted by previous scholars, the harmful effects of bullying can be mitigated when parents effectively advocate and support their children (Conners-Burrow, Johnson, Whiteside- Mansell, McKelvey & Gargus, 2009). Therefore, engaging parents should be part of a comprehensive strategy to curb bullying in schools.

2.2. Defining Bullying

Aggression can be broadly conceptualized as a social behavior that is intended to cause harm to another person who is motivated to avoid said harm (Warburton & Anderson, 2015). This definition is expansive enough to cover a wide range of harmful behaviours that are inflicted without consent. Under this broad definition, aggression can include acts committed by soldiers in armed combat, criminal acts of violence that can result in severe bodily injury, or the acts of a frustrated driver in a fit of road rage. This definition of aggression emphasizes both the intention and the subsequent action of the perpetrator, and not his/her emotional state (e.g. affect/attitude).

Bullying is a distinct form of aggressive action that is intended to cause harm, occurs repeatedly and is inflicted by a more powerful person or group on a less powerful person or group (Olweus, 2001). Unlike the definition of aggression, to meet the definitional standard of bullying there must an imbalance of power between the victim
and the perpetrator, and the aggression must follow a pattern of repetitive injury. There are different types of bullying. In the context of bullying in childhood and adolescence, peer victimization can be broadly understood to include overt aggression (e.g. hitting, kicking, name-calling), relational aggression (e.g. excluding someone from a group on purpose, spreading rumours) and cyber aggression (e.g. posting hurtful messages online) (Fite, Cooley, Williford, Frazer & DiPierro, 2014, Olweus, 2001).

Even though victims of bullying indicate that social exclusion is the worst form of bullying, parents have rated relational bullying as less serious than overt forms of bullying (Sharp, 1995). In the case of relational bullying where a child is socially isolated at school, the role of parents in providing psychological support is especially important, as the child is unlikely to have peers to turn to for support (Duy, 2013; Morin, Bradshaw & Berg, 2015). Children who act and appear to be different, because they have a special need (for example, children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder) are more likely to be bullied and excluded from peer groups in school (Chen & Schwartz, 2012). Parents of these children may be aware of their child’s challenges at school and be witness to their child’s lack of integration within their peer group. However, it is unclear if parents consider this type of group dynamic as bullying.

2.3. Conceptualizing Participant Roles in School Bullying

There is limited research literature on how parents conceptualize participant roles in school bullying, especially when their child is a target of aggression at school. In the majority of the bullying research, participants are categorized as bullies, victims, bystanders, or in the case of children who are both bullies and are victimized, bully-victims (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010). Although there is considerable literature to indicate these four roles are distinct, there is variation within these categories (Cook et al, 2010). Bullies can be divided into high power and low power bullies (Vaillancourt, Hymel & McDougall, 2003). Victims may be targets of bullies, but they may not necessarily feel “victimized” if they have adequate support or if they do not understand the intent of the bully; this is a profound distinction that is not easily picked up in quantitative studies (Carrera, DePalma & Lameiras, 2011).

Bully-victims are children who are bullied and bully others. Del Moral and his colleagues made a distinction among six different sub-types of bully-victims (Del Moral,
Suarez, Villarreal & Musitu, 2014). Children may fall into the bully-victim role because they lash out at others after being unable to manage stressful situations, because they use bullying as a means to protect themselves, or because they are displacing aggression that they have experienced in the home. Since bully-victims tend to be impulsive, reactive and lack social sophistication, they are not sympathetic victims, and are not typically liked by their peers or their teachers (Schwartz, Procter, & Chien, 2001). Parents of bully-victims may face the challenge of being expected to discipline their children for inappropriate behavior without receiving support from school personnel when their children are being bullied.

The limited amount of qualitative work on bullying indicates that children’s roles can shift within a single environment. In an ethnographic study of participant roles in school bullying, Gumpel, Zioni-Koren and Bekerman (2014) showed that children could cycle through roles depending on the teacher and other contextual factors. Therefore, even though the four main categories in the literature provide useful distinctions, these roles are not necessarily rigidly fixed. Within a single day at school, a child may act as a bully and be bullied as contextual factors change (i.e. presence or absence of a friend/teacher). It is unclear if parents view these roles as fixed or dynamic categories. Does their understanding of bullying roles influence how they view their child and other players in the bullying dynamic? Does it impact the type of action they take to support their child? The literature on parents understanding of bullying does not fully address these questions.

2.4. Theoretical Perspectives

Bullying can be interpreted through a variety of lenses including psychological, socio-ecological and/or post-structural. The theoretical perspective one adopts to understand a phenomenon can influence the subsequent action that one pursues. Knowing the perspective a parent adopts can provide insight into how a parent responds and takes action to support their child. A psychological perspective on bullying seeks to understand bullying as an outcome of factors related to the individual child, or the individual parent (Graziano, Keane & Calkins, 2010; Herne, 2016). Child factors include temperament and social competence (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, Sadek & Kamphaus., 2010). Examples of parent factors are parenting style and involvement in school (Healy, Sanders & Iyer, 2015; Jeynes, 2011; Fite et.al, 2014). In their effort to
support their children, parents who adopt a primarily psychological understanding of bullying may seek to modify their parenting practice and/or seek to provide their child with social skills training.

A socio-ecological perspective on bullying views bullying as a group phenomenon, which arises out of group dynamics rather than individual factors in the bully or the victim (Salmivalli, 1999; Carrera, DePalma & Lameiras, 2011). From this perspective, children shift roles and can fall along a bully-victim continuum depending on the context (Carrera et al., 2011; Gumpel, Zioni-Koren & Bekerman, 2014). When bullying is analysed through a socio-ecological lens, the role of teachers is extremely important in setting a classroom climate that does not enable bullying behaviour. Parents who view bullying as a social phenomenon are likely to attempt to influence the social environment that enables the phenomenon. This can include reporting behaviour and engaging with school officials to enact change. However, this raises questions around the effectiveness of parents in influencing the classroom climate when it is not their primary sphere of control.

Critical post-structural theorists offer a unique challenge to researchers of bullying, as they call for an analysis of the discourses and practices that maintain power between and within people and institutions (Ball, 2013). Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, bullying can be characterized as a phenomenon that arises from the hierarchical structures of school, cultural values around dominance, and the use of language that encourages the labeling of children (Herne, 2016). Post-structural approaches call for a more complex analysis of how students gets positioned outside of the norm, and stress the need for a gendered approach to bullying (Carrera, DePalma & Lameiras, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). For example, the high rate of LGBTQ children being bullied is considered a function of who falls within cultural norms (Walton, 2004). And children with special needs are more likely to be targets of bullies than typically developing children (Chen & Schwartz, 2012). Individual parents have limited power to change cultural norms and attitudes, when their children suffer the consequences of breaking norms. In light of the post-structuralist perspective, it is unclear if parents consider how broader cultural understandings around gender, race, disability and sexual orientation may play a role in marginalizing their children at school.
2.5. Factors that Predict Bullying and Victimization

In their meta-analysis of the predictors of bullying and victimization, Cook et al. (2010) distinguished between individual-level predictors and contextual predictors of being bullies, victims and bully-victims. The strongest individual predictor for being a bully was externalizing behavior, for being a victim was peer status, and for being a bully-victim was self-related cognitions (i.e. a child’s thoughts about himself).

Family/home environment referred to elements that included family cohesiveness, family monitoring, parenting style and socio economic status. When assessing the role of “family/home environment” as a contextual predictor of being a bully, victim or a bully-victim, it is of interest to note that this variable had one of the lowest effect sizes. The strongest contextual predictors of being a bully, victim, or bully-victim, were related to peer influence or peer status. This finding highlights the power that the social context has in understanding what contributes to bullying and victimization. It also points to the important role of teachers in creating a classroom climate that sets clear expectations on how peers are expected to relate to each other. For parents, it highlights the limits of their capacity to protect their children from negative peer influence and the difficulty they face with sending their child to school every day when they have limited control over that environment.

2.6. Parent’s Perspectives

How do parents navigate the complexity of finding solutions for their children who are involved in bullying? An important step is to recognize it when it happens. There is evidence to suggest that a significant number of parents do not know when their child is being bullied. After collecting self-reports from children about whether they were bullied, Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler and Wiener (2011) found that about half the parents they interviewed did not know their child was a target. A common misconception was that children who had lots of friends were not targets, or that a child would not be bullied by a “friend”. This speaks to the need to gain a deeper understanding of how parents characterize bullying behavior and how they identify bullies and victims. In addition, half the parents sampled in the Sawyer et al. (2011) study reported their children were witness to incidents of bullying, but only a few parents instructed their children on how to respond as a bystander. We know that bullying behavior is reinforced by pro-bullying
attitudes or lack of action on the part of bystanders (Saarento, Garandeau & Salmivalli, 2015). It is worth exploring how parents understand their parenting role in relationship to bullying when their child is a bystander.

Qualitative studies indicate that when parents try to involve the school in finding solutions to a bullying situation, many are extremely dissatisfied with the response of school officials in implementing safeguards (Brown, Aalsma & Ott, 2013). Reasons for parent’s dissatisfaction with the handling of reports of bullying include an inability or unwillingness to enforce school policy, or a perception that the victim was a source of the trouble. It is unclear why school personnel are perceived to be inadequately responding to reports of bullying and it suggests that the reporting of bullying can be complex. One explanation may be that when reporting instances of bullying there may not be a ‘pure’ victim. Although children are encouraged to report bullying, few children do and the majority of children report “fighting back” as the most common strategy they used (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2014; Black, Weinles & Washington, 2010). Fighting back or counter aggression is linked to continued victimization (Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor & Chauhan, 2004). When children become embroiled in retaliation as a means of defense, it can lead to the perception that they are part of the problem. Retaliation may also prevent teachers from classifying an incident as bullying if it is believed that there is no power differential between two actors that are in an ongoing conflict (Eriksen, 2018). This in turn may pose an advocacy challenge for parents whose children are harassed but cannot rely on the enforcement of formal bullying policies. Therefore, it is important to know how parent’s description, understanding and experience of bullying influences their attempts to collaborate with school officials to find solutions for their children.

A systematic review of the qualitative research literature was conducted to summarize parent’s perceptions of bullying and how they react to it (Harcourt, Jasperse & Green, 2014). The data collection methods consisted mainly of semi-structured interviews, but also included data collected from blog posts, focus groups and questionnaires. Many of the studies used measures such as teacher or child questionnaires to identify bullied children. The review analysed the findings of 13 studies that were conducted between 2003 and 2012, and six themes emerged. The first theme was that there was variation in parent’s definitions of bullying. In particular, parents found it difficult to identify indirect relational aggression as bullying. And parents of children in kindergarten were uncertain if negative behavior at that age could be
considered bullying, rather than be attributed to a developmental stage in which children had difficulty controlling their aggressive behavior. The second theme that emerged was that parents believed that bullying was inevitable, and a normal part of growing up. Related to this normalization of bullying, was the tendency of parents to perceive bullying to be an issue that the victim had to resolve. The third theme was that parents used a wide range of strategies to cope with the bullying. The fourth theme was that parents themselves suffered negative effects when their child was bullied. Across many studies, parents reported feeling frustration, helplessness, guilt, anger and stress. The fifth theme revolved around the discovery and disclosure of the bullying, and the ensuing support. Parents rarely found out about the bullying from the school, and in several studies parents only found out that their child was feeling bullied through the researcher’s reports that were collected from the teacher or child. Many parents expressed a need for support and information about effective strategies to support their children. The sixth and final theme focused on where responsibility lies to deal with bullying. The review found that parents feel that schools should be doing more to prevent and respond to bullying.

After the systematic review was completed, Hale, Fox and Murray (2017) conducted an exploratory qualitative study to investigate the experience of parents of children who had been bullied. In their study, the majority of the participants had children in secondary school, and participants were primarily recruited through the recommendations of teachers and school personnel. The main findings from the study were that parents were frustrated by “perceived institutional factors” that resulted in them being viewed negatively by school personnel when they attempted to address the bullying issue. At the same time, parents saw that protecting their child was a fundamental part of their role as a parent and they engaged in self appraisals as they tried to be a “good parent.” The findings reveal the complex experiences for parents when their children are bullied. In this particular study, parents also had to reconcile the challenge of protecting their child while also respecting that their child would have to cope with these challenges more independently as they progressed through secondary school.

To summarize, bullying is a complex phenomenon influenced by many individual and contextual factors. For children in elementary school, parents can play an important role by providing psychological support, skills training, as well as act as advocates with
school officials. Most of the research on parents has focused on parenting factors and its relationship with bully or victim roles. There has been limited research on the lived experience of parents whose young children are bullied at elementary school. This study explores how parents characterize bullying, how they understand the phenomenon, and how their understanding influences their responses and subsequent action they take to support their child.
Chapter 3.

Research Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how parents describe, understand and respond to the experience of their child being bullied. Unlike quantitative research that seeks answers to questions about what people do for the purpose of prediction and generalization, qualitative research asks questions related to how people experience phenomena in an effort to understand why people behave the way they do (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is well suited to understanding complex social problems like bullying and deeply felt human experiences such as parenting, because it requires the researcher to consider multiple factors and view complex issues in a holistic manner (Creswell, 2007). All qualitative research has a phenomenological aspect to it, because it focuses on the interpretation of the subject under study, and seeks to understand the richness of human complexity (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). However, not all qualitative research uses the phenomenological method. In phenomenological research, the emphasis is on understanding the meaning of the lived experience for the individual being interviewed, and how that phenomenon can be understood as an essential human experience (van Manen, 1990). In this study of parents’ experiences of having their child bullied in elementary school, I wish to understand not only what this experience is like for the participants as it relates to their life, but also the deeper significance as it relates to the human experience of parenting.

Creswell (2007) argues that when the central focus of a study is on understanding a shared human experience, the phenomenological method is the best suited of all qualitative methods. He suggests that the group under study should ideally be up to 10 people who have experienced the phenomenon in question and are able to articulate their experience. In a phenomenological study, the meaning of individual experiences is reduced to component parts that describe the phenomenon at hand and the description generated allows others a glimpse into the true essence of an experience. If done well, a phenomenological study will leave the reader with a true feeling of what it must have been like to experience the phenomenon (Berg, 2009).
Moustakas (1994) details the phenomenological method as comprising four main steps: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. The word epoche originates from a Greek word that means doubt (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). It refers to an approach by the researcher to suspend judgement about what is real, and is done by “bracketing” one’s opinions and natural judgements, in an attempt to see what is at hand. The subsequent reduction and synthesis of the data is a method that reduces the transcribed data into statements that represent specific codes, and then synthesizes them back into broader themes that showcase the meaning of an experience. Imaginative variation is the process in the data analysis whereby the researcher considers all possible meanings of the descriptive codes.

For this study, a descriptive phenomenological method was selected to undertake the project of understanding the how and why questions related to parents’ discovery of and response to their child being bullied. The goal was to find out how parents describe their experience and to uncover the meaning they attach to this experience. Initially, there were five specific research questions that guided the study:

1. How do parents understand bullying?
2. What do parents believe are the reasons their child is involved in bullying?
3. How do parents understand their role in relation to their child’s involvement in bullying?
4. How do parents respond to their child being involved in bullying?
5. What are parents’ perceptions of the efficacy of those responses?

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study were six mothers who believed that their children were bullied at elementary school. All the participants had children between the ages of 6 and 12 years who attended public elementary or middle schools in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. This particular age group was chosen because younger children are more likely to turn to adults for support, rather than their peers, and also because parental involvement tends to decline as children get older (Gage, Prykanowski, & Larson, 2014; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson,
As a result, parents tend to play a more active role supporting their children in navigating complex social dynamics and conflict when their children are younger.

At the outset of the project, I decided to exclude participants if the parents’ child was in kindergarten, if the parent was homeschooling their child, or if the participant was known to me. Parents of children in kindergarten were excluded because the experiences of parents whose child is just entering the school system are likely to be reflective of a transitionary period that may be unique to that time. Although I believe that the transition period of kindergarten may include experiences of bullying that are worth studying, I wanted to capture the experiences of parents who had had sufficient time to develop relationships with school personnel. Similarly, the experiences of parents who homeschool will be distinct from those who have children in the institutional school environment. Initially, I excluded participants who I had any prior relationship with, based on the belief that I would have greater difficulty bracketing my opinions and judgements when analyzing information provided by a familiar participant. However, after the recruitment for the project had been underway for almost three months with only two parents recruited, I decided not to exclude people who I had a prior relationship with. This change was made because I wanted to increase my accessibility to participants.

The qualitative research interview is typically understood to be a conversation between unacquainted individuals where a life experience is re-constructed through the telling of the story rather than the recording of a fixed truth (Kuzmanic, 2009). By being transparent about my previous relationship with the participants, and being committed to a reflexive approach, I allow the readers to make their own judgements about the extent to which my prior relationship and knowledge about the participants has influenced the findings. Since the goal of this study was to find parents who would be able to open up and share the most amount of information about their experience on a sensitive topic, I determined that there would not be any disadvantage to interviewing people I had a prior relationship with as long as I was clear about disclosing the nature of my relationship. An amendment to the study was granted by the university research ethics office, and moving forward an additional four parents were recruited to the study. In total, six parents consented to participate in the study and all the participants were mothers. Even though the study aimed to be inclusive of all parents, the findings of this study will be reflective of mothers’ perspectives on bullying.
Profile of the parents

All the participants in this study were female, and the only language spoken in the homes was English. The mothers in this sample were well-educated, with four of the six women possessing post-baccalaureate credentials. Interviews were conducted in five separate cities of the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and their child, and have been used throughout this report to protect confidentiality.

June

At the time of the interview, June was 42 years old, and a mother of two children, ages 5 and 10. She is a Caucasian woman who has completed a Bachelor’s degree. She reported that she lives with her husband and children and that their family income was over $100,000. She responded to recruitment emails about the study and had no prior relationship with me. June is a US citizen who has travelled to several provinces, resulting in her daughter having had to move schools several times. June works from home and is an active member of the Parent Advisory Council at her daughter’s school. She is concerned about her 10 year old daughter, Sydney, who has been classified as a “gifted” student at the school, and has a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Sensory Processing disorder.

Aubrey

At the time of the interview, Aubrey was 48 years old and a mother of two children, ages 7 and 9. She is a Caucasian woman who has completed a Certificate in Early Childhood Education. She reported that she lives with her husband and two children and their family income was between $50,000 and $75,000. She responded to recruitment emails about the study, and had no prior relationship with me. Aubrey works as an Educational Assistant (EA), has been an active parent volunteer in her child’s classroom, and has worked as an EA in her children’s school. She is concerned about her 7 year old son, Felix, who has a speech impediment (speech dyspraxia) and a reading disability.

Andy

At the time of the interview, Andy was 42 years old, and a mother of two children, ages 7 and 9. She is a Caucasian woman who has completed a Bachelor’s degree and
a teaching certificate. She reported that she is a single parent with shared custody of two children and that her family income was between $50,000 and $75,000. In the year leading up to the study, she changed careers and started teaching at the high school level. In addition to her full-time job, she supplements her income with contract work. Andy and I were acquainted prior to the start of this study as we had previously worked together. She was concerned about her 9 year old daughter, Frankie, who was diagnosed by a pediatrician as having social anxiety and a tic.

**Masha**

At the time of the interview, Masha was 43 years old, and the non-biological mother of two children, ages 5 and 8. She is a Caucasian woman who has completed a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD). She reported that she lives with her wife and children and their family income was over $100,000. She responded to recruitment emails about the study. She is a distant acquaintance, as we have attended events in the past hosted by a local community group that also assisted in advertising this study. Both Masha and her wife had work schedules that allowed them the flexibility to volunteer at their son’s school. She reported concerns about her 8 year old son, John, who is extremely shy and has been diagnosed with ADHD and social anxiety. She also stated that John exhibits characteristics, such as rigidity in thinking and difficulty with social communication, that are typically associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), but she has not pursued that diagnosis.

**Kirstin**

At the time of the interview, Kirstin was 46 years old, and a single parent of her daughter Astrid, age 8. She is a Caucasian woman who has completed a doctoral degree. She reported that she has sole guardianship of her daughter, and that her family income was between $75,000 and $100,000. In the year leading up to the study, Kirstin’s husband passed away from a terminal illness. Kirstin and I were acquainted prior to the start of this study and she received the recruitment email for this study that was widely distributed throughout my network. She is concerned about her daughter, Astrid, who has no official diagnosis but has difficulty with reading and is not meeting academic expectations at school.
**Mary**

At the time of the interview, Mary was 45 years old, and a mother of two children, ages 12 and 15. She is an Indo-Canadian woman who has completed a Master’s degree. She reported that she is a single parent, with primary custody of her children, and confirmed that her family income was between $50,000 and $75,000. Mary works in the health care profession. Mary and I were acquainted prior to the start of this study as we had taken a parenting course together several years ago. She is concerned about her younger son, Sam. Several teachers and principals have suggested to Mary that she should have her son tested for ADHD, but she has not followed up with that recommendation.

### 3.3. Measures

In phenomenological research, a common process of data collection is to conduct in-depth interviews, for the purposes of understanding how participants experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). I created two measures for the study: a brief survey to collect demographic information and a semi-structured interview schedule.

First, I developed a short survey to collect demographic information so that the contents of the interview data could be analysed with an understanding of the participant’s socioeconomic context. The literature indicates that socioeconomic status and life context are highly predictive of parental involvement, and so being aware of the participants’ larger context would be relevant for understanding and analyzing the data (Hoover-Dempsey, et. al, 2005). Life context includes the resources that parents have access to, such as their time, energy and skills. It was important for me as a researcher to know each participant’s context, so that I would then be able to probe for information and ask questions that would reveal relevant data. The survey was handed out before the interview began, and it collected information on family composition, education and income level, and child diagnoses (see Appendix C).

The second instrument was a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix D). The creation of the questions was guided by the research questions of the study, feedback from pilot interviews and consultation with my committee members. It was designed to strike a balance between collecting thick description about participants’
experience with bullying, whilst still being open-ended enough to allow for the participants to digress and share what they considered to be important (Berg, 2009). As a novice qualitative researcher, I also decided that a semi-standard interview structure containing structured questions and unstructured probes would be the best interviewing strategy to get data that was as complete and authentic as possible.

The questions were crafted to capture the context the parents were in, to explore the numerous ways in which the phenomenon could be experienced, as well as to clarify the details of the phenomenon. In his breakdown of a method of interviewing for phenomenological research, Bevan (2014) argues that an interview structure should consist of three types of questions that provide context, apprehend the phenomenon and clarify the phenomenon. In this study, the demographic survey and open-ended questions in the interview schedule were designed to elicit information about the context that parents are in, and provide a view into the “life world” and “natural attitude of the participants” (Bevan, 2014, p138). Though my goal was to focus on the experience of the mothers, I knew that I also needed to gather information on their children in order to understand the context the participants were in. So in the first part of the interview, I asked participants to tell me about their child, and used follow up probes to find out what strengths and difficulties their child experienced at home or at school.

Apprehending the phenomenon is the method by which a researcher uses descriptive questions to understand the “modes of experience” (Bevan, 2014, p.139). In my study, even though all parents had a child who was bullied at school, there was variation in how they responded to this situation. An example of a descriptive question that captures the different modes that a phenomenon can appear is: “When you realized that your child was being bullied, what did you do?” and “How did that make you feel?”

Imaginative variation is the process where several aspects of the phenomenon are varied in the questioning process. It provides clarification on the essential aspects of the experience, by reducing the phenomenon to component parts. A question such as “What do you think are the differences between bullying and a case of peer conflict?” is intended to clarify the phenomenon, by using the technique of imaginative variation. Another follow up question that was asked when assessing parents’ perceptions of the efficacy of their responses, was: “If you could have any support you needed, what would it be?” Using imaginative variation allows for the component parts of the phenomenon to
be clarified, and when done in a dynamic interview lends validity to the findings, as the phenomenon is clarified with the participant herself (Bevan, 2014).

3.4. Procedures

3.4.1. Ethics

This study received ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics. During the recruitment phase for participants, one amendment to the ethics approval was later granted to amend the exclusion criteria so that people known to me could be included as participants.

Prior to recruiting participants for the study, I conducted two pilot interviews with acquaintances I knew who had children who had struggled with feeling socially excluded from their peers. Both parents were single mothers and the primary guardians of their respective children. Each interview lasted approximately an hour, and I took copious notes during the interviews. Pilot interviews were not audio recorded, but the notes from the pilot interviews were used to refine the interview protocol, and served a useful purpose in giving me practice with interviewing people about a sensitive subject. In particular, the pilot interviews highlighted the need for me to balance listening with ensuring that I asked enough follow-up questions to probe deeply and gather further clarification on the subject.

3.4.2. Recruitment

When first designing the study, I was unsure how open parents would be to discussing the particular details of their child’s victimization. Though I had known some of my acquaintances to be strong and vocal advocates of their children, I also knew of other friends who tended to avoid conflict and experienced a sense of powerlessness. Therefore, I intuitively knew that gaining the trust of participants would be important to recruit participants for this study. As an active parent of young children, I also knew that another barrier to recruitment would be the simple fact that parents of young children are busy, and find it difficult to schedule in an hour or two of child-free time to reflect on their personal experience. This was apparent in attempting to coordinate schedules with friends for the purposes of conducting the pilot interviews.
Based on these two factors, I decided that using my own personal network to recruit participants would be a good strategy since an element of trust would be pre-established, and people may be more open to participating in a project if they received a referral from someone they knew. A summary of the project and a request for participation was emailed to friends, co-workers and colleagues (see Appendix B). The advertisement for the study was also posted on FaceBook (see Appendix A), and the sharing of the study was encouraged. In this manner of forwarding emails and messages, many people were reached, and I was approached by many colleagues who heard of the study but did not meet the inclusion criteria.

A secondary recruitment strategy was to contact organizations that would be willing to distribute the advertisement for the study through their email contacts. Not all community organizations responded to my request, but the study was successfully advertised to the members of the District Parent Advisory group of Vancouver, and the parents of children in the religious exploration programs of the four Metro Vancouver Unitarian Church congregations. Permission for distribution was always requested as I did not have direct access to any email lists.

I used a purposive sampling method, which required that all participants be parents of children who were bullied in elementary school. Purposive sampling is appropriate in this study because I sought to gather the information about a phenomenon directly from the people who experienced that phenomenon (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2015). Knowing that any child in elementary school has the potential to be bullied, the inclusion criteria was kept very open and there was no attempt to target recruitment at groups that may have higher rates of victimization (for example, advertising at specialized tutoring centres to reach parents of children with learning disabilities or developmental disorders). In the first three months of recruitment for the study, there were only two parents who joined the study. Though a couple more people expressed interest, they could not commit to the time necessary to schedule a face-to-face interview. After amending the exclusion criteria, the recruitment emails were re-sent to my personal and professional networks, and I was able to recruit four more participants who volunteered for the study.
3.4.3. Interviewing

Interviews were conducted in a quiet location chosen by the participant. These spaces included the participant’s home, workplace or meeting at a public location like the library. None of the participants were willing to travel to the university to be interviewed. Consent forms were emailed to participants prior to the interview (see Appendix E). Before starting an interview, I would read to the participants a short summary of the study that summarized my motivation to engage in this research, encouraged their open participation, and also reminded them of their rights as research participants to disclose as much as they felt comfortable sharing (see Appendix D). After collecting the signed consent form, I asked participants to complete the short demographic survey (Appendix C). Audio recorders were switched on as soon as the consent form was signed, and then the semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the interviews.

In his approach to research interviews, Bevan (2014) proposes that descriptive phenomenology offers an explicit approach for researchers that can be applied to the process of interviewing, and not one only focused on data analysis. I adopted the researcher approach of being “accepting of the natural attitude of participants”, being reflexive, and engaging in active listening (Bevan, 2014, p.139). During the interviews, I focused on active listening, and asking open ended and clarification questions. I approached the interview with a non-judgmental attitude and a sense of curiosity. These specific techniques had been studied and practiced in a previous undergraduate university course I had completed on listening skills, and complemented the researcher approach advocated by Bevan (2014).

The interviews ranged in length from 1 hour and 5 minutes to 1 hour and 19 minutes. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by me. The digital recordings were listened to once more after the initial transcription, and then deleted after all interviews were transcribed. Hard and soft copies of the transcribed interviews have been saved respectively in a locked filing cabinet and password protected computer belonging to me. Raw data will be destroyed one year after the completion of the thesis defense.
3.5. Data Analysis

The data analysis method I adopted is outlined in Creswell (2007). The data analysis began as soon as the first interview was transcribed. After each interview was complete, it was transcribed and read in detail. Any initial impressions and thoughts about the data were recorded before the next interview was started. I did this so I could examine each transcript independently and ask myself what was going on for that particular person, without being unduly influenced by the experiences of the other participants. I also engaged in a reflexive analysis by reflecting on my own experience as a parent, and inserting a comment in the margin (memo) when I noted anything of interest or significance, such as a similarity or difference in my parenting approach. This was intended to help me be aware of my own judgements and prejudices that may have affected my analysis.

After reading the transcripts as a whole to get a general sense of what was occurring for the participant, I started the next phase of analysis with a coding process. This involved making notes in the margin where I noticed significant statements, and assigning it a descriptive code. I then transferred all these codes and corresponding quotations into a Word document; these formed my initial codes. For example, the statement, “He knows I have his back” would be coded as “Protector”. This process is known as horizontalization of the data, and gives equal weight to all the non-repetitive statements (Creswell, 2007). After I had my initial list of codes, I clustered similar codes together and gave them a heading. For example, codes such as “protector”, “role-model” and “emotional support” would come under the heading of “Parental Role”. I read through the transcripts again and included quotations from all the other transcripts that described the phenomenon in the heading. This was done in a systematic way to ensure that every code or “experience” was not lost across interviews. After that I re-organized the quotations and sorted them into five groups that would be subsumed under one of the five research questions. Therefore, the codes and associated quotations linked to “Parental Role” would be subsumed under my third research question: How do parents understand their role in relation to their child’s involvement in bullying? This was an attempt to organize the data into categories, but it was primarily driven by the five research questions I had at the outset of my study.
Once the data were reduced in this fashion, I looked at the data again and asked myself, “What is happening?” and “What does this mean?” Though I felt that I had descriptive material that could respond to the five research questions, I did not have a description that would approach van Manen’s standard for phenomenology, which is to capture the essence of a human experience (1990). I then proceeded to hand write all the quotations on card paper. By asking myself, “What is happening for this parent?” I proceeded to re-organize the quotations into groups that came to represent the themes in my study. For example, the quotation, “And I had to keep sending him back. And I felt a lot of guilt about that, cause I knew that it wasn’t the right environment for him”, was placed under the cluster entitled “Guilt”. And the quotation, “he’s managed, he’s found ways to channel what they are doing into something that he finds interesting and he wants to do, but, again, marking him as different”, was placed under the heading of “Difference”. After I had created several categories in this manner, I asked myself what was the essence of the experience to guide me in discarding some categories that were interesting, but did not represent the essence of having your elementary school child bullied. An example of a cluster of quotations that were discarded were references to lack of funding for children with special needs or references to class size. The themes that remained were then re-ordered to create higher order themes and sub-themes. The three major themes that emerged were: (1) Difference, (2) Personal Responsibility, with sub themes of Guilt, Mother-Child Relationship Building, and Strategies, and (3) Isolation, with sub themes of Uncertainty, Fear of Label and Not Being Heard.
Chapter 4.

Findings

In the interviews, participants spoke about their concerns about specific instances of bullying behaviour and more general concerns about their children’s social life and school adjustment. Through the interviews, it became clear that the participants cared deeply for their children and were invested in their roles as caring and protective parents. The parents spoke at length about their children, and focused much of their responses on their children’s experiences within the school system. In analyzing the data, I took care to bear in mind that my purpose was to bring to light the experiences of the parents, rather than their children who they cared so deeply about. In this chapter, I present the three major themes that emerged from the data. Not every theme was applicable to every participant, even though there were similarities in experience across this relatively homogenous sample of six mothers. As noted, I labeled the three major themes: (1) Difference, (2) Personal Responsibility, and (3) Isolation. Sub-categories are included within two of the major themes.

4.1. Difference

The first theme that emerged from the findings is “Difference”. All parents in this study commented on how their child is different, and how in the school context, difference is not viewed as a positive characteristic. Instead, parents viewed their child’s difference as a factor that made them vulnerable in the school environment. Of note is the fact that, four of the six participants had a child with a diagnosis of ADHD, learning disability, speech dyspraxia, and/or social anxiety. Of the two parents whose children did not have a diagnosis from a physician or psychologist, one mother reported that her daughter was approximately two years behind academically and the other mother has had teachers suggest to her that her child be evaluated for an ADHD diagnosis. In effect, all the children of these participants have a confirmed or suspected learning disability or behavioural diagnosis. This is interesting in light of the fact that this study was open to all parents of children in elementary school who had been bullied. At no point was the study advertised at organizations that would have biased the sample toward attracting
participants whose children have a particular learning or behavioural challenge (for example, recruiting participants at a clinic, counselling office or learning centre for students with disabilities).

Several parents discussed how their children were different from their peers in light of traits that were linked to their learning or behavioural diagnosis. Masha reported that her son John actively tries to fit in with his peers but finds it difficult because of his disposition: “He wants to fit in desperately, but there is a lot of stuff that makes it difficult to fit in”. Later when she is asked what she thinks makes John a target, she responded: “I think his anxiety. His shyness. And that he acts different”.

Similarly, Aubrey highlighted her son’s speech dyspraxia as a marker that set him apart from his peers:

It means that his lips and his tongue were not strong enough to form the words, so he didn’t really talk. So, I think that it already put him socially at a disadvantage when he started pre-school and that sort of thing. And kids can see he’s different.

In addition to behavioural or physical differences, a child’s tendency to stand out in any way that is not socially endorsed can make them self-conscious, even though there is nothing intrinsically problematic with the behaviour. Aubrey shared how her son’s vivid imagination is another marker of how he is disconnected from his peers, rather than something to be celebrated for its uniqueness:

He has a different way of looking at things. He’s got a very, very, very vivid imagination, so when he is completely immersed in whatever he is playing, and gives it his ... if he’s a dog, then he’s 100% a dog... I find much more so than his peers.

Later in the interview, Aubrey confided:

He’s fairly confident, but he also knows that he’s different. He knows that he struggles, so I think his confidence takes a little bit of a beating sometimes, and I think that makes him an easy target.

These comments illustrate parent’s perceptions that their child’s unique styles of relating to the world tend to draw negative attention which increases their child’s vulnerability amongst their classroom peers.
Mary also spoke of her son’s experience of not fitting in, in relationship to symptoms associated with ADHD, even though her son, Sam, had not been diagnosed with any behavioural condition. Sam’s teachers asked Mary to have him assessed for ADHD, but she refused. Mary opted to help Sam by being emotionally supportive as she did not see the value of an ADHD diagnosis and ADHD medication for her son. In the following excerpt, she discussed Sam’s discomfort in the classroom and the feedback that he received about being a disruption to the class:

You know, I think over time, I think in the first early years I was able to go into the classroom or accompany on field trips, you know I could just see how he didn’t necessarily fit in or wasn’t always included with his peers. So he was left out. And then they might treat him like “Eew”, and then I realized no wonder he feels so bad. And then that’s for no-one else to fix... you can’t make people like your kid. I think, you know, it started out as a child who was uncomfortable in his skin. And just, you know, would do things impulsively, and so very quickly became a disruption, or who needed a lot more attention and guidance. And so... and just... so then it was hard for the teachers, and I guess the kids... and it kind of draws negative attention. Cause I think because of his nervous system just being so agitated... things just would not go smoothly for him. And then as a result it just drew negative attention. So I think it almost was consistent...but through the reactions of others he was just made out to be a bad kid, and a bad boy. So then everything just got worse. It was consistent and it just built up and didn’t get better.

Mary references some of the traits associated with ADHD as an explanation for why Sam had difficulty fitting in with his peers. Her comment that “you can’t make people like your kid” illustrated her perception that the traits which make Sam stand out as different are an integral part of him, and that she had limited control over whether he will be accepted by his peers and teachers.

June did not explicitly identify her daughter as different, but spoke about her daughter’s uniqueness, which made it challenging to find a place of belonging among her peers at school. To illustrate her point, June compared her daughter’s classroom environment at school to her daughter’s positive experience of belonging at a summer film camp. In the film camp, her daughter Sydney met peers who shared similar interests, and she experienced the satisfaction of working in a team to create an artifact, which ended up being a fairly graphic and gruesome horror movie. Had she suggested a similar project in her regular classroom, she would have been singled out as someone whose ideas were not only different, but “weird”. The following excerpt illustrates how
her daughter’s tendencies to cast aside the typical interests of 10 year old girls marked her as different in the school context, but celebrated in the context of the film camp:

June: I think in that context, her 1000 ideas, it was a lot of kids like that. It was a self-selected group of kids like that. So, they were all talking 1000 miles/hour, and really into making a movie. And she raised her hand, and said she wanted to make a horror movie. And three other little girls joined her. So it was a group of little girls who were really passionate about making a horror movie, and they wanted it to be really gruesome, and the teachers couldn’t let them, because you can’t make it R-rated, because you wouldn’t be allowed to watch the movie. So, they were all like pushing in the same direction.

AS: So, would that be an unusual experience for her? For her to experience that sense of camaraderie with her peers?

June: For sure, and the fact that she wanted to do something that’s kinda creepy, and the other kids were totally down for it. In other contexts, like her classroom, if she had suggested that they would have thought she was pretty weird.

June’s perception is that her daughter’s natural interests would be considered strange at school but normalized in another setting. This suggests that she believed that her daughter’s tendency to be perceived of as ‘weird’ and different from her peers made her vulnerable in the school context.

Two parents attributed their children’s tendency to contradict gender norms as contributing to their difference and their social problems. In the case of Kirstin, her daughter’s ‘strong personality’ and her reputation for ‘being tough’, have contributed to her standing out as different. Kirstin discussed her daughter’s experience as a child who does not behave as her peers expect a girl should:

So she related much more to the physicality and the movement of boy friends, the friends who are boys, so she engaged a lot in chasing and running and playing tag, and also you know being quite fearsome. So boys would run away if they were bothering other little people. So that evolved into a lot of name-calling and stuff from the boys: “Girls don’t do this.” And “Boys are faster than girls.” And “Boys are stronger than girls.” And that would really get her angry. So the game started shifting into her indignance around that kind of gender norming, and what all these boys were saying about what girls are and aren’t, and what they can and can’t do. So it shifted from being a game to her being pretty mad about it. And then she became kind of wound up, and angry, and indignant, and she would come home saying “Can you imagine they said this?” And I’d be like ... so now, she’s kind of like
“Girls rock. Girls rock, they rock and you suck.” So she’s kind of gone into that. So I don’t know if that’s part of it, she’s just, she doesn’t have the ability to be nuanced about it.”

Kirstin’s daughter took it upon herself to police the playground and protect younger children on the playground that she felt were being harassed. This excerpt illustrates how Astrid’s tendency to act outside gender norms resulted in her being called names. Her anger at being limited by these gender roles ironically made her even more of a target, as her indignation and tendency to fight ‘like a boy’ continued to mark her as different.

Similarly, Masha’s son was teased when he went to school wearing his favourite powder-blue ‘Elsa and Anna’ themed shoes from the Disney movie, Frozen. Masha’s son, John, now wears hyper-masculinized clothes (i.e. camouflage colours/ army fatigues) which she attributed to be his attempt to fit with gender norms:

But he also from a very early age was very clear that he was a boy, and he knew what the differences between boys and girls were. And he would get very upset when people mis-gendered him. So, he started gender policing his own stuff…once he started going to kindergarten. Because he wanted to fit in. And in part I think because of how people responded to him. And I think he is also hyper-aware that he is growing up in family that isn’t the traditional norm. So, he doesn’t mind telling people that he has two moms. And his classmates know… and he’s talked with his classmates about that …but I think he ...he’s got a suspicion that we are not a normal family in a lot of ways. Which combined with his complex behavioural stuff makes like a little difficult for him, just in terms of fitting in.

This excerpt illustrates John’s attempt to appear typical in a manner that is within his control (male clothing), after he was harassed about wearing clothing or shoes that would mark him as effeminate. Moreover, it illustrates Masha’s sense that her son’s attempts to fit in with perceived gender norms mask a fear that he is different or “not normal”.

To summarize, the first theme that emerged from the interviews was an awareness of parents that their children’s uniqueness or difference was a vulnerability in the school context. Difference from the norm could arise due to personality or cultural/gender norm-breaking. Although some of these characteristics (e.g. imagination, leadership, risk-taking) are not intrinsically negative, parents attributed their children’s
difference from their peers as factors that made them vulnerable to being bullied at school.

4.2. Personal Responsibility

The second theme that emerged from the findings was Personal Responsibility. All participants demonstrated a high level of commitment to their children and actively took steps to support them. When the mothers spoke about their children being bullied they tended to frame the issue as their own problem to resolve, rather than as a shared responsibility between themselves and school personnel. Three sub-themes were found within the theme of Personal Responsibility: Guilt, Mother-child relationship building, and Strategies.

4.2.1. Guilt

Keeping one’s child from harm is arguably the central role of parents. Previous qualitative research on bullying has indicated that one of the major roles that parents identify with is to be the protector of their child (Hale, Fox & Murray, 2017). However, to protect a child from being bullied, one first needs to recognize and identify the harm that is occurring. The elementary school environment is supposed to be a safe place for children. Several parents expressed their guilt over taking too long to recognize their child’s distress at school and not carrying out one of the central responsibilities of parenthood, which is to protect one’s child.

Andy is a single parent whose oldest daughter enjoyed her kindergarten year, but started to dislike school in grades 1 and 2. Even though her daughter, Frankie, occasionally mentioned that she was not getting along with some girls at school, Andy initially attributed her daughter’s disenchantment with school to lack of fit with the teacher, rather than focusing on the fact that Frankie was being harassed by her peers:

You know, I think, in the grade 2 situation, looking back, she actually said to me that she was being bullied. And in grade 2, I was like “You’re in grade 2.” So I didn’t take it as seriously (--) and she brought it up, and there were girls at school, and how they were being mean to her, but she didn’t (--) and they were in the same kind of table group. So, I said to her, I’ll come and talk to the teacher. And she said, “No Mum, it’s okay.” And then I said, maybe, we can talk to the teacher about moving desks. And she said that was a good idea.
So I wrote a note in the planner, I didn’t actually talk to the teacher about it. And the teacher wrote a note back, saying “It’s the end of the year. Don’t worry about it.” And in my mind, it’s just grade 2. Really, what kind of bullying happens in grade 2 (--) didn’t really take it as seriously as maybe, I should have.

This excerpt highlights Andy’s reflection about not taking sufficient action that could have supported her daughter, and her guilt about not recognizing the seriousness of what had occurred at her daughter’s school. Later in the interview, Andy spoke about how realizing her daughter was bullied made her “take a long look in the mirror”, as she grappled with feeling guilty and partially responsible for contributing to her daughter’s distress:

Well, it made me take a long look in the mirror. Looking at my own circumstances, and whether or not I actually contributed to the way she is -- if my own behaviours have allowed her to feel in a certain way or act in a certain way. And then the other thing is I feel really sad for her. Everyone wants their child to be loved and have good solid friendships, and hang out with their friends, and just be able to make that connection, because it is really important, especially when they are young. It’s a bit disheartening. When you are young it is supposed to be easy and make friendships, and kinda took me by surprise, because they are young. You know, I didn’t take it seriously, but it is happening in grade 2.

This excerpt illustrates Andy’s tendency to analyze the problem of the school bullying situation from the angle of her perceived failure to recognize the peer harassment. In addition, Andy questioned how her own life context and parenting behavior may have contributed to her daughter being targeted at school.

Kirstin is another single parent who expressed regret at not noticing her daughter’s distress earlier. In Kirstin’s case, her daughter Astrid was teased repeatedly by a group of boys. In class, they made comments about her lack of reading competence. On the playground, they derided her for her athleticism and competitive streak when she wanted to play the games that were typically played by the boys. The backdrop to this context is that Kirstin and Astrid were both grieving the loss of Astrid’s father to cancer in the previous year. Astrid did tell her mother that she was being bullied, but this was during a time when Kirstin was adjusting to the significant personal loss of her husband, as well as transitioning to the domestic and financial challenges of a single parent household. Kirstin expressed her fear and regret about not being able to be present for her daughter as she believes a parent should:
I feel insecure too because I don’t really know like what’s actually going on. Cause I remember my parents had no idea what was happening for me as a child. And that’s one of my great fears as a parent, that I won’t know what’s happening. But it turns out, even when I am being told, I am not really listening sometimes.

This quote illustrates the guilt that Kirstin felt about not being able to hear and respond to her daughter’s school-related needs during a time of grief for the family.

Mary also mentioned her guilt in relationship to not being able to protect her son. She responded by turning inwards. Mary tried to become a ‘better’ parent by enrolling in parenting courses and engaging the services of a counsellor after seeing her son struggle in school:

I think I just started to try to figure out how to help myself, and help him. So, counseling, different parenting courses, and just that’s it. And praying, constant counseling, and constant courses to try and figure out what can I do to help him, because it’s up to me. You can’t rely on the teachers. It’s not their job. It’s not the job of other families, so I knew it was really up to me to try and help him. And if I had the means and had the capacity, I would have homeschooled him. I would have pulled him right out. And I had to keep sending him back. And I felt a lot of guilt about that, cause I knew that it wasn’t the right environment for him.

This quotation is especially noteworthy because Mary directly states that “it’s not the job of the teachers” as she takes on the primary responsibility to find help for her son.

Of note is the observation that the expressions of guilt were much more explicit among the three participants who were single parents. This may be attributed to their single parent status. However, the three single parents also had a prior relationship with me and so may have felt more comfortable sharing their feelings of vulnerability.

4.2.2. Mother-Child Relationship Building

Participants spoke at length about how their role as parents was to provide a psychologically safe haven for their children. The parents in this study used a wide range of strategies to address the social challenges that their children faced in school; these interventions ranged from taekwondo and climbing classes to improve their child’s confidence, personal counselling for themselves and/or their child, parenting courses, heart-centred equine therapy, etc. Though all these interventions played a role in the parent’s larger strategy to support their child, most parents focused on the importance of
developing and deepening the mother-child relationship. A key parental responsibility was to develop a relationship in which they were aware of what was going on in their child’s life, and were attuned and responsive to their child’s emotional needs.

The most common form of relationship development took the form of purposively and actively probing their child about what was going on at school and de-briefing the events of the day. June stated:

I do that (probing child with questions) because I think it’s probably good for parents to be a bit nosey at this stage. And I want to know what their day was like. And if I just say, ‘How was your day?’ they’ll say ‘Fine’.

Many parents spoke of the importance of being persistent in asking questions in order to find out about the details of the child’s life at school, and viewed it as an important part of being a “good” parent.

Parents also saw their role as being a safe person with whom their child could express their emotions. Kirstin spoke of her attempts to reach her daughter at an emotional level when her defenses were down:

And we have quite a dialogic relationship, so we talk through everything. Usually it’s late at night when she wakes up from a bad dream, or when she’s sort of drifting off to sleep, and her boundaries are down. It means that right now, that rapport is more important to me, we end up sometimes not having enough sleep, sometimes being late to school, and stuff. But I am trying to stay connected to her than, what’s it called, faithful to the institutions around us.

This excerpt demonstrates Kirstin’s understanding that her daughter needed to be in the right frame of mind to speak about her true fears and concerns. Even though actively probing about day to day events has its place, Kirstin created time and space for deeper conversations. Kirstin acted in a way that recognized that her daughter’s surface behavior may not accurately represent her true feelings, and to find out what is truly going on for her daughter she had to actively develop the conditions for a trusting relationship. This excerpt also shows the critically high value that Kirstin placed on the mother-daughter relationship bond as she is willing to forgo other parental expectations such as ensuring her daughter gets to school on time.

Andy is a single parent whose daughter Frankie was diagnosed with social anxiety and had developed a tic. After several difficult experiences with another girl in
her class, Andy’s 9 year old daughter threatened to kill herself. When Andy was asked to reflect on her approach to supporting Frankie, her answer reflected an emphasis on improving communication and developing her relationships with her daughters:

So, I have made my daughters more of a priority in my life. And made sure my focus is really on ensuring they know they are loved, and making sure they know they have a choice, and making sure they know where to go to seek help, making sure they listen to their gut, so if something doesn’t feel right it’s not right. So, just having those kind of conversations. And those are conversations I have never had with my parents. And so just looking at my own background, and kind of imagining what I would have needed as a child, she’s going through the same situation and I am trying to adjust my parenting accordingly. And it’s made a difference, you know. I have found we’ve been going through counselling, myself and my children, and working really hard at maintaining a positive relationship with their Dad, and all of that kind of stuff. So, just trying to make sure that they know we both love them, and we’re here for them, and we are doing the best that we can. And sometimes our best is not good enough, but we’re still trying, and just trying to reiterate the fact that they have a choice, and ...yeah. So, I think it has helped me to be a better parent for sure, yeah.

This excerpt shows Andy’s commitment to reflect on her parenting approach, compare it to her own experience as a child, and make adjustments to best fit her daughter’s need. In this way, she assumed responsibility for her daughter’s psychological health by building a supportive parent-child bond to mitigate the emotional damage caused by the bullying.

Part of developing a psychologically safe relationship involved creating space for their children to express anger. Several parents alluded to their children’s frustration at school, which prompted inappropriate behavior that they subsequently were disciplined for at school. Mary talked about her active attempts to get her child to express his frustration:

I think I tried to reach into the side of him that was soft. I remember getting books about being inclusive, about being kind, about how to make friends, you know. I tried to also get him to express it, cause I knew there was that kind of foul energy. So when you are being a bully, it’s just an energy. You just have to get it out. So rather than taking it out on someone, you need to express it in a different way, so trying to appreciate that there is this foul energy, I have had experiences with it, and so has he. So definitely a huge part of my strategy is how do I get him to express that without making him feel bad for having that energy. And so a big part of my strategy, and it’s not been successful with him because, maybe, I have been
inconsistent and been tired and not doing it regularly, but it’s just expressing it on a regular basis in a safe way.

This excerpt shows that Mary recognized that her son needed to express his legitimate feelings of anger without further blame. As his mother she has the capacity to offer him a relationship where he can be safe to express himself. This comment emphasizes her sense of responsibility about not doing it “regularly” enough, and also the value she placed on his need to safely express frustration within their relationship.

Aubrey is a parent who regularly communicated with her son’s teachers about her concerns that her son was being teased at school. She was the only parent in the study who filed formal complaints with the school and was extremely clear about her role as an advocate for her child. When asked about her role, she said:

That you need to step up and be your child’s advocate. Whether it’s bullying or anything else. You have to show your child and the school that you are not going to let it happen.

In addition to advocating for her son’s safety at school, Aubrey was also clear that it was important for her son Felix to know that she was advocating on his behalf. When she heard of anything that she felt was inappropriate, she discussed her approach with Felix so he was informed on what action would be taken, and she reported that has helped deepen their relationship and made him feel more secure at school:

I think it’s made our relationship better because he knows that I support him. He knows that, especially when it comes to the stuff with Kai (the bully), he knows that I believe him. And he knows that I need to I will go to the school, and I will talk to who I need to talk to, to make sure it stops. He knows that I have written emails because I have said to him, “Your teacher may talk to you about this particular incident because I have written her an email to tell her that that’s not okay”. But I don’t think I’ve been a pushover about phoning the teacher about little incidences. And he has the confidence in me to know that I will back him up.

4.2.3. Strategies

Most of the concrete actions that parents took focused on individual support for themselves or their child, rather than on collaboration with school personnel.
Interventions included enrolling their child in skill building extra-curricular activities to boost their confidence, engaging the services of physicians, psychologists and counsellors for their child (including providing medication for ADHD), and counselling or parenting courses for themselves. Many mothers spoke about becoming ‘better’ at being a parent, implying that if they had been better parents the bullying may have been prevented. Many parents in this study tended to focus on self-improvement strategies rather than strategies that called for more accountability on the part of school personnel to ensure the bullying did not occur.

When asked what the most effective strategy had been to support her daughter after being bullied, June spoke of the importance of being aware of her own personal demeanour and the importance of being a good role-model. June spoke of an incident where her daughter started a fight with a girl at school, after finding out very publicly that she was the only girl in her class not invited to the girl’s birthday party. June emphasized how she did not get involved with the school over the incident. When asked if she spoke to the teacher about the fight, June said:

I did not escalate that at all. My (--) Oftentimes, the way I deal with these smaller incidents, I feel like modeling the reflex that I want my kids to have, which I don’t have but I pretend to. So, if someone makes fun... So if the kids make fun of something I am wearing, I respond by saying “Well, you’re wrong, because I look great”. You know, so the same thing with this birthday party incident. I was like, you know, “Well, that’s stupid because you would have been super fun at the party and she’s missing out”. To kind of put the focus on ”Those people are wrong, I’m great”. That’s the reflex I want them to have, but it takes a conscious effort to do that, because my first reflex is to want to go and yell at somebody.

Assuming the responsibility of role modelling the behavior you want your child to employ when they are being teased, is considered by June to be the most effective strategy to teach her child how to respond to being teased at school. This excerpt is interesting because June dismissed this incident as “smaller” and one that did not warrant speaking to the teacher about. She focused on taking the responsibility to role model an appropriate response for her daughter even though she clearly expressed that her primary response is an angry one. This excerpt illustrates how the responsibility to role model appropriate responses for her daughter are in conflict with her emotions of anger about the teasing and exclusion at school.
The tendency of parents to set a high personal standard for themselves was reiterated by June, who emphasized how her own personal demeanour and behaviour has been the most effective strategy when it comes to helping her support her daughter:

Well, in terms of helping her feel not hurt when the bullying happens, the behavior I model, is for sure the most effective. And I have been surprised at how effective at how quickly that has worked.

June then went on to provide an example of modeling appropriate behaviour.

This dude was bullying me out on the street parking situation. And he didn’t want me to park where I was parking, even though it was completely legal and he would just not let it go, and he was yelling at me in front of my kids. This was a couple of years ago. And I didn’t back down. I stayed calm and I called the Municipal authorities and have them confirm I was parked in a legal space. And he kept harping me. And I just stood firm, and eventually told him he was being a jerk and walked away. This took about 10 minutes. And she has cited that multiple times, as this is how we deal with someone who is bullying us. So, I didn’t think about it at the time, that I was modeling how to deal with that situation, but it was really effective.

This quote illustrates how parents tend to focus on their own actions and areas within their personal control when it comes to assessing and implementing strategies to support their children.

Almost all the parents engaged in counselling for themselves or took a parenting course. The tendency to focus on self-development to the exclusion of working with the school is highlighted by Mary’s comments:

I could also see that me blaming others, or coming down hard on the system, or the teacher, or another child, or another family, would not help. So, a big responsibility I took on is don’t try and fix anybody else. Don’t try to fix the teachers or the system. See if they are willing to understand that he needs more support, not less. He does need more kindness, not less. He does need limits and guidance but not harshness. So see if you can plant that seed, but otherwise put all my energy into just working on healing myself and being there for him. And don’t waste energy on fixing what is out here, cause that’s way out of my control. So I think that was a big thing for me, I just said okay, that’s not my business how they run their classroom and their school. What’s my business is, you know, what can I do.

This excerpt demonstrates that Mary expected that the teachers would be non-responsive to her concerns or to her son’s needs. She concluded that she had to take
action in the areas that she perceived she had control, which excluded the classroom or the school community.

The theme of personal responsibility emerged from the data as parents spoke about how they identified and responded to the bullying. Participants had a tendency to frame the issue as an individual personal issue that they needed to resolve. The findings suggest that parents experienced guilt over not protecting their children, their focus on protecting their child took the form of providing an emotionally supportive and safe parent-child relationship, and the strategies they chose tended to focus on themselves or their child, rather than on addressing the issues directly with the school.

4.3. Isolation

The final theme that emerged from the findings was the isolation experienced by parents whose child is bullied in elementary school. This isolation is related to parents feeling alone with the problem, which is linked to their reluctance to directly address their concerns about bullying with school personnel. In this study, only two parents directly raised bullying as an issue with their child’s teacher, and when they did it was in cases of overt harassment (hitting and repetitive name-calling). The remaining parents also interfaced with the school about their concerns, but when they did, they did not use the language of bullying or frame the problem as a bullying issue. Their concerns about their child’s social exclusion or inability to fit in were issues that parents grappled with on their own. The theme of isolation has the following three sub-themes: Uncertainty, Fear, and Not Feeling Heard. When parents realized that their child was being bullied, they experienced uncertainty about how best to resolve the issue. They were fearful of being judged and labelled by school personnel. Finally, parents expressed frustration about not feeling listened to and not having their opinion respected. The uncertainty, fear and concern that they would not be heard tended to make parents feel alone with their problem and reluctant to directly approach school personnel and address concerns around bullying.

4.3.1. Uncertainty

The first sub-theme under “Isolation” is parents’ initial reactions of uncertainty. Earlier I discussed parents’ perceptions that their children were different and/or did not fit
in with their peers at school. Four of the six children had a history of peer rejection and/or disruptive behavior in the classroom. Two children were diagnosed with social anxiety. This history of conflict and perceived peer rejection was a factor in parents’ decision making about approaching other adults to discuss the harassment of their child. Many parents recognized that their child could be perceived as challenging by teachers and their peers. As a result, it was not always clear to them if they should step in to advocate for their child when peer conflict arose. In the following excerpt, Kirstin’s uncertainty about intervening on her child’s behalf is apparent in her response to being asked how she distinguishes between typical peer conflict and active bullying:

I am really unsure. And that gives me a lot of stress. I don’t have clarity, so I don’t really know when to act. And I watch other parents, and I am curious how other parents deal with it. And I see a spectrum of people. For example, one of my friends, you know, if there’s any whiff of any kind of problem with her kids, she’s on it. She’s a very proactive advocate of her children. And, you know, she is not so interested in, you know, whether, to what degree her child was an agent in the conflict. She’s just, you know, this is unacceptable. I do not want to have any reports of this kind of thing happening. Versus other people, you know, on the other end of the spectrum (--) I can’t think of someone I have actually talked to, but some people (--) that’s my own experience growing up, you just don’t really know what’s going on for kids in school. And they just let them fend for themselves, cause that’s sort of you have to learn how to sink or swim. And that there’s people who just live in angst (laughs—implies herself). And I also guess, I know my daughter is intense and complicated, and sometimes rubs people the wrong way. So I also realize sometimes I have not taken her seriously enough when she’s reported things. Cause I have sort of thought, It’s just sort of going to be your thing in life, some complication. But then I have spent a little more time watching her in the school yard, during lunch, checking in about a few things. So, I figure out the more I start to check in with her teacher about things, the more I realize that there’s a motif going on, where she really is experiencing things that I don’t think she should be experiencing.

In addition to illustrating Kirstin’s uncertainty about when to intervene, this quote also shows that Kirstin recognized that her daughter can “rub people the wrong way”. This made raising complaints with the teacher even more complex as there was not a clearly apparent “bully” and “victim”, which contributed to her feeling uncertain about the best approach to take to resolve the problem.

Other parents also experienced uncertainty about what the best approach to resolving complaints about bullying should be. Even when parents had concerns about
their child’s well-being in the classroom, it was not immediately obvious to them that they should report their concerns to the teacher. Andy is a single parent whose daughter Frankie is a creative and cautious child. Frankie has been diagnosed with social anxiety and has a mild tic. Frankie was in a friendship circle with two other girls in her class. The parents of all three girls knew each other and were friends as well. After several complaints from Frankie, and her own observations over time, Andy realized that Frankie was being verbally harassed by the girls in her friendship circle. In the following excerpt, Andy speaks about navigating the complex relationships involved when her daughter was being bullied by Piper, a girl who is also the daughter of a family friend:

It was more of an “Oh shit moment”. Cause I really (--) you know, (--) how do you, (--) how do you deal with this? Do you approach the child? Do you approach the parent? Do you approach the teacher? I didn’t really know how to deal with this. And so, yeah. I was a bit timid, I was a bit scared myself. I have always been a bit of a conflict-avoider myself, and so, it’s been a bit of a challenge. When we had the summer time conversation, with the other mum, Piper and myself, and Frankie, it felt really good. Right, to talk about it. I tried to make sure I wasn’t stepping on anyone’s toes, and things like that. But do you do that every single time something happens? Do you have to let the teacher know to watch out what’s going on? Do you talk to the child who you think is being the bully? Or do you arm your daughter with the skills that she needs to counter? I don’t know. I guess there’s a lot of guesswork in parenting.

This excerpt reveals several concerns. First, parents may have to navigate several relationships when they realize their child is bullied. Unlike older children, children in elementary school are more likely to share the same public spaces (e.g. school playground, parks, daycares, sports activities) outside of school hours (Witten, McCreanor & Kearns, 2007). This makes it more likely that parents of a bullied child will know the parents of children who hurt their child, which raises the stakes for coming to a resolution. Second, Andy’s description of herself as a conflict-avoider shows that she recognized that she had to manage her own emotions as she decided on an appropriate strategy. Both these factors played into feelings of uncertainty, and illustrate the complexity involved in the decision to report instances of bullying to the teacher.

The uncertainty in knowing what the best thing to do for their child arises in even mundane parenting decisions. June’s daughter is physically small for her age and is the youngest in her class. She has had trouble making friends in school and spends much of her time alone. June has attempted to put her daughter Sydney in extra curricular
activities (e.g. taekwondo, dance) in order to build up her skills and give her opportunities to widen her social circle. When asked what her greatest challenge was in trying to support her daughter, June paused for a long time before answering:

I guess recognizing when I should push her to do something or when it’s better to let it go. It’s hard to know. The dance class, for example, I could have just let that go. But I kept pushing her too, because in other areas, pushing her was the right thing to do. So, it’s hard to know when I am getting too involved.

June’s answer reflects the difficulty she had with predicting what would be a successful intervention for her daughter. In the case of the dance class, her daughter was relatively uncoordinated compared to the other girls and ended up feeling more set apart from the group than included, which exacerbated her feelings of insecurity and incompetence with making friendships with girls her age. However, in the case of the taekwondo classes, her daughter gained enough mastery of the art which resulted in improved gross motor skills and self-esteem. June believed that had she not insisted on Sydney persisting through the taekwondo course, Sydney would have given up at the first obstacle. This sense of uncertainty in knowing how best to support a child who has difficulty making friends exacerbated June’s feelings of isolation when trying to find solutions that would support her daughter. This excerpt also shows that as a parent of child who is facing social challenges at school, June had to put a lot of thought into planning extra-curricular activities that would positively support her daughter.

4.3.2. Fear of Label

Parents were aware that reporting concerns about bullying at school raised the possibility of conflict and the risk of misunderstanding. This is interesting because parents also expressed a need to have someone to work with on finding solutions. In the following excerpt, Andy speaks about how her fear of alienating the teacher prevented her from speaking freely and directly about the issue at hand. This also suggests that when parents feel fearful they are less able to collaborate with school personnel. When I asked Andy what support she needed, her response indicated that her desire “just to have somebody”, was mitigated by the fear that the teacher may have her “feathers ruffled” and be resistant to hearing her truth:

Me? That would be nice. (laughs) Yeah, it would be nice to just have somebody that you can tap into and say, “Hey, I would like to fly this
idea by you”. I don’t know how to approach this. I don’t know how to address this”. Because, nobody really does. Parenting is learning as you go. But it would be nice to just be able to like …know that the school has somebody you can talk to and just go ask a question (--) this is what I am seeing, this is what I am hearing, I don’t know how to approach it. If they just had some kind of resource that way. I think sometimes with the teachers, it’s really intimidating per say. Because you don’t want to ruffle feathers. You don’t to really imply that they are not doing their job. Oh, I know they are busy, I know they’ve got a million things on their plate. But I think it becomes a little bit delicate, when you’re having that dance. And putting that expectation on teachers, when they actually also don’t know what they’re doing, or how to manage that, or how to approach the bullying situations. Just to have somebody.”

Even when parents were completely satisfied with their child’s teacher, they were conscious of the risk of being labelled as ‘that parent’ if they raised concerns around bullying. Masha is a parent who had a good relationship with the teacher and the principal at her son’s school. Her son John had a difficult start in kindergarten; he had trouble with impulse control and an inability to focus, which resulted in him not following instructions, not participating in social groups, and occasionally, getting into fights with the other children. In grade one, Masha and her wife received a letter from the school in which the teacher described John as “lacking emotions” and as a child who needed an assessment. Masha interpreted the letter as describing John as “a little sociopath”. After that, she and her wife had John assessed by a pediatrician and started him on a course of ADHD medication. Both she and her wife have been proactively working with John’s teachers to make his adjustment manageable. Masha attributed the good relationship to their good fortune in having teachers who are “willing to listen” and her own willingness to “go out of the way” to develop a relationship with the teacher. She stated:

He’s always had teachers who are really willing to listen. We have always had really good relationships with them. We deliberately go out of our way. We are willing to work with the teachers to figure out a strategy. Also, our attitude has not been the school has to figure out how to fix everything. And it’s not our kid’s problem. No, our kid has a problem, and recognizing that, so I think they have dealt with enough parents who want to deny that it is their kid. So, they are actually grateful that we are willing to say, yes, our child has developmental issues that we need to address. But it’s always been very cooperative, so we’ve had an amiable relationship with the school.

However, when asked to further discuss her concerns about John being teased for wearing his preferred clothing, Masha clarified that she did not raise her concerns that John was being teased for wearing “Elsa and Anna” Disney themes shoes. She
attributed this to the fact that she had not built up the relationship in the first three months of kindergarten and did not want to risk being labelled a difficult parent:

No, it was the first three months. We had just moved to BC. I was just adjusting to a new job. And ultimately, we were having this kid, who for the first semester was only able to go to school for a half-day. They basically put him on an extended half-day.... So we had “that kid” and I didn’t want to stir the pot. Which is sad. But I didn’t want to have another strike against us.... In the “They complain about every little thing”. Like that could be a thing too. They are complaining about... some kid made an off-hand comment about his shoes, and they don’t have a thick enough skin to deal with that. That’s definitely there.

This excerpt highlights two important issues. First, as a parent of a child who had behavioural issues and difficulty adjusting to kindergarten, Masha felt that she needed to reassure school personnel that she and her wife were responsible parents who were aware that their child had developmental issues that they would address. In this case, Masha followed the suggestion of the principal to get her son assessed by a physician, and subsequently, received a diagnosis of ADHD for which John received medication. Second, she did not raise her concerns about the early teasing in kindergarten in part because of a fear of being labelled as a parent who “stirs the pot”. This illustrates that parents whose children have social and/or behavioural challenges are concerned about value judgements from school personnel. In the case of Masha, she did not feel she could directly raise her concerns without first investing in developing a trusting relationship with the teacher.

4.3.3. Not Feeling Heard

The final sub-theme under “Isolation” is parent’s worry that their concerns about their child’s social well-being at school will not be heard by their child’s teacher and principal. These parents wanted to feel that they were truly being listened to. They wanted their concerns to be understood and they wanted their opinions to be respected. Many parents cited examples of feeling patronized and not heard which had the effect of making them less open to engaging with the school when new concerns around bullying or incidents of social exclusion came up. (By the same token, two parents provided examples of teachers who made them feel heard and re-engaged them in working together to support their child, which I include further in this chapter.)
Aubrey is an active parent who volunteered at her son’s school and regularly raised her concerns with her child’s teacher. Her son, Felix, has a speech impediment and a reading disability. He was regularly teased by a particular classmate about being “dumb” because of his struggles with reading and spelling. Aubrey made several requests for her son to be moved to another table group in the classroom, but the teacher did not make the change. She expressed her frustration at not having her concerns heard:

And she says she’s got things under control. So what I hear is: It’s my classroom.

Later in the interview, she stated that the lack of follow up from the teacher left her feeling unsupported:

She tells me she’s going to talk to everyone involved, but she doesn’t let me know what the outcome is. Which I don’t like. I want to know what was discussed, what is the strategy. So I don’t feel I’ve got the full support of the teacher other than I’ve got her saying: I’ll talk to them.

The perceived tepid response to concerns, and the lack of visible action and communication on the part of the teacher, all contributed to Aubrey feeling patronized when she raised her concerns, as the next excerpt illustrates:

Yeah, I feel like I am getting a pat on the head. And being told I’ll look into it. And I don’t feel like we’re being listened to all the time.

Mary is a divorced, single parent who has also felt that she could not partner with the school with finding solutions for her son because her view point was not valued. Mary has had several teachers and principals suggest to her that she should get her son assessed for ADHD, and that she needed to discipline her son more so that he would be better behaved. Mary disagreed with the recommendation and chose not to get her son assessed. Mary has taken several parenting courses on attachment parenting and believes that creating a safe and emotionally supportive relationship with her son would help him calm down and be less disruptive in school. Mary stated that she felt judged by the school personnel about her parenting philosophy and her parenting approach:

And then grade 4, grade 5 was terrible. A new counselor, a new principal, and they just were convinced he had ADHD, and that he .... I wasn’t being strict enough. So when I could see that there was a lot of blame and a lot of “You need to do this. And you need to do that.” Like
telling me what to do. And in my situation, having the father and his partner saying: “Well, he’s not like that with us.” So confusing the staff even more. And saying that it’s the mother. You know, I mean what are they supposed to think.

Later in the interview, Mary discussed her challenges with the emotional tasks involved with raising her son:

I think it’s not really having the support around me. Not having someone who understands the emotional experience that him and I am going through. That’s really been the biggest challenge, just kind of having to go at it alone. Alone meaning, I might have a counselor who might understand me once a month, I might have a course that’s helping me to reframe and retrain, so that became my biggest support. But on a day to day basis, just not having the support.

In addition to not having a teacher who understands her family circumstances, her son does not qualify for certain school resources because he lacks a Ministry designation indicating a disability. When asked what she needs, she states there should be a: “willingness to support kids without needing to have them diagnosed.” Mary has felt that her parenting decisions have not been respected or valued, which has led her to engage less with school personnel. Unfortunately, the outcome of this withdrawal is a high degree of isolation for herself. Again, this finding suggests that when parents do not feel listened to or understood, they are more likely to isolate themselves and their child from the services the school has the potential to offer.

Prior to closing this section on the findings of the study, it is worth highlighting that even though the parents in the study had genuine moments of anguish and worry about their child at school, they also made mention of situations where they felt gratified by the words and actions of teachers and other school personnel who were able to “see the goodness” in their child. The following example serves as a juxtaposition to illustrate how parents see that teachers can create safe environments for their children. Even though Mary felt that her son does not thrive at school, she appreciated the teacher who was able to see the potential in her son. She stated:

You know, but I do believe that there are teachers who can save children. Teachers who see the goodness, who see right through the crap, and say, like this one coach said to him, “You have got more to offer the world than making your team mates laugh.” So it’s teachers like that who cater to the goodness and who don’t give up on children, I think can save these children. But we shouldn’t (--) as a parent, I
also have to make sure I don’t wait for that. Cause 10 years can go by and that never shows up. But if it’s meant to be, it will.

Another excellent example of a teacher who did not give up on a child was provided by Masha, whose son John had a lot of difficulty adjusting to kindergarten due in part to his developmental and behavioural issues. In his grade three year, John had a transformative experience that Masha attributed in large part to his relationship with his teacher:

And then we hit this year, and he bonded with his teacher. He’s in grade 3 now. He bonded with the teacher in a way that I hadn’t seen him do so yet. And, umm, for kindergarten, grade 1 and 2, I would have my cell phone on constantly... and I’d be waiting for the call from the school. And I don’t worry about that anymore. So, she hasn’t had any trouble with him in the school. He’s academically performing where he’s supposed to be performing. He’s engaged with other kids, and he’s actually got friends that he plays with at school, which he hasn’t had. So, he’s doing really, really well, academically and socially. Umm, to the point he’ll come home and tell me how the other kids misbehaved. (laughs). And he’s quite proud of the fact that he can report on the other kids who are engaged in naughty things, but he had a great day. And so, that’s good. And the first day was rough...he called his teacher stupid, and she sent him out of the classroom. But the next day they both apologized. He apologized to her and she apologized for losing her temper. And I think her apology cemented for him that, okay, there’s an adult who is willing to admit when they’re wrong. And for him I think, that’s one of the biggest things. The willingness to admit when you are wrong, and so, ever since, he knows what the boundaries are, what he can do, what he can’t do, and he’s engaged. So it’s been really great this year.

In conclusion, the findings are presented in three main themes which have been labelled: (1) Difference, (2) Personal Responsibility, and (3) Isolation. The first theme of Difference revealed that parents view their children as being vulnerable in the school context because of their differences. All the parents who volunteered for the study have children who have a diagnosis or suspected diagnosis of ADHD, learning disabilities, social anxiety, and/or other co-morbid conditions. Though these conditions are not uncommon, these children were aware that they were atypical when compared to their peers and their difference was not perceived as a positive one. This finding suggests that when parents volunteered for this study on bullying, they were also concerned about their child’s social fit and belonging at school. The second finding suggests that parents Shouldered a high degree of personal responsibility for the well-being of their children at school. This is manifested by the guilt they felt when they realized their child was in
distress, their commitment to deepen the mother-child relationship and provide emotional safety, and their emphasis on finding interventions that focused on personal development for themselves or their child. The second theme of Personal Responsibility illustrates that on the continuum of self and system, parents focused on their own actions more than the systemic factors that contributed to their child’s well-being at school. The third theme of Isolation illustrates how parents felt alone with the problem. This is illustrated by their initial reaction of uncertainty about who to approach for help and how best to respond when they realized their child is struggling at school. It is also evidenced by the fear that strongly advocating for their child will result in being labelled as a troublemaker that “stirs the pot”. Parents also felt isolated when their parenting approach was not valued and their concerns were not validated. The isolation that parents felt made them reluctant to be upfront about their true concerns and collaborate with teachers on seeking solutions.
Chapter 5.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experience of parents whose children had been bullied at elementary school. This chapter presents a brief overview of the study, a reflection of my role as a researcher, a discussion of each of the three themes, and implications for practice. Max van Manen argues that the goal of phenomenological research is “to sponsor a critical educational competence” (1984, p. 36). As such, I discuss the pedagogical implications of this study’s findings for parents, teachers and other school personnel.

5.1. Overview:

The phenomenon of bullying in schools is complex. The research literature is expansive on the individual and socio-ecological factors associated with bullying. Parents play an important role in teaching their children about appropriate social behavior and supporting their children through emotional difficulties (Healy, Sanders & Iyer, 2015). Considerable research has focused on parental characteristics associated with bullying (i.e., authoritarian parenting). However, relatively little research attention has been paid to the experience of parents whose children are bullied at school. Given the significant impact that a parent’s advocacy or emotional support can have on a child involved in the bullying dynamic (Conners-Burrow et al, 2009), the voice of parents is important. Thus, my goal was to understand how parents experience the bullying of their child. I began this project with five specific research questions that investigated how parents understand bullying, their role in relationship to bullying, and their response to the bullying. The five research questions guided the interview process and were successful in yielding rich data about parent’s experiences.

In the process of analyzing the data, I let go of my attachment to the original five research questions and followed van Manan’s advice that a phenomenologist should get to the essence of the experience. But what is an essence? Van Manen (1990) states that an essence is a description of a phenomenon, and does not have to represent a mysterious quality. He uses the example of how a seat is essential to our understanding
of a chair, whereas the materials that a chair is made of can vary, and therefore do not make up the “essence” of a chair. My goal was to distill the parent’s experience of having their child bullied into its essential structural components. Through the data analysis process, the themes that emerged were: (1) parent’s keen awareness of their personal responsibility for the welfare of their child, (2) their perception that their child was different and that this difference made them vulnerable to being bullied at school, and (3) that in working through the experience of having a child who is bullied the parents themselves felt a keen sense of isolation. The themes of Personal Responsibility, Difference, and Isolation that capture the essence of the experience of parenting a bullied child are not generalizable, but speak to the “structure” of the lived experience of this relatively homogenous sample of mothers. In discussing the themes that emerged from this phenomenological investigation, my goal is that there is recognition amongst the readers of “your story” in “my story” (van Manen, 1990).

5.2. Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research is interpretive by nature and calls for an attitude of reflexivity (Creswell, 2003). Throughout this project, I paid attention to my own history and attempted to be aware of how I was moved by the stories of the mothers in this project. I do not pretend that I am detached from my own beliefs and experiences, but I share my history so that the reader can evaluate how my own background influenced the design and outcomes of this research project.

I moved to Canada after I completed high school, so I have no personal experience as a student in the Canadian K-12 public education system. I was educated at a private Catholic girl’s school in the Middle East. My recollection is that teachers were listened to and their profession was respected; the opinions of teachers mattered, and parents and students considered their advice and approach seriously. I was a reasonably good student and my school life was fairly uneventful. Most of my classmates were similar to me in terms of race, religion and socio-economic standing, as it was the school where most expatriate families schooled their children. The terms “inclusive education” or “special needs” was not something I ever encountered as a child, and from my recollection, the student body at my school did not include children with visible disabilities.
I have two children who currently attend the local public elementary school in my neighbourhood. One of my children has had significant difficulty with reading and currently has an IEP to address his learning needs. My other child loves the structure, stimulation and social interaction that school offers. Though I have had my fair share of conversations with both children about negotiating relationships with peers, I have had serious concerns that one of my children was being purposely excluded from social circles at school. I am aware that my experience of parenting a child who is considered “typically developing” and another one who could be labelled “neuro-diverse” has shaped the construction of knowledge presented in this project.

5.3. Discussion of Themes

The essence of these parents’ experience of their child being bullied lies in the inter-relatedness of the three themes of Difference, Personal Responsibility, and Isolation. Parents viewed their child’s difference as a factor that made them vulnerable to being bullied in the classroom. They responded to this perceived vulnerability by assuming responsibility to protect and support their child. When assessing what should be done for their child, parents tended to focus on changing their parenting in the hopes that it would help their child adapt and or better cope with the difficulties at school. This perceived responsibility to change themselves or their child, distracted from an alternative strategy of engaging in a direct conversation with school personnel about bullying. Most parents did not feel they could genuinely address their concerns about their child’s lack of acceptance in the peer group because they were uncertain of the right approach, they feared being labelled a troublesome parent or they had previously experienced not having their concerns validated. This led to intensified feelings of isolation, as they grappled with the responsibility of finding support for a child who was perceived to be different.

5.3.1. Difference

Very quickly after reading the transcripts it became apparent to me that the parents viewed their children as different from their peers, and they believed this difference was an important factor in explaining why their child was bullied. The perception of difference was consistent across the interviews, but the sources of
difference varied. The presence of a disability or special need was an indicator of difference in my sample. Among the six participants’ children, one child was gifted, another had a speech impediment, and another two had a diagnosis of social anxiety by a physician. Three of these children were also diagnosed with or had characteristics of ADHD, and three were designated as learning disabled by the Ministry of Education. When discussing their child’s difference, parents spoke about it in relation to the traits associated with their child’s diagnosis, rather than the condition itself. The perception of difference was not limited to concerns around disability, mental health or learning issues; it was also apparent when the bullied children crossed gender norms.

This finding supports the existing literature in several ways. First, the fact that all the children of the parents in this study were diagnosed or had a suspected diagnosis of a learning or behavioural disorder aligns with the research evidence that children with learning disabilities and internalizing/externalizing disorders (e.g. social anxiety, ADHD) are more heavily represented in the bullied population (Moura, Cruz & Quevedo, 2011). Second, the fact that parents highlighted their children’s difficulty in social communication (i.e. Sydney’s “intensity”, Frankie’s “cautiousness”, Astrid’s “fierceness”) is also in keeping with the literature that indicates that it is the traits associated with disabilities that are the risk factors for bullying, and not the presence of the disability itself (Rose, Simpson & Ellis, 2016). According to a 2010 meta-analysis, poor social competence is one of the strongest predictors of a child being bullied (Cook et. al, 2010). When Andy talked about her daughter who was diagnosed with social anxiety and a mild tic, she mentioned Frankie’s “cautiousness” and being “not entirely comfortable in her own skin” as factors that impeded her social communication with her peers. And when Aubrey said, “He knows that he’s different. He knows that he struggles, so I think his confidence takes a little bit of a beating sometimes, and I think that makes him an easy target,” she was linking his lack of confidence to his speech dyspraxia and reading disability that made him vulnerable to bullying. In this study, difference in the form of disability reflects the existing body of evidence that children with disabilities are more likely than typically developing children to be involved in a bullying dynamic, whether as a bully or a victim (Rose, Simpson & Ellis, 2016).

Another way that parents viewed difference as a vulnerability was when their children crossed gender or cultural norms. Children who were perceived as atypical in other ways were also viewed by their parents as being vulnerable to bullying by peers.
Previous research has found that students justify bullying victimisation when the victim is perceived to be different from themselves (Forsberg & Thomberg, 2016). An example would be Kirstin’s daughter, Astrid, who was perceived to be different because she broke gender expectations and her peers were quick to chastise her for it. Kirstin believed that her daughter’s style of interacting was more in line with the expectations of little boys than little girls, which earned her the rebuke of her peers. Rather than demonstrating her sadness with tears, Astrid appeared “fierce” on the playground, further violating gender norms around female expression and reinforcing the perception that she was different from other girls. In this way, gendered expectations of normality can lead to bullying (Forsberg, 2017).

Similar to Kirstin, Masha also commented on how her son John was marked as different because he wore “girl’s shoes” to school. Masha shared her belief that her son John felt different because he has two mothers. She stated: “I think he …he’s got a suspicion that we are not a normal family in a lot of ways. Which combined with his complex behavioural stuff makes life a little difficult for him, just in terms of fitting in.” Masha’s concern was that her son may not feel the peer acceptance granted to those coming from a ‘normal family’ as he was the only person in his class with same sex parents. These examples illustrate that parents were concerned about how any difference can put their young child at risk of losing access to peer group membership and acceptance. Ringrose and Renold (2010) use a feminist, post-structural approach to analyse how everyday gender-based expectations and actions are viewed as ‘natural’, and children who do not fall into typical gender-based patterns are marked as gender deviants.

The participants concern that their children did not “fit in” at school suggests that the way they define bullying is broader than the common Olweus definition used by researchers. When parents discussed their children’s “difference”, they situated the bullying problem as one of lack of belonging within the social context at school. Physical bullying was not generally a worry for the parents in this study. Instead, the sense that their child’s difference prevented them from experiencing the benefits of group membership permeated their concerns. The comment by Mary, “I could just see how he didn’t necessarily fit in or wasn’t always included with his peers. So he was left out. And then they might treat him like “Eew”, and then I realized no wonder he feels so bad.”
highlights that when she expressed her concerns about bullying, she was also troubled about him not experiencing a sense of belonging amongst his peers at school.

Dorte Marie Sondergaard (2012, p. 361) has highlighted in her writing the “intimate connection between the feelings of dignity and worthiness and the existential necessity of social embeddedness, of belonging”. She suggests that the Olweus definition of bullying is too narrow to recognize all the nuanced and complex social interactions that exclude individuals “on the road to bullying.” Parents’ emphasis on “difference” aligns with the notion that when their children do not feel like they are a respected member of the group, they feel vulnerable and bullied. Children who are not likeable or who have difficulty gaining access to group membership as a result of their difference may therefore feel bullied, even if there is no intention to cause harm by their peers.

5.3.2. Personal Responsibility

The theme of Personal Responsibility broadly describes and reaffirms that a primary role and responsibility of parents is to keep their child safe from harm. This echoes previous qualitative research on parent’s understanding of their role as a protector and advocate for their children (Hale, Fox & Murray, 2017). The three sub-themes unpack the lived experience of Responsibility: (a) Guilt (b) Mother-Child Relationship Building, and (c) Strategies.

Guilt

There was a belief among parents that they had failed their child in some way by not preventing the bullying, and the expressions of guilt reflected the internalization of responsibility. The sub-theme of guilt is congruent with the notion that a parent’s job is to protect their child from harm. However, what was surprising was the relative absence of overt anger and/or blame toward school authorities. With the exception of one parent who made a formal complaint with the principal and the school superintendent for not doing enough to support kids who are bullied, parents in this study tended to internalize the responsibility.

In examining her role, Mary explicitly said she felt guilty about not having the means to homeschool her son and having to send him to school:
I think I just started to try to figure out how to help myself, and help him. So, counseling, different parenting courses, and just that’s it. And praying, constant counseling, and constant courses to try and figure out what can I do to help him, because it’s up to me. You can’t rely on the teachers. It’s not their job. It’s not the job of other families, so I knew it was really up to me to try and help him. And if I had the means and had the capacity, I would have homeschooled him. I would have pulled him right out. And I had to keep sending him back. And I felt a lot of guilt about that, cause I knew that it wasn’t the right environment for him.

Mary’s statement is worthy of further inspection because in addition to her expression of guilt, she also shares her feelings of powerlessness to protect her son, which is a fundamental responsibility of parenting (Hale, Fox & Murray, 2017). In addition to claiming responsibility for her perceived failure to protect her son, Mary also states, “You can’t rely on the teachers. It’s not their job”. This suggests that the strong sense of personal responsibility is linked to an assumption on her part that the school personnel will not take responsibility to keep her son safe from bullying.

The sub-theme of guilt and internalization of responsibility that emerged in this study can be contrasted with the findings of other qualitative studies of parents of bullied children. In a systematic review of parent’s perspectives on bullying, Harcourt, Jasperse and Green (2014) found that parents believed that schools are not doing enough to prevent or respond to bullying and schools need to take more responsibility. The parents in this study tended not to dwell on what schools could be doing better. One explanation for this discrepancy may be that the inclusion criteria for participating in my study did not require that parents had filed a formal complaint about bullying. In the systematic review, many of the qualitative studies required that the parent had filed a formal complaint of bullying, or there was a report completed by the child or the teacher that independently confirmed whether the child was bullied (Brown, Aalsma & Ott, 2013; Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler & Wiener, 2011). This could explain the difference in the attribution of responsibility between the findings in my study and other research.

The internalization of responsibility exhibited by the study participants aligns well with a psychological perspective of bullying popularized by psychologist Dan Olweus (2001). The Olweus model conceptualizes bullying as psychological phenomenon that can be understood in terms of characteristics of the bully or the victim. By extension, the parent is held responsible for preventing the harm their child incurs, and Olweus was one of the first psychologists to link children’s bullying to their parent’s style of parenting.
(Hein, 2017). The internalization of responsibility also links well to Foucault’s concept of self-discipline. Foucault argued that the expression of power does not have to be visible and coercive, similar to the power imposed by a sovereign king or dictator. Instead, disciplinary power is exerted through regimes of truth and discipline that normalize certain types of discourse and behavior, and stigmatize others (Ball, 2013). When children have difficulty fitting in at school and find themselves the targets of bullies, the responsibility to prevent bullying shifts from school personnel to parents who feel guilty about not doing enough for their child and resolve to become better parents (Herne, 2016). The next two sub-themes of Mother-Child Relationship Building, and Strategies, refer to the indirect and direct strategies that parents employ to fulfill their parental responsibility to protect their child.

**Mother-Child Relationship Building**

The sub-theme of Mother-Child Relationship Building is consistent with previous qualitative research literature that indicates that one of the main strategies employed by parents in response to their child being bullied is to provide emotional support (Harcourt, Jasperse, Green, 2014). Most mothers in this study emphasized the importance of being emotionally responsive and supportive to their children and having more dialogue with them about their challenges. This is shown by Andy’s comment:

> So, I have made my daughters more of a priority in my life. And made sure my focus is really on ensuring they know they are loved, and making sure they know they have a choice, and making sure they know where to go to seek help, making sure they listen to their gut, so if something doesn’t feel right it’s not right. So, just having those kind of conversations. And those are conversations I have never had with my parents.

In a study mapping the experience of being a “good mother”, qualitative researchers have found that dialogue is considered to be one of the essential functions of being a good mother (Narcisco, Relvas, Ferreira, Viera-Santos, Femandes, de Santa-Barbara & Machado, 2018).

The finding of Mother-Child Relationship Building was not unexpected, and it reflects my own experience of feeling a strong responsibility to support my own children. However, it is also important to critically assess any assumptions we make about the role and responsibilities of parents. The sub-theme of Mother-Child Relationship Building as it relates to the higher order theme of Personal Responsibility echoes
another trend in our culture about the role of parents as coaches and counsellors. Historically, the role of parents has been to be the caregiver and the teacher to be the educator (Van Zanten, 2005). With the advent of the parent as partner to the teacher, parents now also have to take on the role of educator. And more recently, parents are also expected to adopt the role of coach and counsellor (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). An example of the increased cultural expectation of parental responsibilisation is reflected in reality television shows like SuperNanny that teach parents how to talk about emotions and coach them on how to have a “makeover” so that they can be better parents. Much of the parenting advice literature hinges on the assumption that a child-centred, positive social and emotional climate is necessary to raise a healthy child (Hoffman, 2009). The finding that the middle class parents in this study experienced guilt and a heightened sense of personal responsibility to provide emotional support needs to be viewed in the context of the cultural expectations of what it means to be a good parent.

**Strategies**

Strategies employed by parents focused on approaches that develop and support themselves or their child. The parents in this study used a wide range of interventions to support their children. These included extra-curricular activities such as taekwondo and climbing classes to build their child’s self-esteem, equine therapy, personal counselling for their child, seeking the services of physicians or psychologists for assessment and medication for their child, and parenting classes and counselling for themselves. In addition to these interventions and the emphasis on mother-child relationship building, parents also resolved to focus on their own behavior so they could be a good role model for their children who were having social difficulties with their peers.

The mothers in this study engaged in constructive action as they strived to become “better parents.” Since deficits in social communication is one of the key predictors of bullying involvement, role-modelling and dialogue are important teaching tools for children with these deficits (McLauchlin, Byers, Oliver & Peppin-Vaughan, 2012). Through their own behavior, their interpretation of events and display of emotions, parents teach children how to cope with stress (Margalit, 2010). When asked what she has found most effective, June reflected on the effectiveness of being a positive role model:
I feel like modeling the reflex that I want my kids to have, which I don’t have but I pretend to. That’s the reflex I want them to have, but it takes a conscious effort to do that, because my first reflex is to want to go and yell at somebody.

The fact that June found it difficult to be good exemplar reflects not only her sense of responsibility, but also the challenge of having to be a consistent role model to a child with atypical development.

The theme of Personal Responsibility is reflected in the finding that parents were choosing strategies that were designed to help their child or themselves cope with or adapt to the existing school structure, rather than attempt to change the class environment themselves. This suggests that parents understand that there are limits on their influence over the classroom environment. When Mary stated, “I just said okay, that’s not my business how they run their classroom and their school. What’s my business is, you know, what can I do?”, she is indicating that her choice to focus on counselling for her son and herself, and parenting courses is within her sphere of control. Semke et al. (2009) investigated the parental involvement of parents under stress, and found that self efficacy is a factor in home based involvement, but not school based involvement. This supports the line of thinking that parents attempt to make change in areas that they perceive that they have control over. Mary’s experience is also consistent with the research literature that indicates that parents of children with ADHD report lower self-efficacy and feel less welcome at school (Rogers, Wiener, Maron & Tannock, 2009).

Upon reflection of the theme of Personal Responsibility, I have asked myself if these parents would have internalized this responsibility to the extent that they did had their children not been perceived to be different. Would they be more willing to hold school personnel accountable for the bullying if their child was typically developing? Do parents of typically developing children experience less guilt when their child struggles with bullying or social relationships at school? My findings suggest that the theme of Personal Responsibility is intertwined with the theme of Difference, and this would be an area that could be explored with further research.
5.3.3. Isolation

The theme of Isolation reflects the parent’s lived experience of feeling alone with the problem of helping their child who is bullied at school. Only one parent made a formal complaint about bullying which was prompted by inadequate supervision due to teacher absences. With the exception of overt cases of physical bullying, parents who approached teachers did not identify their concerns as related to bullying. Parents discussed their concerns in relation to their child’s individual characteristics such as their mental health/learning disability diagnosis, instead of directly informing school personnel that their child was bullied. Even though parents typically did not approach school personnel about bullying related concerns, several parents said that they wished they could have someone to talk to about their child’s situation. The lived experience of parental isolation highlight concerns about the power differential in the parent-teacher relationship and is discussed in the following sub-themes: (a) Uncertainty (b) Fear of label, and (c) Not feeling heard.

Uncertainty

In this study, parent’s feelings of uncertainty emerged in two main ways: (1) uncertainty about whether an action is bullying, and (2) uncertainty about what to do about. The research literature points to the fact that parents are not always aware when their child is bullied (Fekkes, Pijpers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Demaray, Malecki, Secord & Lyell, 2013). In this study, some parents were not able to distinguish between peer conflict and bullying. This uncertainty may be a result of the extenuating factors caused by the child’s perceived difference or disability. Children with ADHD are prone to be involved in bullying as a bully and a victim, and parents have to attempt to understand complex social interactions when they are not physically present to witness them because they happen at school. When asked how she differentiates between peer conflict and bullying, Kirstin responds: “I am really unsure. And that gives me a lot of stress. I don’t have clarity, so I don’t really know when to act.”

The second way uncertainty is experienced relates to the best approach that should be selected once the bullying is established. Previous qualitative research on the parental experience of reporting bullying indicate that parents do not know who to report bullying to, and are generally referred to the school counsellor, even though that position
is not typically associated with school discipline (Brown et. al, 2013). As Andy reports when she realized that her daughter was being bullied by a friend at school:

   It was more of an “Oh shit moment.” Cause I really (--) you know, (--) how do you, (--) how do you deal with this? Do you approach the child? Do you approach the parent? Do you approach the teacher? I didn’t really know how to deal with this. And so, yeah. I was a bit timid, I was a bit scared myself. I have always been a bit of a conflict- avoider myself, and so, it’s been a bit of a challenge.

This uncertainty about what to do is consistent with the research literature that states parents are not always aware of what to do when they realise their child is struggling at school. This lack of understanding of what to do and who to approach has also been experienced by parents in the early stages of recognizing that a child has reading difficulties (Dipeolu, Storlie, Hargrave & Cook, 2015). The policy implication of this finding is that when parents face challenges in relation to their children’s well-being at school, they do not always know about or understand how to access relevant school resources.

**Fear of Label**

The parents in this study were aware that registering complaints about bullying raised the possibility that they might be judged as parents who “stir the pot” or “complain about every little thing.” Hein (2017, p. 1136) argues that the “apparatus of home-school cooperation” about bullying does not facilitate trust between parents and teachers. Instead, parents who raise concerns are viewed as initiating conflict, and teachers fall into a role of distinguishing what behavior does or does not constitute bullying. The assignment of responsibility to respond to the behavior is then based on whether the behavior is considered bullying or not, where teachers are only obligated to respond to instances of bullying. However, what constitutes an act of bullying is not always clearly apparent. Walton (2005) distinguishes between “bullying incidents” (a clear case of abuse of power) and “bullying moments” (a snicker or eye-roll that fall into a pattern of making someone feel excluded). Since the nature of bullying is complex, and bullying is not always immediately visible, it can be difficult for parents to present an arsenal of evidence that “proves” that a child is being bullied (Hein, 2017).

Two parents (Andy and Aubrey) in this study made requests to the teacher about changing table seating arrangements for their child, when they noticed their child was
having difficulty with another peer. Both teachers did not change the child’s seat. This placed parents in a position where they have to now counter a teacher’s decision and risk being “that parent” who risks offending the teacher. This is an illustration of how parents and teachers engage in an “apparatus of home-school communication” where parents are placed in the position of being quarrelsome (Hein, 2017). When explaining why she did not make a complaint about bullying, Andy said:

> Because you don’t want to ruffle feathers. You don’t to really imply that they are not doing their job. Or, I know they are busy, I know they’ve got a million things on their plate. But I think it becomes a little bit delicate, when you’re having that dance. And putting that expectation on teachers, when they actually also don’t know what they’re doing, or how to manage that, or how to approach the bullying situations.

Andy did eventually seek support for her daughter through the school counsellor, but she framed the issue as a need to seek mental health support for her daughter’s anxiety rather than suggest that she had concerns about the classroom climate. This fear of alienating the teachers means that while parents need the support of teachers, they simultaneously find it hard to be honest with them about their true concerns over bullying.

**Not Feeling Heard**

Parents also experienced a sense of isolation when they feel their opinions or approaches to supporting their child are not valued. Parents who raise concerns want to feel that their opinion matters and will be taken into account when decisions are made regarding their child. However, a lack of communication on the teacher’s part can lead to feeling patronized, as Aubrey expressed: “Yeah, I feel like I am getting a pat on the head. And being told I’ll look into it. And I don’t feel like we’re being listened to all the time.” This finding echoes other qualitative research reports that parents want to know what actions are being taken by school personnel in response to their concerns, but do not find that teachers kept them informed (Hale, Fox & Murray, 2017).

Another observation in this study is that parents who endorsed a medical model are more likely to receive support and feel that they are being listened to than parents who disagree with a deficit based medical model. Masha’s son is diagnosed with anxiety and ADHD. She reported that school personnel have listened to their concerns and she attributed this in part to her own recognition that her son has developmental
issues that she needed to address. Masha had her son assessed after receiving a letter from the school about his disruptiveness and he has been on ADHD medication since grade one, which has helped him integrate into the classroom environment. In this manner, Masha accepted the suggestions of the school professionals and is validated as a parent who acts in the best interest of her child.

The privileging of “professional” knowledge over parent’s perspectives is illustrated in Mary’s experience when she objected to the classification of her child according to a medical model of disability. Mary refused to get her son assessed for ADHD after being asked to by staff at her son’s school. She felt that she was blamed for not disciplining her son effectively and providing appropriate treatment, as a medical model would suggest:

And then grade 4, grade 5 was terrible. A new counselor, a new principal, and they just were convinced he had ADHD, and that he .... I wasn’t being strict enough. So when I could see that there was a lot of blame and a lot of “You need to do this. And you need to do that.” Like telling me what to do.

Mary rejected the label of the educators and chose a strengths based approach to parenting. She spoke about how she attempted to get teachers to “see the goodness” in her son because she did not believe that medication was the answer. She hoped that schools would have the “willingness to support kids without needing to have them diagnosed.” Mary’s parenting approach aligns with a strengths-based perspective rather than a disability model, but her experience was that school personnel did not respect her values or validate her strategies as an appropriate way to parent her child. Previous research has indicated that women who were reluctant to medicate their child were accused of being negligent or in denial, which makes it difficult for them to discuss any alternative approach to the medical model of treatment (Lalvani, 2014). Mary’s experience of not feeling welcome and having her opinions valued by school educators is similar to the findings in other qualitative research on the experience of mothers of children with ADHD (Malacrida, 2001).

Lalvani (2014) argues that the notion that parents are “in denial” about their children’s differences invalidates parents views that they may reject dominant interpretations of disability. In Mary’s case, because she refused to have her son diagnosed for ADHD, he does not have an IEP, which in turn places limitations on the
type and level of support she can receive for her son. Parents with alternative interpretations of their child’s difference are therefore not heard and have to seek support outside of the school system, which further isolates them from school resources. This finding is congruent with the literature that shows that parents of children with ADHD feel less welcome and supported by their children’s schools and teachers than parents of children without ADHD (Rogers et al., 2009).

5.4. Strengths and Limitations

As a research method, phenomenology offers particular strengths and limitations (Giorgi, 2012). The primary strength of phenomenology is that it gives the reader a deeper understanding of what it is like to experience a phenomenon. Understanding fosters meaningful dialogue. By collecting a rich description of the experiences of the participants, my hope is that the findings of this study bring to light the essence of the parental experience and that this understanding will suggest meaningful pedagogical changes within BC’s inclusive education system.

One of the main limitations of the phenomenological research method is that it can be difficult to establish reliability and validity, and researcher bias is difficult to assess. Though some may view the lack of formal validation techniques as a limitation, van Manen (2014, p. 348) argues differently:

The validity of a phenomenological study has to be sought in the appraisal of the originality of insights and the soundness of interpretive processes demonstrated in the study. No predetermined procedure such as “members’ check” or “triangulation of multiple methods” can fulfill such demand for validating a phenomenological study.

Throughout this project, I adopted an attitude of reflexivity. I asked myself how my own background has influenced the research process. I shared my background as a student and a parent so that the reader can assess how my history has influenced the creation of knowledge in this project.

Unlike a positivist science research method, phenomenology does not seek to make generalizations (Creswell, 2007). Any transferability of these findings must consider the participants who were included. In my sample, all the participants were relatively well-educated, English-speaking mothers, who had a familiarity with the North American education system. This was not unexpected since I recruited primarily through
my personal networks that included many people who work in the public school and post-secondary education environment. What was surprising was that all the participants had children who were diagnosed or had a suspected diagnosis of a learning disability or a behavioural diagnosis such as ADHD or anxiety. Any discussion of the findings must take into account the characteristics of the participants and their children. Another important consideration is that while I did ask parents about their child’s experience at school, I did not independently verify whether the children were bullied. All of the participants volunteered for the study and believed their child was bullied at elementary school. Because phenomenological research is about the study of essences, it was important to focus on how the phenomenon was experienced by the parents (Van Manen, 1984).

5.5. Implications of the Findings

Recognizing that these findings are not generalizable, the themes that emerged in this study suggest several areas for parents and educators to pay attention to. The findings suggest that educators, parent advisory councils and teacher education programs review their existing policies and practice in light of the following: the limitations of the Olweus definition of bullying; the need for belonging as a guiding principle in education; the need for relevant information for families; and the need for a meaningful dialogue on the power dynamics that play out in the education system.

Recognize the Limitations of the Olweus Definition of Bullying

The Olweus definition of bullying that characterizes bullying as an intentional, repetitive act of aggression against a less powerful person or group is a research-based definition that is widely accepted in academia and forms the basis of educational policies on bullying (Eriksen, 2018). However, strict adherence to this definition risks the possibility that other forms of harassment are more likely to go unnoticed. Dorte Sondergaard (2012, p.361) calls for a new conceptual framework that considers how the “production of contempt and dignity” place students on the road to bullying:

The mechanism seems to work this way: if it is agreed upon that some individuals, activities or things are odious, creepy and disgusting, and that others are seriously cool, this makes it possible for a group of individuals to draw together in fellowship around the shared assessment that ‘we’ and ‘our’ interest are not creepy and disgusting. Perhaps this strategy
may grant ‘us’ security for a while. Perhaps ‘we’ can be strong enough in our shared contempt to ensure that the hunt for something to despise will not target us and what we represent. Perhaps we can anticipate having the opportunity to fix the terms of what can be hit, thereby securing our own long-term social belonging.

Though the fixed definition of bullying according to Olweus provides clarity, it does not attend to the nuances of “contempt production” (Sondergaard, 2012). As the findings suggest, students who are perceived to be different are at risk of being the targets of contempt. When educational policies narrowly define bullying, parents with concerns about belonging and social exclusion have difficulty using a shared language with educators to communicate their concerns. One recommendation is that educators and parent advisory councils actively engage in a dialogue on the areas of harassment that are not easily captured under existing school policies on bullying. Illuminating the blind spots of the existing definition of bullying, would create a shared understanding and language for school personnel and families on sensitive but important topics that parents currently avoid discussing.

**Recognize the Need for Belonging as a Guiding Principle in Education**

John Dewey was a prominent psychologist who viewed education as a social enterprise rather than an individualistic endeavor, and emphasized social interaction as a basis for learning (Osterman, 2000). According to Dewey, the caliber of an education is reflected in the extent to which an individual can contribute to and be part of a community of students and teachers. Being a member of a community means that one experiences a sense of belonging within the group. This philosophy places the onus on schools to develop a sense of community and pay attention to the socio-emotional needs of individuals. In contrast, another more prevalent view is that a sense of belonging is a reward for mastery or compliance, not the prerequisite for engagement (Kunc, 1992). The attitude of granting acceptance and belonging only after compliance or mastery is achieved can be especially difficult for children of atypical development.

The parents in this project alluded to their children’s separation from their peers on account of their feeling different. Moreover, this separation reinforced the idea that they did not belong to the wider group or community. The themes of difference and isolation point to the primacy of a need to belong by all students and their parents (Allen & Bowles, 2012). Belonging refers to a sense that the child (and the parent) are
significant within the school community. The findings of this study support a recommendation that school personnel engage in ongoing professional development to promote action that promotes a positive school climate that is supportive of all students (Osborne & Reed, 2011; McNeal, 2015). The involvement of parents in school life is an important way to foster a sense of belonging at school (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie & Waters, 2018).

**Be Proactive in the Provision of Information to Families**

The theme of Personal Responsibility suggests that parents and educators focus on a within-child understanding of the determinants of bullying. This is compounded by the fact that when accessing support from the school system, children are assessed using a medical model that uses an assessment of their deficits to acquire support. The parents in this study wanted information and resources and invested significant amounts of time and money searching for resources outside the school. Previous research confirms that parents and teachers benefit from the support of educational psychologists who collaborate with them to support their children’s learning and well being (Mohangi & Archer, 2015; Rogers, et. al, 2009). The finding of Personal Responsibility suggests that school counsellors and school psychologists should proactively engage with teachers and parents. Parents (and teachers) would benefit from knowledge of strengths based approaches that build social cohesion for children with special needs (Armstrong, 2017; Pimm, 2012).

**Have Meaningful Conversations about Implicit Bias**

The theme of Isolation challenges parents and educators to have courageous conversations about the bias and power dynamics built into the education system (Hein, 2017; Markstrom, 2011). This study found that parents avoided directly addressing their concerns over fear of being typecast as a troublesome parent. Parents were worried that they would be perceived to be challenging the teacher’s authority and that would result in them undermining their child’s functioning in the class. Other research has highlighted that teachers also do not feel free to express their concerns due to a pressure to conform to standards of “professionalism” and parental demands (Bourke, Lidstone & Ryan, 2015). Moving forward will require a genuine understanding of difference and an opportunity to dialogue about differences. If one accepts that “schools are in the people
business”, care must be taken to have meaningful conversations that invite rather than refuse the voices of all the stakeholders (Kohler-Evans, Webster-Smith & Albritton, 2013, p.21).

Educators also need to be aware that certain populations are at a higher risk of being marginalized (Scorgie, 2015). For example, parents of children with ADHD are less likely to feel welcome at school (Rogers, Wiener, Marton & Tannock, 2009; Malacrida, 2001). By understanding this reality, educators have the potential to make schools a place where all children and their families are willing to collaboratively invest in children’s education. This will require a constructive dialogue on the power dynamic inherent in the education system and how access to social support can be distributed more equitably. The findings indicate that parents are reluctant to approach school officials and therefore educators ought to open a meaningful dialogue on the barriers to home-school communication.

5.6. Conclusion

I began this project with the intention of giving a voice to the experience of parents whose children are bullied. During the project, I witnessed parents bravely care for and advocate for their children. The findings of this study suggest that the essential experience of having a child who is bullied in elementary school can be understood through three inter-connected themes (i.e. Difference, Personal Responsibility, and Isolation). Parents perceive their child as different from their peers, which enhances their vulnerability in the school setting. This perception of difference makes parents feel an acute sense of personal responsibility to help their child cope with and adapt to the school environment. In their attempts to find support and resolution for their children, parents feel isolated from the social support they require to assist them in their parental role. Every one of the parents in the study has my deep gratitude for participating in this important project.
References


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Harcourt, S., Jasperse, M. & Green, V. (2014). “We were sad and we were angry”: A systematic review of parents’ perspectives on bullying, Child Youth Care Forum, 43, 373-391


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Appendix A.

Post for Facebook or Online Discussion Forum

Do you have concerns that your child has been or is being bullied at elementary school?

Volunteers needed to take part in a research study on Parent Perspectives on Bullying in Elementary School

As a volunteer participant in this study, you would participate in a confidential private interview for approximately one hour, and asked questions about your perspectives and experience of having a child who is bullied at elementary school. Total time commitment is expected to be between 60-90 minutes. In appreciation for your contribution, you will receive a $20 Starbucks gift card.

To volunteer or receive more information, please contact Arlette Stewart and you can receive more information about this study. Arlette is a graduate student in the Educational Psychology program at SFU, and she can be reached by email or phone.
Appendix B.

Poster for Email or Notice Board

Invitation to Participate in Research

Project Title: Parent’s perspectives of bullying: How do parents understand and respond to their child’s victimization in elementary school?

Hello Parents,

My name is Arlette Stewart. I am a graduate student in the Educational Psychology program at Simon Fraser University, working under the supervision of Dr. Lucy Lemare. My research interest is in the experience of parents who have a child who is a target of peer aggression in elementary school, and I am completing this project as part of the thesis requirement for my program.

If you are a parent whose child (aged 6-12) has been bullied, you are an ideal candidate to provide information about the perspective of parents on this important topic. My goal is to describe and understand parent’s understandings of bullying and learn more about the strategies they use to support their child.

If you participate in this study, I will meet with you for approximately an hour to ask you questions about your perspectives and experience. A brief survey will be completed to collect demographic information. Your confidentiality will be respected and your identity will be protected. All participation is completely voluntary.

Your participation will be a valuable contribution to an understudied area of research on parent’s perspectives on bullying. Please contact me if you have any questions, would like more information or are interested in participating in the study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Arlette Stewart

Educational Psychology student, Simon Fraser University
Appendix C.

Survey: Demographic Information

Research Project: Parent’s perspectives of bullying: How do they understand and respond to their child’s victimization in elementary school?

This study is about parent’s perspectives about bullying. I am interested in your experience as a parent who has a child who is a target of bullying at school. The first part is a short survey requesting information so I have some basic demographic understanding about your family context. Please fill in as much as you feel comfortable. The second part is a series of questions I will ask you, which should take about an hour to complete.

Demographic Information on Parent:

- Pseudonym (preferred): __________
- Age: ___________
- Gender: ___________
- Ethnic group/ race: _______________

Please indicate your relationship to child:
- Biological parent __________
- Step-parent: _______________
- Primary guardian: __________

Please indicate your highest level of education:
- General Equivalency Diploma (GED)/ High school graduate
- Some college
- College/ Trade school diploma
- Bachelor’s degree
- Post-graduate education
- Other _______________

What is your total annual household income?
- Less than $25,000
- $25,000- $50,000
- $50,000- $75,000
- $75,000- $100,000
- More than $100,000
Demographic Information on your child:

- Pseudonym (preferred): __________
- Age: __________
- Gender: __________
- Ethnic group/race: __________
- Primary Language spoken at home: __________
- Any other language spoken: __________

Family Composition: Please check off any other members of your household

- Child’s other parent _________________
- Step-parent _________________
- Siblings: please provide age & gender _________________
- Step-Siblings: please provide age & gender _________________
- Other: _________________

Diagnoses: Please indicate if you child has received a diagnoses from a registered professional for any of the following conditions:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: __________
- Autism Spectrum Disorder: __________
- Learning Disability: __________
- Other: __________
Appendix D.

Interview Protocol

This study is about parent’s perspectives about bullying. There are two parts. The first part is a short survey to collect relevant demographic information. The second part is an interview.

I am interested in your experience as a parent of a child who you believe has been bullied at school. The purpose is to get your perspective on what constitutes bullying in the elementary school context, to hear about your experience with this area, and to understand how you responded to this situation. I am especially interested in what strategies you feel have been effective.

There are no right or wrong answers. I would like you to feel comfortable enough to say what you really think and feel. In this interview, expect me to ask for details and examples so that I can ensure that I fully understand your position. We will speak for approximately one hour.

Informed Consent form: Please sign the consent form, and let me know if you have any questions.
Survey: Please fill out as much of the survey as you feel comfortable.

Recording instructions: This interview will be recorded. The purpose of the recording is so that I can get all the details of what you say. All comments will be confidential. The final report will contain select comments using pseudonyms only.

**Interview and recording will start after confirming consent form is signed.**

Questions

1. To start off, please tell me a bit about your child. How would you describe her?
2. How would you describe your child’s overall experience at school?

Research Question: How do parents understand bullying?

3. What is bullying to you?
4. What do you think are the differences between a bullying situation and a case of peer conflict?
Research Question: What do parents believe are the reason their child is/was bullied?

5. Can you tell me about your child’s involvement in a bullying situation at school?

6. What do you think it is that makes your child a target?

Research Question: How do parents understand their role in relation to their child’s involvement in bullying?

7. How did you discover that your child was being bullied?

8. How did learning about the bullying make you feel?

9. Were there any expectations you had for yourself when it came to helping your child on this issue?

10. How has your relationship with your child been effected by the bullying he/she was involved with at school?

Research Question: How does their understanding of bullying affect their strategy?

11. What was your response when you realized your child was being bullied?

12. Are there any actions you have tried to help your child? How do you think this will help? (These could be actions taken at home or in the community.)

13. What have you done with school personnel to help your child?

Research Question: What are their perceptions of the efficacy of those responses?

14. Do you think your strategies are helping? Are you satisfied?

15. What has your greatest challenges with trying to find a solution for your challenge?

16. If you could have the support you needed, what would it be?

17. Anything else to add?

**If you know of any other parents who would be interested in participating in this study, please consider sharing with them the details of the study. Anybody interested can email me directly.
Appendix E.

Informed Consent

*This consent form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask the investigator.*

**Title:** Parent’s perspectives of bullying: How do they understand and respond to their child’s victimization by peers in elementary school?

**Ethics Application Number:** 2017s0539

**Study Team:** This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement to complete a Master of Arts degree in Educational Psychology, in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University.

Principal Investigator: Arlette Stewart, Educational Psychology program, Simon Fraser University. She will be conducting the study, interviewing participants and writing the final report to be defended before a committee.

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Le Mare

**Purpose:**
The purpose of this study is to understand how parents describe and understand bullying when their child is a target of bullying in elementary school, as well as to know more about how they choose strategies to assist their child. This includes understanding the beliefs that parents have about what constitutes bullying and why it occurs, and knowing about the challenges and/or successes they have with resolving bullying situations faced by their child at the elementary school.

This information will be summarized in a descriptive report that showcases the experience of parents, which can be used to inform future research into interventions to reduce bullying.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection:**
To be recruited for this study, you must have a child aged 6-12 who you believe is/ has been bullied in elementary school. You should feel comfortable describing the details of your experience of learning about and responding to a child who is a target of bullying, and having that conversation audio recorded. Participants should be over 19 years of age and reside in the Lower Mainland.
Parents are not eligible for participation in this study if their child is in kindergarten or is being home-schooled.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**
You will be invited to participate in a face-to-face interview on the SFU Burnaby campus, where you will be asked questions to find out your perspectives on bullying, and your personal experience with responding to a child who is a target of bullying. Through a short survey, you will be asked for demographic information (e.g. your gender, age, education level, etc.). The interview will take approximately one hour to complete and will be audio recorded. After the interview is transcribed and summarized, you will be sent a written summary by email of the key impressions made by the researcher and asked to confirm if the written summary accurately reflects your view expressed in the interview. This review and response will take approximately 15-30 minutes of your time. You are free to provide your feedback, or end your participation at any time.

An audio recording of the interview will be required for a complete and accurate review and analysis of the participant’s perceptions.

**Your Participation is Voluntary**
Participation is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be free to withdraw at any time for any reason. Any data collected up to that withdrawal point will be destroyed and not used in the study.

**What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**
Your confidentiality will be respected. The only personally identifying information collected will be your name and contact information, which will be used to facilitate communication between the researcher and participant, but will not be associated with any data. All survey and interview information collected will be labeled with a pseudonym to protect personal identity.

Audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as the interview is transcribed. All transcribed interviews and researcher’s notes will be kept on a memory stick in a locked cabinet in a locked office on the SFU Burnaby campus.

**Are There Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**
The risks of participation are intended to be none or minimal. Since you will be asked personal questions, there is a small risk of feelings of emotional discomfort such as frustration or sadness. To mitigate this, you can choose what information you are comfortable revealing. As mentioned, all your information will be kept strictly confidential. Where individual participant quotations are used in the final report, I will ensure that the selected quotations or references data does not suggest participant identities.
There are no direct benefits to the participants in this project. It is anticipated that this research may assist in giving voice to the experience of parents, and that you are contributing to an understudied field of research on parent’s perspectives on bullying.

**Will I be paid for my time?**

There is no payment for participating in this study. As a token of appreciation, all participants will receive a $20 gift card to Starbucks.

**What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

No one except the researcher and the supervisory committee will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers to the questionnaire or the interview. To protect identity, pseudonyms will be used on the short survey form and transcribed data. Digital voice recordings will be destroyed as soon as the interview is transcribed. All data collected, including the survey, interview notes, and interview data will be saved on a memory stick in a locked filing cabinet, in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office belonging to the principal investigator at SFU. It will be stored for two years, after which it will be permanently erased.

**Acceptance of this Form:**

Your completion of this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.
To consent to participate in this research project, please sign below:

Name of Participant: ____________________________
Signature: _____________________________________
Date: _________________________________________

Name of Researcher: Arlette Stewart
Signature: _____________________________________
Date: _________________________________________

Questions/Concerns: If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant or concerns with the research project, please contact:

• Dr. Lucy Le Mare, Professor, Faculty of Education.
• Dr. Jeff Toward, Director, Office of Research Ethics