



Teacher Identity and Bullying—Perspectives from Teachers During Bullying Prevention Professional Development

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of qualitative data collected from general and special education teachers ($n = 36$) participating in a four-module professional development training focused on preventing bullying among students with disabilities. Analysis was driven by Braun and Clarke (Qualitative Research in Psychology 3:77–101, 2006) six step process for thematic analysis. We report on four major themes: (1) the effect of teachers' identities, including race, gender, age, and cultural and social backgrounds; (2) teacher perspectives of the role of parents in bullying prevention; (3) teacher views concerning bullying between students and best practices for responding to reports of bullying in schools; (4) the influence of sociocultural factors on bullying in classrooms. Taken together, these themes suggest that teachers reflect on their role as the “kind of teacher” that prevents bullying, which has implications for the students within their classroom. Results inform best practices for the design and delivery of instructional programs and workshops that consider teacher identity and create environments that better support teachers in preventing and responding to bullying in their classrooms.

Keywords Bullying prevention · Students with disabilities · Teacher identity · Professional development

The construct of “teacher identity” serves as a conceptual and analytic tool for examining how individuals within dynamic social spheres engage in constant (re)construction of understandings of their “teacher self.” American linguist and discourse analyst, James Paul Gee (2000), describes identity as:

The ‘kind of person’ one is recognized as ‘being,’ at a given time and place, which can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or unstable...all people have multiple identities connected not

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to their ‘internal state’ but to their performances in society. (p. 99)

As an analytic frame, an individual’s teacher identity is at once a personal (individual), social (group), and dynamic (dependent on time and context) understanding (Pishghadam et al., 2022). Identity is both a political construction and a philosophical framing, differentiated from explicit teaching “roles” but not explicitly differentiated from a teacher’s sense of “self” (Olsen, 2012). Understanding the importance and implications of teacher identity is vital for improving and sustaining effective teaching practices related to both academic and social goals (Pishghadam et al., 2022). More specifically, special education teachers work with students that have specific academic and behavioral goals and are more susceptible to be involved in adverse social experiences such as bullying (Rose et al., 2011).

Questions related to teacher identity allow teachers to reflect, respond, and revisit questions related to their teaching selves (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018). Teachers, like all individuals, make sense of identities through a process of comparing and contrasting their identities to other identities, including ones they wish to enact (Stevens, 2016). Broadly speaking, this process is when a teacher thinks of past teachers in order to emulate or avoid certain qualities, values, habits, or traits that they identify as being aligned with either a “good” or “bad” teacher. It should be noted that this process of evaluating which identities are worthy of emulating or rejecting takes place at an almost unconscious level for most teachers (Stevens, 2016). Alsup (2006) observed tensions in narratives aligning their “student” and “teacher” selves, personal beliefs, and current learning, as well as taught “best practices” and what they were experiencing as part of their field experiences.

Teacher relationships with students are widely studied in the special education field as a best practice (e.g., Sointu et al., 2017). Positive teacher-student relationships have been shown as a protective factor for bullying (Iotti et al., 2020). Facilitating awareness of teacher identity allows teachers to detect differences between their own lived experiences and their students’ lives, furthering their relationships. This is especially important for teachers to recognize a potential deficit mindset as they make sense of the similarities and differences of the students they teach (Hyland, 2009). Recognizing tensions and alignments between teacher identities and the identities of the students they serve is an important aspect of understanding teacher identity (Olsen, 2008a). Incorporating teacher identity into investigations of teaching processes and methods, including behavioral interventions connected to addressing and preventing bullying involvement, can serve as a powerful tool for researchers focused on bully prevention. This study examines teacher perspectives on the role of identity in bullying prevention as teachers

completed professional development modules on bullying prevention and intervention.

How Teachers and Their Identities Impact Bullying

A commonly understood definition of bullying, along with clearly identified steps toward intervening in bullying behavior, are key first steps to reducing bullying in schools (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Volk et al., 2017). In addition to this fundamental knowledge, bullying prevention education efforts should support the construction of a teacher identity where teachers are confident in their ability to prevent/stop bullying as well as build positive relationships with students as a protective factor (Blain-Arcaro et al., 2012; Migliaccio, 2015). Selves and identities are “predicted to influence what people are motivated to do,” as well as how people think and make sense of themselves and others, including their ability to regulate themselves and those around them (Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 3). Teachers participate in these types of professional development opportunities, at least in part, to make sense of their role as “the kind of teacher” who can prevent bullying incidents (Andrà et al., 2019).

Social identity theory focuses on individual self-concept shaped by membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Our focus on teacher identity uses social-ecological frameworks for a broader view of various influences on identity formation to acknowledge the dynamic and intersectional nature of identities through multiple contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It is important to understand teacher identities within the broader cultural and social backgrounds where teachers are situated (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018). For instance, teachers may construct their identities along the axis of teaching a specific grade level, being a public school employee, a member of a profession, or a specific type of teacher (e.g., special education teacher). Additionally, teachers may identify as a specific race, gender, age, and cultural background which are likely to influence how they perceive and respond to bullying incidents (Yoon et al., 2016). It is also vital to consider that teacher identity is dynamic rather than static in nature and may vary across different contexts (Pishghadam et al., 2022). The personal and social identities that inform teacher identities are embedded within the reciprocal and dynamic nature of social ecology. Using a social-ecological lens, the embedded contexts of individual teachers, students, and parents interact within global systems (macrosystem), social and government institutions (exosystem), and family, community, and social networks (microsystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These interactions influence the formation and maintenance of teacher identities, and “the inextricable link between the personal and professional selves of a teacher must be taken

into account in understanding teacher identity” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; p. 180). Thus, we examine teacher identity and its relation to preventing and responding to bullying in schools.

The current study is informed by a socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Espelage, 2004). The socio-ecological model is a systems theory that expands on the complexity of factors that interact with one another to contribute or prevent certain conditions like bullying involvement. This exchange is often represented as concentric layers of direct and indirect interactions on relationships and behaviors (Espelage, 2004). The layers range from individual characteristics to broader societal factors, and the interactions between layers are bidirectional, due to the nested framework of contextual systems (Migliaccio, 2015). For example, the microsystem denotes the direct engagements and surroundings that influence the person (i.e., parents, educators, household). Subsequently, the mesosystem involves how elements within the microsystem engage with one another (i.e., the connection between a parent and a teacher). To understand how teachers may prevent bullying, this framework facilitates the examination of teacher’s individual (e.g., identities), interpersonal (e.g., relationships with students), and social (e.g., biases) factors as they shape their responses to bullying intervention and prevention strategies among students with disabilities (SWDs) in an online professional development (PD) program.

Current Study

The current study examined lived experiences of teachers as they completed online professional development modules. Throughout these modules, teachers completed a combination of content-based and open-ended questions. The content of the professional development modules focused on educating teachers on bullying involving SWDs and emphasized the role of bias in bullying, including the importance of self-reflection on identity and the role of intersectionality in bullying. Based upon module content and previous literature, we anticipated that teachers would bring up their own identities and experiences as central to their relation to bullying within their classroom.

There is a lack of professional development (PD) and teacher training when it comes to preventing bullying within and among SWDs (Allen, 2010; O’Brennan et al., 2014; Raskauskas & Modell, 2011). This gap exists despite the fact that SWDs are at a greater risk of bullying perpetration and victimization (Gage et al., 2021; Rose & Gage, 2017; Rose et al., 2011; Yell et al., 2016). With active learning being a key component of effective PD, it is important for researchers to understand how teachers negotiate their identity to create experiences that connect to teachers’ lived

experiences, interests, and beliefs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Teachers in this study were part of a pilot evaluation of the DIability Anti-buLLying (DIAL), an online professional development training with four modules and a coaching component. DIAL was informed by focus groups on teachers’ lived experiences identifying and intervening in bullying, as well as several theories and frameworks including socio ecological theory, social emotional learning, Multi-Tiered System of Support, and intersectionality. These frameworks were used to inform the content and the reflection prompts given to participants (see Appendix). This paper is an analysis of participating elementary school teachers to reflection prompts from the first two modules. Module 1 provides foundational knowledge to differentiate bullying perpetration and victimization from peer aggression among all students and especially SWDs. Additionally, this module provides a brief introduction to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans and introduces global risk factors of bullying (i.e., factors that increase student risk for bullying involvement). Module 2 expands on the Module 1 material and deepens knowledge on disability classifications and eligibility criteria. Furthermore, this module provides content on risk and protective factors for bullying involvement with SWDs, details the Child Find process to identify youth with or at risk for disabilities, and provides information about disability characteristics and supports and prejudice associated with their intersectional identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation) and how it impacts bullying involvement. Details of these modules are described in depth elsewhere (Espelage et al., 2023).

Specifically, this study was driven by two central research questions: (1) What are teacher’s perceptions of and experiences with bullying as they complete bullying professional development modules?; and (2) How do their identities and experiences and their students’ identities and experiences influence their perceptions of bullying prevention? This focus on perceptions and identities is important, as teacher PD that improves teacher self-efficacy and perceptions or feelings of preparedness for intervention has been found to prevent bullying (Novick & Isaacs, 2010). Additionally, higher self-efficacy, which may be tied to the ways a teachers’ identity intersects with their understanding of their role in the bullying prevention process, has been shown to improve teacher confidence in the effectiveness of intervening in bullying scenarios (Bradshaw et al., 2007).

Desimone and colleagues (2002) identified content focus as one of five core features for maximizing the effectiveness of PD. *Content focus* has been found to increase teacher self-efficacy (Main et al., 2015). Teachers are more comfortable teaching and engaging with subjects that they understand more deeply. As such, our focus on evaluating the content-based and open-ended reflection responses of the DIAL

PD modules aims to analyze current teacher knowledge and experience of SWD-specific bullying, as well as better understand how teacher and student identities shape bully prevention. In doing so, future implications for bully-based prevention and research for SWD can be identified.

Method

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the PI's institution. All participants completed an informed consent prior to completing pre-intervention surveys and beginning the DIAL training modules. Per the IRB protocol, all participants received a US\$50 gift card as compensation for each module they completed and received compensation for surveys they took for the larger project. Completion of the module prompts was voluntary, and participants could skip any prompts and still receive their compensation. Participant data were de-identified after it was exported from the learning management system where the DIAL training modules are housed.

Research Team Positionality

Part of a larger, multi-institution research team focused on bullying prevention, supporting students with disabilities, and teacher professional development, the authors are deeply committed to educational equity, especially for students with disabilities. That said, as education-focused researchers, this team has experienced the toll bullying takes on this population and their teachers firsthand in the classroom and via various research settings, all of which motivated the creation of the DIAL training and the focus on the role of teacher identity in bullying prevention. As lead researchers, Author 1, Author 2, and Author 3 cleaned the transcripts of relevant data, developed the codebook, and monitored other coders throughout the coding and analysis process. Author 1 identifies as white cisgender heterosexual woman and was previously a special education teacher. Author 2 identifies as a white cisgender heterosexual neurodivergent woman who has experiences as a special education student as well as a special education teacher. Author 3 identifies as a white cisgender Palestinian woman with ADHD and has worked as a mental health counselor-in-training in school settings. Of the remaining authors, all assisted with coding, interpretation of codes, and writing and editing the manuscript. Of the authors, one identified as disabled and nine identify as nondisabled. Eight of the authors identify as female and two of the authors identify as male. All authors are school-based researchers on bullying prevention and intervention. Our understanding of our own biases is informed by the experiences we have within our training and experiences in the education system. As such, the research team's emic and

etic perspectives shaped our methodological lens throughout the course of this analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017). Our emic status of insiders familiar with the education system and working with students with disabilities is complemented by our etic status as researchers connected to the wider scientific literature.

Participants

Qualitative reflection-based learning check responses were collected from elementary school teachers participating in the DIAL training ($n=36$). Participants were teachers working across three different elementary schools in one of the largest urban school districts in the USA. The majority of students in this school district identify as Hispanic (70%) and 9% of students have IEPs. Across the three schools, the number of students in each school ranges from 597 to 757, the number of full-time teachers ranges from 41 to 42, the percent of students with disabilities ranges from 8 to 24%, the percent of students receiving free/reduced lunch ranges from 44 to 74%, and the percent of students who identify as an ethnic minority ranges from 90 to 97%. Of the participants, 86.1% were general education teachers, and 13.9% were special education teachers. There were six Kindergarten teachers, six first grade teachers, six second grade teachers, eight third grade teachers, nine fourth grade teachers, and six fifth grade teachers. Some participants taught across multiple grade levels. Participants identified as 80.6% Caucasian, 66.7% Hispanic, 13.9% African American, 11.1% Haitian, 2.8% Asian American, and 2.8% other race (checked all that apply). Participants could select all races and ethnicities that described them, and therefore do not equal one hundred percent. 83.3% of the participants were female. Participant experience in the classroom ranged from 4 to 34 years, with an average of 13 years teaching. Table 1 showcases pertinent demographic information.

Data Collection

Reflection survey questions were administered within each of the training modules in order to allow participants to demonstrate understanding of module content, as well as to reflect on their own connection to the material. Importantly, question prompts were formulated to showcase individual participant applications of the material, especially within the context of connecting learning material to classroom management strategies and encouraging teachers' beliefs about bullying to promote greater empathy toward victims and increase their confidence in handling bullying behaviors (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Responses to question prompts ranged from a few sentences to multiple paragraphs. Each participant's responses were exported by the learning management system via a CSV file in a de-identified format.

Table 1 Participant demographics

<i>N</i> = 36	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	6	16.7%
Female	30	83.3%
<i>Race/Ethnicity^a</i>		
Asian American	1	2.8%
Black or African American	5	13.9%
Hispanic	24	66.7%
Native American or Alaskan Native	0	0.0%
White or European American	29	80.6%
Other race (please specify)	1	2.8%
Haitian	4	11.1%
<i>Education</i>		
High school diploma/GED	0	0.0%
Some college	0	0.0%
Associate's degree	0	0.0%
Bachelor's degree	13	37.8%
Master's degree	23	62.2%
PhD	0	0.0%

^aPercentages exceed 100% as some teachers selected more than one choice

Data Analysis

To generate themes and patterns within the data, researchers utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process for conducting a thematic analysis. Notably, Braun and Clarke's (2006) process stands out as a practical, albeit iterative approach to qualitative analysis and has been applied within the field of teaching and learning research, specifically (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). First, to become familiar with the data and gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' responses, the first and second author checked

transcripts for accuracy and cleaned transcripts by removing identifiable information (e.g., mention of student names or educator positions). All responses were then compiled and arranged in a matrix format; all co-authors were then able to read through and familiarize themselves with the data. Next, to avoid the common pitfall of using interview questions—in this case, question prompts—to define themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013), the research team intentionally looked across the data set to develop initial, meaningful codes rather than developing codes for a specific question. Third, the research team reviewed transcripts again to source key themes, connections, and any insight that did not fall within these themes. Then, after a meeting to discuss themes, the team developed themes (i.e., School-, Parent-, Teacher-, and Student-level contexts), and subthemes into a codebook, operationalizing with working definitions and key examples (see Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5). In general, themes represented overarching ideas expressed by participants, whereas subthemes explore more detailed patterns that were engendered to describe similar perspectives shared.

This process aligned with the fourth and fifth steps in Braun & Clarke's model and was iterative, rather than prescriptive or formulaic in nature and helped to keep the research team to review and refine themes based on identifiable distinctions, checking applicability to the overall data set (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Specifically, the research team continued reviewing transcripts to source key themes and any insight that did not fall within these themes. This process helped to keep the research team organized and provided a systematic way to ensure saturation was met, especially during the fourth and fifth steps of the process. Saturation is understood here to be non-probabilistic and is undergirded by one's ability to reach a certain level of consensus (Guest et al., 2006). Moreover, consensus theory, first posited by Romney and colleagues (1987), suggests that within a particular domain or cultural context (i.e.,

Table 2 Role of individual teacher-level identities and experiences for bullying prevention

Subtheme	Examples
Teacher identity shaped by lived experience	I am a white male with a learning disability. As I work, I am able to relate to most individuals with disabilities
Teacher identity shaped by (dis)comfort level with bullying	The main people my intervention would target would be students in general. As a teacher, I have direct contact with them and can make an impact at the front line. Considering that any student especially those with disabilities can be bullied, all teachers should be involved in the anti-bullying movement. Teachers have the ability to influence students and alter their behavior. Therefore, they can use their connection with students to educate them on the harm that bullying causes. They can help them to develop empathy not just for those with disability but everyone in general. A teacher's role is to educate, why not educate about bullying as well?
Teacher identity shaped by (dis)comfort level with disability	I have had students with a disability in my class and sometimes it's difficult to explain to the little ones that they have a disability and not to react to some of the things they do that might not be "normal"

Table 3 Role of interpersonal relationships with parents and caregivers for bullying prevention

Subtheme	Examples
Parents play a role and influence bullying	Parents play a vital role in having conversations at home with students that may potentially identify possible bullying behaviors in school that their child experiences and/or witnesses
Parent knowledge about bullying is varied, needs education	Establish a better school to home communication with parents regarding bullying. Provide parents with workshops, trainings, and resources to educate themselves on this topic.
Teacher-parent communication shaped by (dis)comfort and competence	Is it likely for students with disabilities to bully other children with disabilities? How do I deal with parents that are in denial?

Table 4 Role of interpersonal relationships with and between students for bullying prevention

Subtheme	Examples
Complex interactions between students' contribute to bullying	I remember my students becoming resentful and questioning why this student got whatever he wanted especially when he was having a breakdown. And they would make comments because to them he got to throw a fit and the teacher would give him whatever he wanted
Sharing identities with students shapes teacher's bullying perspectives	I live in the community where I teach, and I share similar immigration history so I can relate to the difficulties of culture shock. I can also remember how some students bullied the recently arrived so I'm quite sensitive to how one set talks to the students just arriving to our country
Student identities and biases shape teacher's bullying perspectives	I have a student with a 504 plan who does not have any friends. Other students avoid him and don't really care to play with him. He does have some social skills issue that may encourage other students to avoid him. In addition, his interests are different from the norm. Therefore, he is avoided.

an elementary classroom) that small sample sizes can be efficient and accurate given that participants have a certain level of expertise in the given domain (i.e., teaching experiences). Consensus theory also assumes that: (1) an external

truth exists about the domain in question; (2) that individuals answer independently from one another; and (3) that the questions posed encompass a coherent domain of knowledge (Guest et al., 2006). For this study, the first assumption is

Table 5 Role of broader school context and macrosystem for bullying prevention

Subtheme	Examples
School definitions shape bullying prevention	My school's definition of bullying is when a student is constantly harassing, name calling and/or consistently bothering the same student at multiple times
School resources influence bullying prevention	Our school has many resources for anti-bullying/prevention for students with disabilities. We have our school counselor, a mental health specialist, and an extensive plan to protect these individuals in our school
School policies influence bullying prevention	Bullying prevention in our school consists of a few strategies to try and minimize bullying. The student would be contacted by the counselor to discuss what is going on and the parent would also be involved. A behavior plan could be set up between the parent and the teacher to make sure the behavior does not continue...If necessary the student may be switched classrooms to prevent the bullying
School policies influence teacher bullying intervention	...I am not aware of a school wide bully prevention plan. I do know [redacted] schools have a no tolerance for bullying...The intervention in place currently and report to the counselor and she speaks to the students involved and tries to get to the root of the problem

met in that the external truth about teacher identities and their relationship with the content in question are collected through the research team's interpretation of teacher meanings as expressed through their reflections. In response to the second assumption, prompts were administered to all participants in the same manner during individually completed module sessions. Participants completed modules and responded to question prompts on their own, using their personal learnings, beliefs, and perspectives. We believe that the structured nature of the reflection questions and their alignment with the learning objectives of each module clarify the parameter of experiences within the domain we were aiming to capture. Finally, after using the generated codebook to extract results based on each code, the research team worked to craft a narrative that described our findings in an evocative and compelling manner.

Results

To better understand the role of teacher identity in bullying experiences and prevention, the results are organized using a modified socio-ecological framework, where teachers reciprocally impact and are impacted by their environments, their schools, their students, their students' parents, and their own experiences in early life. Four key themes were identified: (1) the impact of teachers' identities, including race, gender, age, and cultural and social backgrounds; (2) teacher perspectives of the role of parents in bullying prevention and their interactions with parents; (3) teachers' views concerning bullying between students and their identity as a bullying preventionist; (4) the influence of sociocultural factors on bullying in classrooms. Quotes from participants have not been altered.

Individual Identities and Experiences: Sameness and Difference

As teachers progressed throughout the bullying prevention modules, many reflected on the roles that their own identities and personal experiences play within the classroom. Some teachers referenced their racial identity, ethnic identity, gender identity, or identity as a person with a disability as impacting their work in bullying prevention. Importantly, these experiences are not shed as the teacher steps within the classroom, rather they impact the way the teacher views themselves and how they interact with students. For instance, one teacher acknowledged that their own experiences with bias-based bullying contributed to their desire to join the teaching profession, "I have been teaching for 20 years, I am a 4th grade Math, Science, & SS teacher. I became a Teacher because I was a victim of bullying throughout my academic life (Elementary, HS

and even in the University due to my ethnicity)" (Teacher 8, 4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic). The same teacher later expanded on how their background impacted their view of their identity now—as an advocate for those of similar backgrounds: "Because I am Latina, daughter of immigrants, have learning disabilities and was part of a lower socio-economic class, I was bullied as a child, and this experience has made me an advocate for those who are, like me, at-risk of being bullied" (Teacher 8, 4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

Some teachers discussed the effect of sharing identities with students. This teacher is able to relate to the unique experiences of her students, which causes a sensitivity to bullying:

I live in the community where I teach, and I share similar immigration history so I can relate to the difficulties of culture shock. I can also remember how some students bullied the recently arrived so I'm quite sensitive to how one set talks to the students just arriving to our country. (Teacher 29, 2nd grade, Female, White/Hispanic)

Teachers were highly aware of their identities in relation to their students. A teacher describes how being a person with a learning disability allows them to relate to students with disabilities, "I am a white male with a learning disability. As I work, I am able to relate to most individuals with disabilities" (Teacher 19, Kindergarten and 1st grade, Male, White). Teachers found connections between their own experiences and how they approach their work as educators preventing bullying, drawing on both their identities and personal connections to bullying. As Teacher 22 (3rd grade, Female, White/Hispanic) states, "My experience of these identities helps me understand how other students with the same identities may be at risk of being bullied." Another teacher described the ability to recognize bias having experienced it themselves: "My culture, individual biases, and the fact that I come from immigrant parents allows me to be able to identify the same experiences of bias that I experienced as a child." (Teacher 15, 4th grade, Female, White).

Importantly, many teachers do not share the same identities and experiences as their students. One teacher reflected on how their lack of experience with bullying may make them less sure of bullying happening within their classroom:

I think I am aware of bullying when it has or is happening in my class. However, I was never a victim of bullying, so there have been times when things have been brought to my attention that I may not have caught on to, or that I may not be sure I believe. I make it a point to address every situation, and to

listen to every side. (Teacher 28, 3rd grade, Female, White/Hispanic)

This lack of experience leads to an uncertainty which is addressed through examining every potential bullying situation carefully. This may be different from the teachers with first-hand experience of bullying who felt more comfortable immediately identifying bullying behavior based upon their own childhood experiences and their intersecting identities.

Interpersonal Relationships with Parents: Roles and Challenges

Teachers, and their identities, exist with a broader social ecology. Crucially, teachers bring their identities to their work with students. Additionally, teachers' identities are embedded in their relationships with students' parents or caregivers and their view of the role of parents in bullying prevention. "Parents play a vital role in having conversations at home with students that may potentially identify possible bullying behaviors in school that their child experiences and/or witnesses" (Teacher 13, 4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic).

This perspective on the importance of parental influence is perhaps shaped through teachers' own experiences with bullying.

In my classroom, bullying is not allowed. We discuss this many times throughout the year. We have a 0 tolerance. As a child, I was bullied one year and know firsthand what it feels like. I had a supportive support system at home and it did not affect me later in life but I do know that is not the case for many other children. (Teacher 24, 1st grade, Female, White/Hispanic)

Teachers view parents as playing a role in bullying prevention and in mitigating the impact of bullying, but also as potential sources of bias for their children. "Though I teach the little ones, kindergartners, they too experience some microaggressions I have picked up on thus far. Because they are so young, the main source of where they could pick up on these things is in their households" (Teacher 36, Kindergarten, Female, Black).

Some teachers felt comfortable addressing parents with bullying concerns, "...as an educator I feel confident and comfortable talking to the students and willing to involve administration and parents to help Jason (a character from an example scenario presented in the professional development module)" (Teacher 5, 3rd grade, Female, White/Hispanic). Other teachers described working with parents in bullying prevention as a potential challenge. One teacher identified knowledge concerning bullying as a potential challenge toward working with parents: "A challenge we have had is educating parents on what is and what is not

bullying" (Teacher 13, 4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic). Individual parents possess diverse beliefs about what constitutes bullying behavior, which may lead to a disconnect between teacher and parent. Teachers perceive certain repeated behaviors as bullying, while parents may hold differing views. This aligns with another teacher's question: "How do I deal with parents that are in denial?" (Teacher 28, 3rd grade, Female, White/Hispanic). In describing a real bullying scenario from their work, another teacher writes,

I had a little boy in my class that would disrespect the teachers, staff, and children in the class. He would say mean things, push, hit, and make loud noise in class. He was always sent to the office for not following directions so (no) matter how many chances you give him. Parents would blame the school and not take ownership. (Teacher 3, 1st grade, Female, Black/Haitian)

Relationships with and Between Students: Managing Bullying and No Bullying Present

Teachers interact with students directly—they also must manage the interactions among students in their classroom. In the classroom, teachers are in positions of power, so their role becomes both preventing bullying and/or deciding how to respond to bullying scenarios. This is done through managing the complex relationships between students. These relationships are further complicated by student identity, specifically the interactions of students with differing identities. Teachers described how student identities impacted the dynamics in their classrooms and how they responded. Importantly, their own identities, both personal and as educators, are crucial in this process. In this instance, a teacher describes the interactions of a student with autism and their non-disabled peers:

I once had an autistic student that was triggered by loud noise and had difficulties transitioning between activities. The students would laugh at him when he would scream when it would get loud in the classroom. It was hard for the other students to understand why the loud noise would make this student scream and go into panic. (Teacher 6, 3rd grade, Female, White/Hispanic)

Though Teacher 6 detailed how a student with autism was laughed at by their non-autistic peers within their classroom, they did not describe any attempts for education to prevent the bullying behavior. Another teacher demonstrated an actionable bullying prevention and intervention strategy:

One challenge I've had this year is integrating a nonverbal autistic student to the other students' play

time. He is aggressive when he wants to show he wants something and the other students are scared of him. I have found one buddy for him that understand him better and is very patient to help him enter games and interacts with the other peers. (Teacher 27, Kindergarten, Female, White/Hispanic)

In this situation, the teacher used their knowledge of their students to identify a competent “buddy” for the student with autism spectrum disorder. The buddy student acts as a mediator between the student with autism and their peers. Another teacher described a student with intersecting identities who may be the victim of bullying and the steps taken to support this student:

I have a very recent situation that I just became aware of that a student in my class is isolating himself because of possible bullying. He is limited-English proficient & may have a hidden disability...Although I have already informed administration of the situation & reached out to parents regarding behavior, I want to help both the student being bullied by setting up a support system and the student potentially bullying to make better choices as this may be due to his lack of self-esteem. (Teacher 20, 5th grade, Female, White)

This teacher took a highly proactive role, demonstrating confidence in dealing with potential bullying situations. She noted that the child may be bullied due to his intersecting identities and had already taken steps to involve administration and parents. She also acknowledged her role in supporting the perpetrating student.

Teachers described how differing student identities transpire in the classroom and their role in mediating the intersections of these identities. While some teachers brought up specific examples of the complexities of relationships concerning bullying and students with disabilities, other teachers emphasized that there is no bullying among the students in their classrooms. Teachers emphasized the positive relationships between students in their class. “As mentioned before tier 3 interventions are not relevant to my classroom. My students do not exhibit concerning or aggressive behaviors as mentioned in the videos. They respect one another and have healthy relationships in the classroom” (Teacher 17, Kindergarten, Female, White/Hispanic). Another teacher connected their perceived lack of bullying to their identity as an alert teacher, implying that their competence has created a safe environment, completely free of bullying. “I am very alert in my classroom, I have not experienced a case of bullying...child feels safe to report peer aggressions” (Teacher 7, 3rd grade, Female, Black/Haitian).

Teachers connected bullying, or the lack thereof, to their reasons for becoming educators. As one teacher states:

I became a teacher because I want to touch the lives of children in a positive manner. We are like family in my class. Showing Kindness is of the utmost importance in my class. Fortunately, I have not witnessed much bullying in my class. (Teacher 31, 5th grade, Female, White/Hispanic)

Their desire to touch the lives of children in a positive manner is tied to their creation of a classroom that is like a family, with little to no bullying. However, by stating they have not witnessed “much bullying,” this teacher acknowledges that bullying may have occurred at some point with their students. This acknowledgement points to a tension between identifying as “the kind of teacher” who facilitates family-like kindness and taking proactive bully prevention measures as action steps toward the stated desire to impact students’ lives positively.

Broader School Context and Macrosystem

Teachers acknowledged the role of bias throughout the bullying modules. Though teachers identified parents and caregivers as influences of bias for students, ultimately, these biases are representations of larger societal constructs. Some teachers attempt to use awareness of discrimination to prevent bullying. This is connected to how they view the broader ecology, but also how they view their own role and identity within that ecology. “Being aware of how others perceive different cultures is crucial to attempt bully prevention. Unfortunately, students are targeted due to race, ethnicity, age, sex, gender etc. I try to focus on how we are a family in class despite our differences” (Teacher 30, 4th grade, Female, White/Hispanic). This teacher’s view of self in bullying prevention is as someone who cultivates “family” within the classroom.

Another teacher expands on the broader context of culture utilized as a bullying tool by stating, “It’s important to know what the bully is using to attack the other students. Perhaps educating students to appreciate diversity will stop them from fearing differences and stop the bullying.” (Teacher 29, 2nd grade, Female, White/Hispanic)

I worked in different schools but noticed that children that come from low income families are the most bullied or bullied others. (Teacher 31, 5th grade, Female, White/Hispanic)

Teachers expressed preventative strategies to combat bullying fueled by SES status, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexual identity. One teacher states, “As an educator you can have each student share something about their culture or you as an educator can share cultural differences” (Teacher 3, 1st grade, Female, Black/Haitian). Another teacher expands on the proactive approach:

For the simple reason that ALL people need and deserve to be treated equally within our community both in and out of schools. We must teach our young students to overlook any differences that others may have and that they must treat everyone as they would like to be treated. It starts with the smallest children first, that is why I begin these life lessons from day one in my kindergarten classes each and every year. (Teacher 35, Kindergarten, Female, White/Hispanic)

Discussion

This study demonstrated that teacher identity plays a crucial role in preventing, detecting, and responding to bullying through shaping the ways in which teachers interact with students, parents, and the broader social ecology. Teacher responses showed that identity is at the core of how teachers prepare, train, and show-up to be educators and the first line of defense against bullying. Our findings suggested that teachers' identities and their knowledge of self continually shape their experiences within the classroom, particularly in regard to preventing, interpreting, and responding to bullying behaviors. This has important implications for how teachers are trained to prevent and respond to bullying. In prior studies, teacher identity has been conceptualized as a dynamic construct, shifting as teachers interact with others (Golzar, 2020; Leigh, 2019). Simultaneously, identities are personal, social, and dynamic (Pishghadam, 2022). This study further supports the notion that teachers' dynamic identities—meaning their personal identities, their social identities, and their teacher identities—continually shape their interpretations of and responses to bullying scenarios. Data analyzed from this study revealed eight sub themes derived from four themes. These themes were rooted in a modified socio-ecological framework, which nests teacher identity at the core of their experiences with regards to bullying prevention, specifically teacher's demographic identity as an individual, reciprocal relationships with parents, positionality within student identity interactions, and navigation of broader sociocultural influences.

Individual

This study reinforced that demographic factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, and disability status, play a role in a teacher's conceptualization of self. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the events and experiences that occur in the personal lives of teachers, including their own lived experiences as former K-12 students, impact their professional role (Acker, 1999; Day, 2008; Lortie, 2002). The interrelationships between professional and personal lives

of teachers create an unavoidable dynamic. Teaching is an inherently caring profession in which significant personal investment is required (Day, 2008). This is reflected in the ways teachers discussed their relationships with students. As Castells (1997) describes: "Identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves..." Teachers in this study reinforced this notion, as their own identities provided a sense of meaning to their teaching. For some teachers, their own identities, and their experiences shaped by their identities, were their reason for joining the profession; for others, their identities were described as their reason for advocacy.

Because "identity work" plays a significant role for teachers and their ability to meet the reflective demands of teaching (Zembylas, 2018), this study demonstrated that teachers' experiences impacted their perceptions of their ability to relate with students and thus their view of their own self-efficacy. This awareness of identity allows teachers to interrogate differences between their own lives and their students' (Olsen, 2008a). For instance, a white male teacher with a learning disability described that through his work, he could relate to most individuals with disabilities. Another teacher described that through their intersecting identities, they are able to understand how students of the same identities may be at-risk of being bullied. This heightened awareness of the role of identity is particularly salient in the bullying prevention context. As one teacher noted, their identity of never having been bullied impacts their perception of their own self-efficacy in identifying bullying. This teacher's recognition of their experience mismatch with students created an increased awareness of bullying; thus, though the experiences may be different, this teacher is compensating for this mismatch. Though they do not identify as someone who experienced bullying, they do identify as an educator who prevents bullying.

Interactions with Parents

Teachers' perceptions of the role of parents in bullying and bullying prevention are shaped by their experiences. In this study, some teachers viewed parents as vital in the bullying prevention process. One teacher in particular noted her own prior experiences with bullying were moderated by the support present in her homelife. This again reinforces the notion that, in the teaching profession, personal selves and lived experiences are interrelated with professional identity (Alsop, 2018). Teachers, based on their own identities and experiences, and parents may have differing views concerning bullying. This can be problematic, as a commonly understood definition of bullying across stakeholders is a key first step toward reducing bullying in schools (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 1993). As one teacher stated in our study, "How do I deal with parents that are in denial?" Though parents may be in "denial" about their

child's behavior, a mismatch in perceptions of bullying can be relegated through a clear bullying definition.

Some teachers shifted the onus of bullying and bullying prevention onto the parents, perhaps in a desire to preserve their own self-efficacy. This may be in an effort to protect their own view of their identity as a bullying preventionist (Migliaccio, 2015). A kindergarten teacher described microaggressions in her classroom, stating "the main source of where they could pick up on these things is in their households." While students likely pick up on microaggressions in various environments outside of school, including their households, this teacher centers the role of the household in learned bullying behaviors. Other teachers took a contrasting approach and highlighted the steps taken in the classroom to prevent bullying behaviors, regardless of where they may be learned.

Bullying Behaviors Between Students

Teachers are often the first responders to bullying and bullying prevention in the classroom; thus, teachers must be confident in their ability to prevent bullying (Blain-Arcaro et al., 2012; De Luca et al., 2019; Migliaccio, 2015). Several teachers demonstrated a perspective of self-efficacy through describing how they prevented bullying in their classroom. For instance, one teacher described assigning a "buddy" for a student with autism, while another teacher described involving parents, administration, and providing services for the bully and victim. These teachers demonstrate an identity as "the kind of person" who intervenes in preventing and addressing bullying (Green, 2021).

While numerous teachers detailed their experiences playing a proactive role in bullying prevention, other teachers stated that there is no bullying in their classroom. Prior research indicates that teachers often grossly underestimate the prevalence of students frequently involved in bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007). With the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) reporting that 11.4% of elementary schools surveyed reported that school bullying took place at least once a week, it seems unlikely that there are classrooms completely free of bullying. Additionally, teachers tied the lack of bullying in their classrooms to their identity as educators. One teacher described themselves as an "alert" teacher, indicating that bullying would not occur in their class due to this attribute. Another teacher described their class as "like a family" where an importance is placed on kindness. These teachers appear confident in their own self-efficacy to prevent bullying; though crucially, it is unclear whether they are conceptualizing bullying differently or missing bullying that is taking place, as prevalence rates demonstrate that bullying likely occurs in most, if not all, classrooms. As Migliaccio (2015) notes, teachers may be

presenting their experiences in a particular light, in order to reflect a self-identity that they wish to convey.

Macrosystem

Identities are contextual and are impacted by the broader macrosystem. Teachers frequently discussed the role of outside sociocultural factors as impacting bullying and bullying prevention efforts. Teacher identities and student identities are nested within broader cultures. Of course, these cultures play an important role in bullying and bullying prevention. Keeping this importance in mind, teachers' discussion of contextual factors may be, in part, due to a desire to distance themselves from negative outcomes, which would harm their self-perceptions (Migliaccio, 2015). For instance, one teacher stated that she observed most bullying from low-income students. This observation may stem from multiple factors impacting increased bullying involvement including teacher perceptions of low-income student behavior reflecting systemic bias (Gorski, 2018; Henry & Feuerstein, 2021; Hunt & Seiver, 2018; Malecki et al., 2020). However, many teachers described their role as educating students on kindness, appreciation of diversity, and treating others the way you want to be treated. These teachers take responsibility for mitigating the potential influence of sociocultural factors on bullying. Furthermore, for these teachers, their belief in equality and commitment to fostering similar values in their students seemed to be an important part of their identity.

Implications for Practice

Though this study focused on professional development (PD) focusing on disability-specific bullying prevention, it also has relevance to, and implications for, teacher education research and practice, including teacher preparation. The continual process of teacher identity construction includes sense-making, the ability to connect new learning to past experiences in order to create new understanding (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). Facilitating this connection is particularly important for research focusing on teacher efficacy related to addressing bullying involvement. This specific population of teachers and students provided perspectives from a wide range of identities and experiences; including teachers: (a) who have and have not themselves experienced bullying; (b) with and without disabilities; (c) with a wide range of skills to intervene in bullying situations; (d) with different knowledge and skills in working with students with disabilities; and (e) who do and do not identify bullying within their classroom. While these identities and experiences encompass a broad range, they are still specific to this context. Notably, our teacher participants were majority Hispanic and working in a majority Hispanic school district. A shared ethnic identity between students and teachers may

facilitate bullying prevention efforts given teachers' ability to identify ethnic-based aggression, which may occur in other languages besides English (i.e., Spanish) and communicate with families using cultural humility. In addition to diverse characteristics that contribute to identity, there is also wide variation in how identity is known and expressed.

Teacher identity encompasses more than who teachers are professionally; there may be an interwoven understanding between who they are as people as well (Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Olsen, 2008b). The personal investment required from teachers reflecting on the ongoing development of their professional identity creates conditions for teacher vulnerability (Liu & Yin, 2022). This vulnerability requires thoughtful consideration by PD researchers. Participation in disability-specific bully prevention PD may serve to bridge the gap between teacher identities that prioritize kind, bully-free learning spaces and their ability to effectively address bullying via evidence-based practices.

Implications for Future Research

This study shows the potential importance of teacher identity for PD research, including research focusing on longer term teacher identity formation processes and the role of teacher identity in identity-based bullying prevention. Most teacher identity research focuses on identity formation processes of preservice and early career teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hanna et al., 2019; Hong et al., 2017; Zhang & Wang, 2022). The development of systematic tools measuring dynamic domains of teacher identity is potentially useful for determining how teacher identity changes over time through large-scale longitudinal studies (Hanna et al., 2019). More research is needed to validate teacher identity measurement instruments. Results of future research studying teacher identity development processes may result in more personalized and effective PD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) including future PD that more effectively matches identities of teachers and coaches (Committee on Effective Mentoring in STEMM et al., 2019; Sun, 2018).

Many of this study's participants shared that it was important to be "the kind of teacher" who can prevent and address bullying involvement. The importance of this facet of teacher identity has implications for future identity-based research and development of PD specific to identity-based bullying. Identity-based bullying research should incorporate teachers' background knowledge and experiences related to the PD content (Yoon et al., 2016). Future study of alignments and tensions between PD content and teacher identity development processes must be situated within the context of school policies and practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Noonan, 2019). To sustain lasting large-scale changes, teacher perceptions of self as effective agents of bully prevention must be fostered within research-based

systems of support at the school and community level (Migliaccio, 2015).

Limitations

As opposed to quantitative research goals aimed at generalization to all teachers, qualitative inquiry focuses on presenting multiple understandings of a contextualized experience through rich description of the process as well as the results of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This rich description should be considered thick, beyond a surface-level observation of the actions or words of study participants toward a deeper understanding of the contextual factors that contribute to a richer understanding of those actions and words (Geertz & Darnton, 2017). Qualitative researchers use naturalistic descriptions of complex phenomena by using purposefully selected, small samples in order to represent specific populations and contexts (Leko et al., 2021). Although the use of open-ended questions allowed our participants to contribute responses that are not limited by numeric scales or response items, there were limitations to this format. An open-ended survey does not provide an opportunity for clarifying questions or probes for additional information (Leko et al., 2021). Additionally, the research team did not conduct member checking, or respondent validation, to explore the credibility of the data (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking is used to support the trustworthiness of a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Time limitations presented a barrier to member checking. For future research, member checking with participants would provide opportunities for participants to reconnect and reflect on their PD experience while creating additional data (Candela, 2019).

Conclusion

Understanding teachers' identities, experiences, and attitudes toward bullying plays an important role in developing professional development for teachers. Knowledge and understanding of self are important in understanding and detecting bullying. The findings from this study implicate that there is a gap between teacher identity and bully prevention practices at school. Furthermore, understanding the dynamic components of identity (i.e., sense of "self," personal experiences, relationships, and roles) may provide researchers with the ability to develop training that increases teacher efficacy related to bullying detection, intervention, and prevention.

Using reflective practices and awareness of identity may create greater relevance and present opportunities for increased buy-in. These participants were willing and able to create connections between their identities and how those identities informed their beliefs, values, and practices related

to teaching. Preventing bullying involvement in their classroom was connected to their sense of the “kind of teacher” they were and wanted to be. Because teacher identities—like all identities—are continually negotiated over the course of their careers, professional development should look to individualize programming in ways that encompass the unique components that drive teachers’ beliefs, behaviors, and practices. Future professional development should capitalize on the connections teachers make when reflecting on their identities as “the kind of teacher” they see themselves as and the roles they play in addressing bullying involvement among their students.

Appendix

DIAL Module 1 and 2 Reflection Questions

Module 1 reflection questions	Module 2 reflection questions
Did this module meet your expectations? What were you hoping to learn? What are you hoping to learn in the next modules?	Reflect on what you have learned about intersectionality before answering the following question. Remember, intersectionality is the interplay of systems of oppression and how they differentially affect identities and their relationship to power. Tabitha is a white student who has a learning disability. She also wears a hijab. Briefly share how understanding these aspects of Tabitha’s identity could be important for understanding her risk of experiencing bullying. How could this be an example of compounded risk? Note: Be sure to think about the intersectional aspects of Tabitha’s identity that might influence the situation
Given what you’ve learned throughout Module 1, what are two questions you have about bullying, or the content so far?	Reflect on your identities (with regard to race, ethnicity, age, sex and gender, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic class, and immigration status). How does your experience of these identities shape the lens you bring to addressing bullying in the classroom?
Tell your coach a little about yourself, including your role within your school, your reason for becoming a teacher/school counselor, and what you love most about your job. Include a short reflection on how you think your coach can be most helpful to you.	Why is it important to adopt an intersectional approach to evaluating bullying?

Module 1 reflection questions	Module 2 reflection questions
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Share and describe an example of a challenge that you or a colleague have had within the school setting that is related to the topic of bullying among students with disabilities.	
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Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the PI on project, DLE, upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Consent to Participate All participants completed an informed consent prior to completing pre-intervention surveys and beginning the training modules.

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