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## Preventing Bullying of Students with Disabilities: Teachers' Definitions of Bullying and Use of Anti-bullying Strategies



Jenny C. Chiappe, PhD., Associate Professor & James Koontz, Ed.D., Faculty Special Education Program, College of Education, California State University, Dominguez Hills

## Abstract

Students with disabilities are at a higher risk of victimization compared to their peers without disabilities, yet limited research has explored how general education teachers address this in inclusive classrooms. This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to investigate teachers' strategy use and disability category, views on social exclusion, the relationship between strategy type and bullying type, and the role of bullying definition completeness as a moderator. A total of 114 teachers completed the survey, and six participated in follow-up interviews. Results indicated that participants were less likely to use individual level strategies. Completeness of bullying definition moderated the relationship between years of experience and strategy use. Common themes included varied reasons for bullying, lack of support, and a tendency to overlook social exclusion. Implications include improved training and additional support to address the bullying of students with disabilities.

**Keywords:** bullying, students with disabilities, teachers, inclusive classroom

### **Preventing Bullying of Students with Disabilities: Teachers' Definitions of Bullying and Use of Anti-bullying Strategies**

Students with disabilities are more likely to be bullied than students without disabilities (Hartley et al., 2015). Bullying or victimization is defined as repeated exposure to negative actions from one or more students, typically when there is an imbalance of power between individuals or groups (Olweus, 1993). The prevalence rate of bullying among elementary students with disabilities is 24.5% (Blake et al., 2012). Over time, students with disabilities experience higher rates of bullying compared to their peers without bullying (Rose et al., 2016). School must foster a sense of belonging and inclusion, especially for marginalized groups such as students with disabilities. Bullying can hinder a student's ability to learn, making it essential to establish a positive school climate. A positive school climate is important in preventing bullying and encouraging students seeking help when bullied (Thapa et al., 2013). This article addresses the sociopolitical turmoil that may be associated with recognizing the victimization of students with disabilities in school settings. At a time when support structures for students with disabilities are being re-evaluated, the importance of preparing all teachers to foster safe and inclusive classroom environments is greater than ever.

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### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is essential in advancing inclusive education by ensuring students with disabilities receive appropriate services and are educated alongside their peers. IDEA (2004) emphasizes students with disabilities should have meaningful access to the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible. This inclusive approach helps create a diverse, equitable, and supportive learning environment for all students. Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive learning environments (Shogren et al., 2015), underscoring the importance of enhanced training and resources to realize the inclusive vision set forth by IDEA.

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### **Teacher Role**

Teachers are essential in creating inclusive environments and foster the webs of care that their students need when they come to school. When asked to define bullying, teachers were more likely to include verbal and physical bullying but often omit social exclusion, intention, power imbalance, or repetition—elements recognized in the literature as key components of bullying (Naylor et al., 2006). This may lead to missed opportunities for intervention. A teacher's likelihood intervening in a bullying situation

is based on their confidence in resolving the issue, their perception in the seriousness of the bullying, and their level of empathy toward the victim (Yoon, 2004). Teachers with more than 25 years of teaching experience were more likely to work with both bullies and victims compared to teachers with less than six years of experience (Burger et al., 2015). Approaches to addressing bullying included fostering self-esteem, providing choice making, and facilitating a meeting to address the bullying. Creating a web of endurance among teachers and students is critical in changing the academic and social landscape of education for students with disabilities.

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### **Bullying of students with disabilities**

Students with disabilities who have experienced a prior bullying incident are more likely to be bullied in the future (Blake et al., 2012). Factors that contribute to bullying of students with disabilities may include a lack of age appropriate social skills, dependence on adult for assistance, and educational placement (Rose et al., 2011). Teachers create opportunities for interaction between students with and without disabilities and teachers need to be cognizant of potential exclusion based on groupings (Lindsay & McPherson, 2012). Additionally, teachers can provide structured social opportunities for students with

with disabilities to learn and practice social skills (Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012).

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### **Multi-level Supports**

Anti-bullying strategies should include a multi-tiered approach to address the diverse needs of students (The Academies, 2016). The School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) framework involves posting consistent rules and creating a positive school environment (Good et al., 2011). By implementing SWPBS alongside a bullying prevention program, a middle school observed a 41% decrease in office discipline referrals for bullying (Good et al., 2011). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (The Academies) defines the universal level of SWPBS as one in which all teachers conduct social-emotional lessons and teach behavioral expectations, while counselors model how to respond to bullying. SWPBS is effective because bullying often occurs outside of the classroom (Ofe et al., 2016), particularly in unstructured environments such as playground and restroom (Shogren et al., 2015).

Classroom strategies include lessons on communication, empathy, and how to identify and respond to bullying. One curriculum in use is *Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention*, which teaches skills such as communication, empathy, emotion and regulation, and problem solving (Espelage et al., 2015).

The individual level consists of intervention for victims and their parents (Cecil & Molnar-Main, 2015). School psychologists reported using individual counseling to address bullying (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Specific individual strategies included in the *Handling Bullying Questionnaire* involved telling the bully to “cut it out,” talking to counselors and parents, and discussing the matter with colleagues (Bauman et al., 2008).



Multi-level strategies promote social justice for students with disabilities by providing access to both academic and social inclusion with school communities. However, there is a paucity of research on how teachers address the bullying of students with disabilities in inclusive elementary classrooms. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used in the study. It began with collection and analysis of quantitative data, which then informed the qualitative phase (Creswell, 2014), addressing the following research questions:

(1a): How do strategies used by general education teachers to address bullying of students with disabilities differ by disability category?

(1b): What are teachers' views on the different types of bullying, specifically social exclusion?

(2a): When teachers address the bullying of students with disabilities, what is the relationship between the type of bullying (direct and indirect) and strategy type (school, class, and individual), while controlling for demographic information?

(2b): How does a teacher's definition of bullying moderate the relationship between the years of teaching experience and individual level strategies used for indirect bullying?

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### Methods

The study was completed in two phases (see Figure 1) and the benefits include quantitative analysis followed by further probing the results in the qualitative data (Ivankova et al., 2015).

## Participants

The participants in the survey included 114 general education teachers, with 86.8% identifying as female, mostly from across California. The race/ethnicity breakdown of the sample was 55.4% White, 14.9% Hispanic/Latino, 11.4% Asian, 3.5% Black or African American, 8.8% biracial/multiracial, and 1.8% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Teachers had varying years of teaching experience ( $M = 13.7$ ;  $SD = 8.5$ ) (see Table 1). The sample comprised 55.3% third grade teachers, 0.9% third and fourth grade combination teachers, 20.2% fourth grade teachers, 2.6% fourth and fifth grade combination teachers, and 20.2% fifth grade teachers. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 67 years ( $M = 40.9$ ;  $SD = 10.1$ ). Most participants (94.7%) worked at public schools. Ninety three percent of teachers indicated they have SWPBS as a resource at their school.

Out of the sample of 114 participants, six completed individual interviews. Interview selection was determined by the convenience of the location and the participant's grade level. The interviewed teachers included 4 female teachers and 2 male teachers from 3 different school districts in Southern California. There were 4 third grade teachers, 1 fourth grade teacher, and 1 fourth and fifth grade combination class teacher.

## Procedure

Recruitment involved meeting with principals at public elementary schools in Southern California, using snowball sampling, and contacting teachers through publicly available email addresses. Interviews were conducted one on one until saturation was reached.

## Measures

The completeness of teachers' bullying definitions was coded based on the bullying definition by The Academies (2016). Each teacher's definition was coded and converted to a percentage. Participants rated ten strategies: change seating arrangement, refer to counselor, communicate with parents, refer to school rules and expectations, teach lessons on what to do when you are bullied, ask the special education teacher for support, refer to classroom rules, handle it myself, refer to the administrative team, and teach communication and social skills to student(s) with IEP. They rated how often they used each strategy in the last 12 months

The survey also focuses on the educational landscape between teacher and students when teachers observe bullying situations and the interactions among students with and without disabilities. Participants were asked if they observed bullying in the last 12 months. If they answered yes, they were presented with six

answered yes, they were presented with six questions that asked them to describe a bullying.

The interview protocol used an ethnographic, semi-structured approach to understand group perspectives through in-depth interviews and observation (Creswell, 2014). The interview questions expanded on the survey results and included questions for examples from their classroom. Teachers received a gift card for their participation in the interview.

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### Data Analysis

Data were downloaded from Qualtrics and transferred to *IBM SPSS Statistics*. The main analysis focused on the survey data using Pearson chi-squared test, ANCOVA, and moderation analysis. Forty eight participants observed bullying within the last 12 months. Due to the limited number of disability categories listed by participants, disabilities were coded as Specific Learning Disability, SLD (n = 17) and non-SLD (n = 31). For the qualitative component, the transcripts were coded on Dedoose. Descriptive coding was applied to create the codes (Miles et al., 2014) and a *priori* codes based on the literature. Ten codes were created in Dedoose, and thematic analysis was used to integrate the content and derive meaning in the codes (Bazeley, 2013). Inter-rater reliability was established through two tests with a

Cohen's kappa of 0.61 to 0.80, indicating substantial agreement (Viera & Garrett, 2005) with a second coder.

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## Results

### Strategies differ by disability category

Forty-nine participants indicated they observed a student without a disability bullying a student with a disability in the last 12 months. The participants mainly selected bullying situations involving students with SLD (n = 17). Other disabilities identified included Emotional Disturbance (n = 5), Speech and Language Impairment (n = 4) and Autism only (n = 2). Additionally, participants indicated 18 students had more than one disability. Due to the limited number of disability categories, disabilities were coded to 0 for SLD (n = 17) and 1 for non-SLD (n = 31).

Since participants described a limited number of strategies used in the bullying situations, a Pearson chi-squared test was conducted to assess whether teachers used different strategies (individual level strategies versus multiple strategies) based on whether a student had a SLD or non-SLD. The test indicated no statistically significant association between disability and strategy  $\chi^2(1) = .24, p = .62$ . There were no differences between the types of strategies used and the type of disability. Cramer's V was not significant at  $p < .05$

which means there is no significant association between disability and strategy (see Table 2).

Participants did not report relational bullying in the bullying situation examples. However, the qualitative data revealed a theme consistent with past research: social exclusion is often subtle, and participants tend to address it by talking to students (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Ms. Liu noted that social exclusion is easy to miss because “you wouldn’t see it outright like a fist fight or anything, a constant teasing, because they’ll be really subtle.” Participants also mentioned having a suspicion or a “Spidey sense” when observing students who may be conspiring or planning to bully. Mrs. Benny explained, “I’m going to keep an eye on it and I’m going to keep you close and I’m going to talk with you informally so I maybe get a better sense of what’s going on.”

The strategies participants used included asking students to allow others to join the group or identifying classroom champions—popular students who could take the lead in including the student who is left out. Ms. Liu said:

From the beginning, constantly just reinforcing the respect and the fact that you may not have to get along with everybody, but at least try to give respect to everybody ... also when we do collaboration, try to get everybody to work together in

in some other situation that you would ideally would never see them [in]. I think, as teachers, we kinda make a choice of which kids we want to place where so they understand the idea of collaboration.

Participants would then praise the students who acted as role models to encourage other students to include their peer.

### **Relationship between the type of bullying and strategy type**

A repeated measures analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to examine the relationship between the type of strategy and type of bullying. Covariates included years of teaching experience, anti-bullying training support, and observation of bullying in the last 12 months. Since the years of experience with students with disabilities variable was highly correlated with years of teaching experience, the variable that included years of experience with students with disabilities was removed.

While controlling for years of teaching experience, training support, and whether bullying in the last 12 months was observed, the interaction between type of bullying and type of strategy was not significant  $F(1, 665) = .16, p = .86$ . The model without the interaction effect was tested. There was a significant association between type of strategy and frequency rating  $F(1, 665) = 7.56, p < .05$

but not between the type of bullying and frequency rating  $F(1, 665) = 1.63, p = .20$ . Subsequent tests were conducted using pairwise comparisons with a Bonferonni correction to determine how strategy level differed. The results showed that teachers were 0.274 times more likely to use school level strategies on average compared to individual strategies ( $p = 0.02$ ). Likewise, teachers were 0.275 more likely to use class level strategies on average than individual strategies ( $p = 0.02$ ). However, there was no significant difference in average use between classroom strategies and school level strategies ( $p = 1.00$ ) (see Table 3).

### **Bullying definition moderates the relationship between years of experience and individual level strategies**

To test the moderating variable of completeness of bullying definition, the two-way interaction with years of experience and completeness of bullying definition was tested. For the rating at the indirect bullying individual strategy level use, years of experience-by-completeness-of-bullying interaction was significant  $b = -0.002, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.003, -0.001], t = -2.70, p < .01$ . The relationship between years of teaching experience and strategy use was moderated by completeness of bullying definition. PROCESS in SPSS created conditional tables for the values of the moderator at the 16th, 50th, and 84th percentile. When completeness of teacher bullying definition is low (10%), there was a significant positive relationship between

years of teaching experience and strategy level use,  $b = 0.046, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.018, 0.075], t = 3.26, p < .01$ . However, there was not a significant relationship between years of teaching experience and indirect bullying individual strategy level use when completeness of teacher bullying definition was at the mean or high (one standard deviation above the mean) (see Figure 2 for interaction graph). Strategy use for participants with high completeness of their bullying definition were similar regardless of their years of teaching experience. At approximately 20 years of teaching experience, the frequency of strategy use is similar for participants with low and high completeness of bullying definition. Additionally, participants with less than five years of experience and low completeness definition were less likely to use strategies.

Similarly, the qualitative data showed themes that demonstrated how participants viewed bullying as multi-faceted but did not have the resources to appropriately support students with disabilities. The participants stated students with disabilities were more likely to be bullied based on their differences in abilities. Ms. Liu said one of her students with RSP support

**“feels [she’s been bullied] because other students see her differently. She’s always just been the one.”**

In addition, participants discussed the need for more training and support in bullying prevention, reinforcing the quantitative findings related to the completeness of bullying definition and years of teaching experience. Four participants stated that they had not received any additional training to effectively support students with disabilities beyond the one course required for their credential program. The supports participants provided included students' accommodations such as more opportunities for wait time and repetition.

Participants discussed administrative support by sending students to the office when bullying occurs but the types of support differed. Mr. Cooper added:

Sometimes when you get administration involved or parents involved, they make it more than what it really was. So, I feel like I just want to make sure that the students feel comfortable with it being handled.

Nonetheless, participants said they would try to "handle" bullying situations before referring to administrators. Handling bullying in their classroom included using behavior contracts and talking to the students individually, in small groups, or whole groups when necessary.

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### Discussion

Teachers and administrators play a crucial role in creating a positive school climate that embraces the diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly for students with disabilities. A community of care where people come together in webs of endurance is essential for students with disabilities. Bullying prevention is a focus on school reform (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013), but it is also important to highlight the strategies teachers are using within their classrooms when bullying arises. Teachers tend to observe more behavioral problems for students who engage in direct bullying compared to students engaged in relational bullying (Smith et al., 2012), which could explain why direct bullying is easier to address. In addition, teachers who receive training feel more confident addressing bullying (James et al., 2006). The completeness of bullying definition and years of teaching experience played a role in addressing indirect bullying. Novice teachers did not feel they were prepared to handle classroom management, discipline situations or differentiate instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This knowledge is critical to support teacher and student interactions when addressing bullying.

In addition to students having social supports, research also discusses the importance of incorporating SWPBS with anti-bullying programs (Good et al., 2011). In order to use multi-tiered supports, all

stakeholders at the same school site should agree on how to address bullying and implement the anti-bullying program (Yell et al., 2016). However, instead of referring to other staff, participants tended to “handle it” themselves. Participants discussed that they would pull the students aside and talk to students individually. Similarly, the questions on the *Handling Bullying Questionnaire* indicated specific strategies such as talking to the bully and telling the bully to “cut it out” or telling the victim to ignore it (Bauman et al., 2008). This further speaks to the need for all school community members to collectively address bullying on their campuses so that they create a stronger social fabric of inclusion and community care amongst students.

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### Limitations

Intersectionality was explored by attempting to understand bullying situations and the characteristics of both the bully and the victim. The first limitation is that the strategies teachers use may change based on a range of characteristics. Factors such as race, gender, and ability, as well as the location and duration of the bullying, were not considered, and bullying may not follow a linear pattern. A second limitation is that teachers mainly identified students with SLD in the bullying situations section of the survey. Nonetheless, students with developmental disabilities are more likely to experience

social exclusion compared to other disability groups (Andreou et al., 2015) and teachers may use different strategies for students with more significant disabilities. The third limitation is that participants rated strategies based on frequency but did not rate strategies for their appropriateness or effectiveness in resolving bullying.

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### Implications and Future Directions

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) released a position statement on creating a safe and positive climate in school for students with disabilities, which recognizes the first step to eliminating the bias that school leaders and teachers may hold (CEC, 2020). Future teacher preparation and professional development can be informed by the knowledge gained from this study. Potential topics include developing a consistent bullying definition, increasing training on how to address bias-based bullying, when a student is bullied due to different social identities (Mulvey et al., 2018)—strategies to help students with disabilities acquire pro-social skills, and teaching how to use accommodations and modifications while using a multi-tiered approach to addressing bullying. These types of training can be incorporated into inclusive education training programs to ensure all students have academic and social access at their school.

Practical implications include ensuring the implementation fidelity of anti-bullying interventions (Rawlings & Stoddard, 2019) and providing appropriate accommodations to students with disabilities. Classroom time should include teaching and practicing communication and social skills to address social miscues by students with disabilities (Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012).

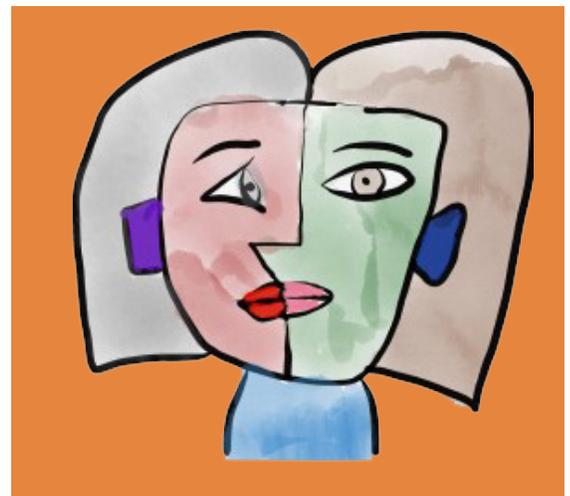
Future directions include expanding the participant pool to include special education teachers and other stakeholders to better understand the support is provided to students with disabilities to prevent bullying. Additional research questions should address the school context, the effectiveness of various strategies, and the diversity of ability levels and placement settings. Furthermore, teachers' responses may vary based on teacher and student characteristics (Yoon et al., 2016); future studies should examine how these characteristics influence the responses to bullying of students with disabilities. Cyberbullying in elementary schools also need to be examined, as the prevalence rates have increased from 16.7% in 2016 to 26.5% in 2023 (Patchin & Hinduja, 2024).

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### Conclusion

Students with disabilities represent a marginalized group within schools, making it

essential to promote to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion to foster a positive school climate for all learners. To meet the academic and social needs of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, teachers must receive the adequate support and training. In turn, the webs of endurance that teachers create are affected by the sociopolitical turmoil in schools as it relates to students with disabilities. Inconsistencies in bullying definitions can create challenges in addressing bullying situations and implementing strategies. To better support teachers to address bullying situations, ongoing training for all members of the school community is necessary. The trainings should focus on supporting students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and implementing a range of strategies tailored to different forms of bullying, in order to build a more inclusive school community. The trainings may generate a new social fabric of change amongst students and between teacher-students.



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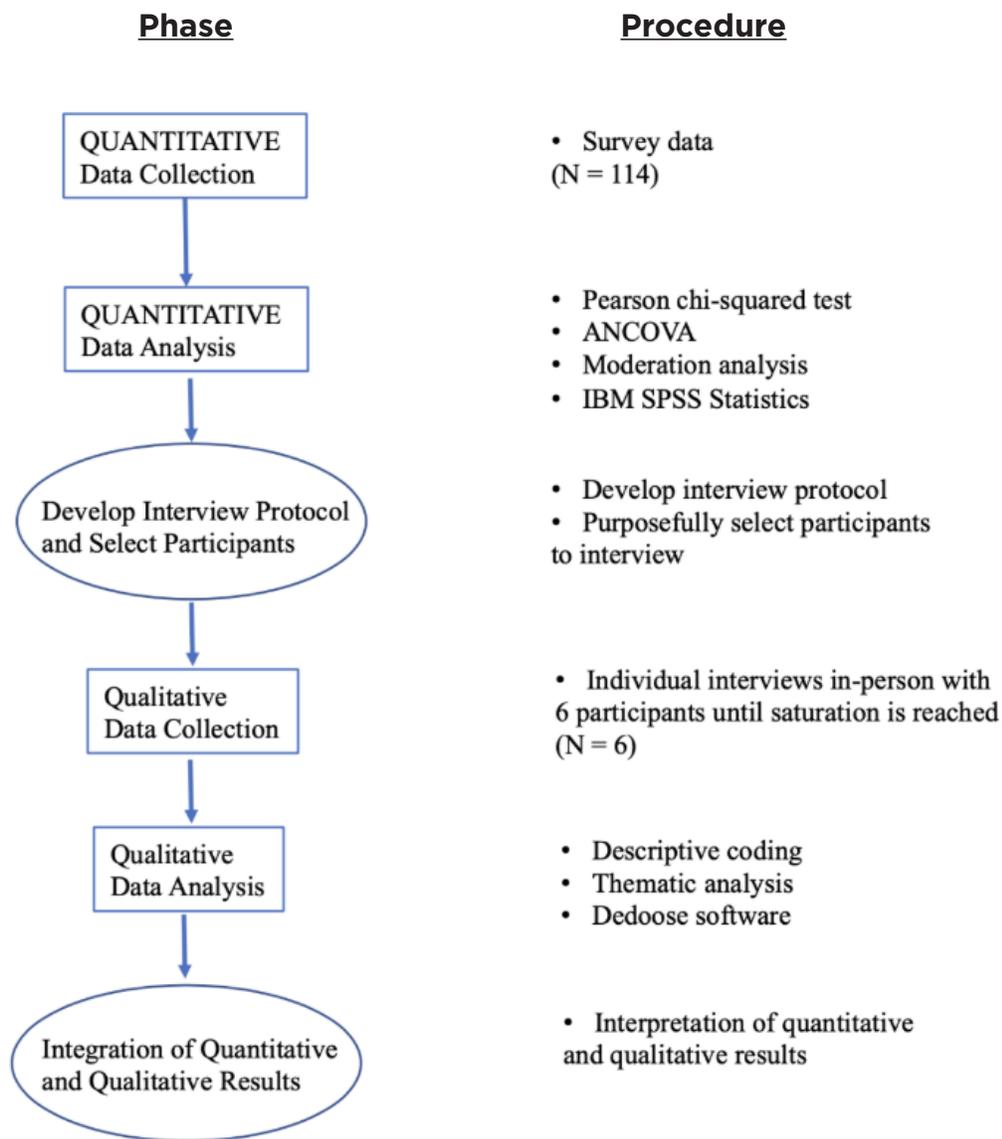


Figure 1. Procedure for Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design

## Moderation Analysis

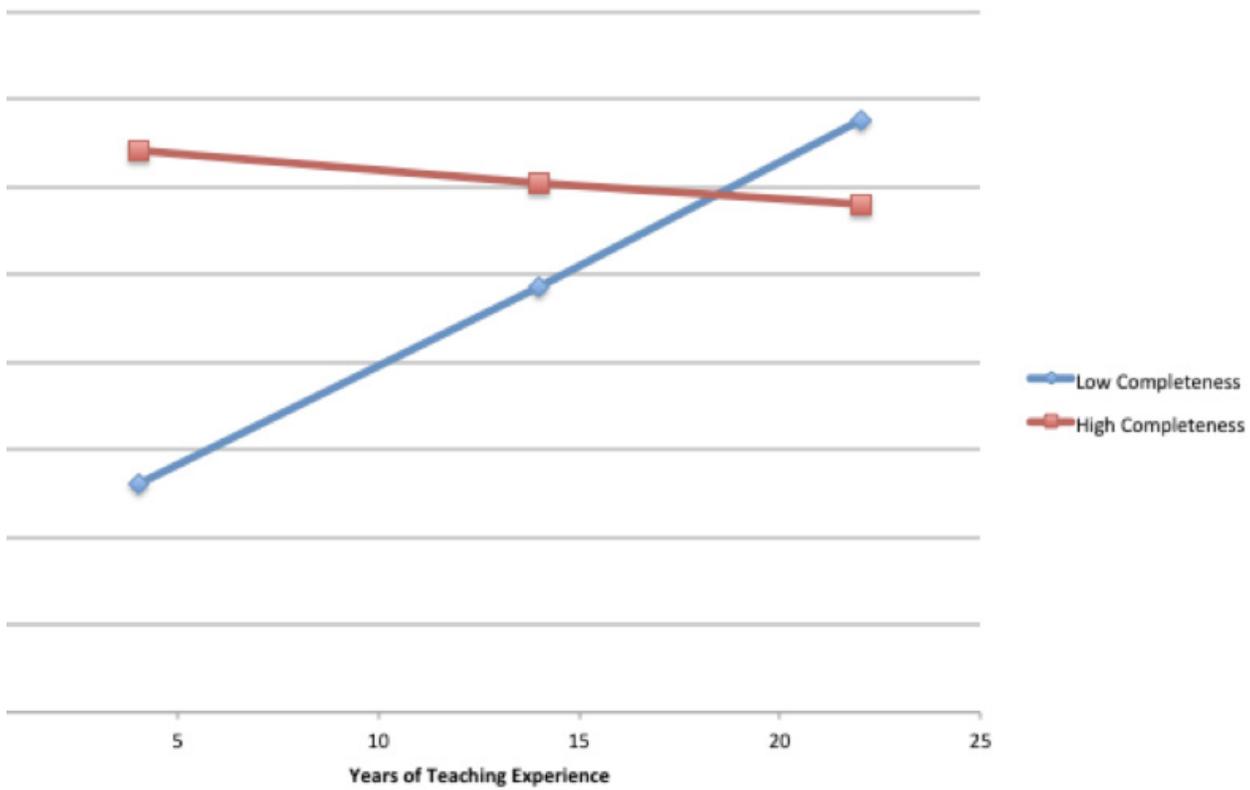


Figure 2. The Interaction between Years of Teaching Experience and Strategy Use on Completeness of Bullying Definition

**Table 1***Survey Participants Demographics*

| <u>Race</u>                         | <u><i>n</i></u> |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| White                               | 62              |
| Hispanic/Latino                     | 17              |
| Black or African American           | 4               |
| Asian                               | 13              |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | 2               |
| Biracial/Multiracial                | 10              |
| Prefer not to answer                | 6               |
| Teaching experience                 |                 |
| 1-5 year                            | 13              |
| 6-10 years                          | 15              |
| 11-15 years                         | 20              |
| 16-20 years                         | 22              |
| 21-25 years                         | 19              |
| 26-30 years                         | 6               |
| 31-35 years                         | 1               |
| 36-40 years                         | 1               |

*n* = 114

**Table 2***Results for Testing the Association between Disability and Strategy*

|                              | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|-------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | .242  | 1  | .622                  |
| Likelihood Ratio             | .243  | 1  | .622                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .236  | 1  | .627                  |
| N of Valid Cases             | 40    |    |                       |

*Note.* 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.75

**Table 3***Pairwise Comparisons*

|        |            | Mean<br>Difference | SE   | Sig   | CI   | CI  |
|--------|------------|--------------------|------|-------|------|-----|
| Class  | Individual | .275               | .081 | .002  | .08  | .47 |
|        | School     | .001               | .081 | 1.000 | -.19 | .20 |
| School | Individual | .274               | .081 | .002  | .08  | .47 |
|        | Class      | -.001              | .081 | 1.000 | -.20 | .19 |

*Note.* Bonferroni correction