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Finnish Primary School Teachers' Experiences of Responding to Bullying and Cyberbullying: Challenges, Strategies, and Support for Newly Qualified Teachers

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Abstract

Bullying and cyberbullying among children presents significant challenges for teachers, who play a central role in identifying, interpreting, and responding to incidents. Finland is internationally recognised for its anti-bullying frameworks such as the KiVa Koulu program, but less is known about how primary school teachers in Finland experience responding to bullying and cyberbullying in their everyday practice. This study explored Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of bullying and cyberbullying, focusing on how they conceptualise these phenomena, the barriers and challenges they face, the strategies they use, and the forms of preparation and support they consider important for newly qualified teachers. The study employed a qualitative exploratory design, collecting data from ten Finnish primary school teachers through semi-structured interviews.

The findings revealed a degree of conceptual ambiguity in teachers' understandings of bullying and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying was reported as less common in primary school contexts, but was widely perceived as more difficult to detect and resolve than face-to-face bullying. The main barriers to bullying resolution included time constraints, emotionally charged interactions with parents, fading anti-bullying programs, and wider social and cultural influences. In practice, the teachers relied primarily on discussion-based, iterative responses involving individual and joint discussions, monitoring, parent involvement and collaboration with school and external professionals. The teachers also emphasised that their own initial teacher educations had provided little meaningful preparation for bullying response, and that competence in this area was developed through professional experience, collegial support, and relational knowledge of students.

The study concludes that responding to bullying and cyberbullying in Finnish primary schools is a complex, relational, and context-dependent process shaped by structural conditions within schools and the individual teacher's professional experience. The findings point to a need for stronger conceptual and practical preparation in current teacher education programs and greater recognition of the collaborative nature of bullying intervention and resolution.

Keywords: bullying, cyberbullying, Finnish primary teachers, teacher strategies, teacher education.

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1 Introduction

Bullying has been a widespread and persistent issue in educational settings for centuries, and in the last few decades cyberbullying has emerged as an even more pervasive form of this problem. In any setting, where children gather together, it is likely that there will be some abuse of power, suggesting that it is simple human nature for conflicts and imbalances of power to arise between children. Olewus (1993), defined bullying as repetitive and intentional harmful behaviour which is characterized by an imbalance of power. The power imbalance can be physical or social in nature, and makes it difficult for the victim to defend themselves. As a more recent and nuanced phenomenon, research into cyberbullying is still in its infancy. Grigg (2010) describes cyberbullying as the deliberate harming of individuals or groups through electronic communication, who experience such behaviours as offensive, derogatory, harmful or unwelcome.

Over the past few decades, plenty of research has been conducted on the varying degrees of success of different bullying intervention schemes implemented in schools around the world; the detrimental effects bullying can have on mental health and academic performance; and the way a teacher's characteristics influence their perceptions and actions towards bullying (Salmivalli, 2010; Sultana et al., 2018; Sutter et al., 2021). Much less research has been undertaken on exactly how teachers intervene in bullying and cyberbullying situations, especially in the Finnish context. Investigating how experienced teachers intervene in instances of bullying and cyberbullying and uncovering the strategies they implement both consciously and subconsciously, has important implications for students and less experienced teachers alike.

1.1 Purpose of the study and the research questions

The implementation of anti-bullying school-wide programs and policies has contributed to an overall global decline in the frequency of bullying incidents (Evans et al., 2014; Sultana et al., 2018). School-wide programs and initiatives are often founded on the socio-emotional aspects of bullying which consider the characteristics of the child, their family and peers, and the school professionals, and they often consist of school-wide rules, teacher training, classroom curricula and clear

guidelines for the students (Van Verseveld et al., 2020). Teachers are usually responsible for the implementation of most of the components of the anti-bullying programs (Salmivalli et al., 2013), and, further, they need to adequately identify and respond to bullying situations.

Teachers are the first line of defence against bullying in schools, and they are often the first point of contact for students who are involved. Teachers need to be aware of what bullying is, feel confident that they can intervene, know what its negative consequences are, and be aware of which strategies to use (Oldenburg et al., 2016). Teachers inhabit an influential space as educators, and the manner in which they react to bullying situations informs how the situation ultimately progresses and evolves. Both students and parents expect teachers to intervene in bullying situations, and teachers can react to bullying incidents in a number of ways. Considering the teachers' intimate knowledge of their students and the classroom dynamics, more research is needed to examine the specific strategies that they should use to intervene.

Rigby (2014) suggests that teachers can intervene, observe, ignore or even trivialize bullying situations, and there is strong evidence to suggest that teachers frequently do intervene when they are made aware of bullying behaviours and situations (Burger et al., 2015; Byers et al., 2011). However, if teachers do not feel confident in their ability to intervene, or feel they lack the appropriate skills to resolve the situation, it is more likely they will ignore the bullying (Bauman, 2006). Teachers who ignore bullying situations discourage the victims from reporting and speaking openly about their experiences, while bolstering the position of the bullies (Burger et al., 2015).

Van Verseveld et al., (2020) claim that effective teacher training is key to identifying, tackling and preventing bullying. Research by Fry et al., (2018) found that around two thirds of newly qualified teachers felt they did not receive sufficient training in university to adequately handle bullying situations, and Burger et al., (2015) similarly commented that systematic instruction on how to prevent and manage bullying incidents is lacking in most curricula. Conversely, in recent research Salo et al., (2024) investigated the perceived preparedness of trainee teachers to address threats to their pupils' well-being and found that the trainee teachers reported above-

average preparedness to observe and provide support in cases of bullying when compared to other such threats such as addictions or mental health problems.

Bullying can wreak physical, emotional, and social havoc on the well-being of a child and cause undue stress and fatigue to inexperienced teachers. Modern schools can have a complex hierarchy of teachers, headteachers, resource teachers, special needs teachers, aides, nurses, counsellors and psychologists, and the role of the teacher in instances of bullying can become vague and unclear. Providing especially newly qualified and inexperienced teachers with clear guidelines and strategies for intervening and resolving cases of bullying and cyberbullying should positively impact the well-being of students–both the bullies and the bullied–and even have the same impact on the teachers and other school staff. Teachers, who are better informed, will have tools to resolve bullying situations and contribute to the overall well-being of all parties involved, thus improving the educational experience and promoting a healthier school culture.

Various studies have examined the interaction between teachers' responses to bullying and how those responses impacted the situation. Findings show that active responses to bullying, such as punitive measures against the bullies and support for the victimized students, result in less bullying, while non-action can make it proliferate (Campaert et al., 2017; Wachs et al., 2019). Teachers, who actively stand against bullying, have been associated with lower levels of bullying in the classroom (Salmivalli et al., 2013). No teacher has a single 'one size fits all' response to this complicated issue, but they must be flexible and adaptable to each unique situation. This study aims to form a more comprehensive and practical view into the specific strategies employed by primary school teachers in Finland when they intervene in incidences of bullying and cyberbullying. The strategies they employ are not learned during their teacher training but rather developed and honed over time through real-life experiences in the workplace.

The primary goal of this research is to uncover the best practices and specific strategies and approaches that primary school teachers in Finland use to tackle and resolve cases of bullying and cyberbullying amongst students in grades 1-6. As such, my research questions are:

1. What are Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of responding to instances of bullying and cyberbullying?

    a. How do primary school teachers in Finland conceptualize bullying and cyberbullying?

    b. What are the barriers and challenges faced by primary school teachers in Finland when dealing with bullying and cyberbullying?

    c. What strategies do primary school teachers in Finland use in response to instances of bullying and cyberbullying?

2. What forms of preparation and support do primary school teachers consider important for newly qualified teachers dealing with bullying and cyberbullying?

The study explored the questions using an inductive qualitative research approach. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten primary school teachers in Finland, allowing for in-depth discussions on their experiences, challenges, and strategies.

1.2 Motivation for the study

I chose to become a teacher, not because I love the act of teaching, but because I knew that it was a profession that would enable me to have a genuinely positive impact on the lives of others. My own time at school was somewhat unhappy. I was not bullied as such, but there were certainly some who behaved in a very unpleasant way towards me and did in many respects make me quite unhappy at school. It is from this perspective that I seek to shed light on how teachers can combat different forms of bullying.

This research is also underpinned by my experiences as a classroom teacher in a primary school in Finland, where I have encountered a variety of classroom dynamics and challenges. My most recent teaching experience was working with 'Class X' during grades 5 and 6. Class X presented a level of difficulty that I had not faced before. There were severe behavioural challenges within the class; destructive and combative social dynamics; and persistent and malicious instances of bullying and cyberbullying which deeply affected the well-being of the students and heavily disrupted the classroom atmosphere and learning environment. While I was able to

address and resolve some instances of bullying, there were several cases where my efforts proved ineffective. This sense of inadequacy in managing such critical issues became a source of frustration and concern, leading me to question my own ability to be an effective teacher. For me, these experiences also highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of effective bullying and cyberbullying intervention strategies.

One of the most challenging aspects of my time with Class X was working with young boys who came from what I perceived to be rather troubled home environments. In many cases, these students were being raised in households where the father was either absent or exhibited bullying behaviour themselves. The attitudes and behaviours modelled by these fathers often conflicted with the values I sought to instil in my classroom, creating a complex dynamic that was difficult to reverse or navigate. The influence of such parental figures frequently placed these students at odds with me, further complicating my attempts to intervene and support them. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to disrupt the cycle of bullying in several cases, leaving me with a profound sense of failure and a desire to develop and improve my professional approach.

During my 10+ years of teaching in Finland, I have encountered many occasions of an incident occurring between children, followed by cries of bullying. While maintaining a strong and visible anti-bullying agenda in schools is essential, it is equally important to develop a clear and shared understanding among both students and teachers of what constitutes bullying–and crucially, what does not. In practice, and especially with younger children, isolated incidents of conflict, unkind remarks or disagreements can sometimes be mistakenly labelled as bullying. Older students may be tempted to use an increased awareness of bullying in school to trivialize the concept by using it humorously or strategically within interactions with peers or teachers. I worked with students in Class X who would jokingly accuse one another of bullying as part of classroom banter, fully aware that the term carries significant emotional and disciplinary weight. By weaponizing the language of bullying in this way to provoke laughter or deflect responsibility, students can erode the credibility of the anti-bullying message.

I have frequently encountered situations where children interpret single acts of meanness or minor conflicts as bullying, particularly in schools where anti-bullying

discourse is prominent and consistently reinforced. While it is important to validate children's emotional experiences, schools must also support students in developing the social and emotional skills needed to distinguish between normal everyday disagreements and sustained, targeted aggression. Understanding these differences leads to more appropriate responses from both students and teachers, ensuring that genuine cases of bullying are identified and addressed effectively, while everyday interpersonal issues are resolved constructively.

My experiences underscore the importance of equipping teachers with the knowledge, tools and strategies they need to effectively address bullying and cyberbullying in school, and they serve as my primary motivation for this research. My hope is that I can uncover practical and evidence-based methods and strategies for bullying intervention through interviews with experienced primary school teachers in Finland.

Teachers who possess the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes are more likely to successfully intervene in cases of bullying (Van Verseveld et al., 2020), and I hope that this research will contribute to a broader understanding of how teachers can navigate such challenging situations and foster a safe and inclusive learning environment for their students. Ultimately, this research aspires to serve as a resource for inexperienced and newly qualified teachers, providing them with guidance and practical strategies to effectively intervene in instances of bullying and cyberbullying.

2 Literature Review

In writing the literature review, I have sought to integrate my own experiences as a teacher, specifically with Class X, with the broader body of research on bullying. My observations and encounters have informed the way I have framed certain issues and highlighted areas that I consider relevant. I have taken care to ensure that this literature review extends beyond the boundaries of my personal experiences; and perspectives or topics from the literature which are not reflected in my own experiences are included to provide a more balanced and comprehensive overview. My experiences serve as an entry point into the subject matter, but they have not limited the scope of the review or exclude important questions or findings.

2.1 Definition of terms

While there is a lack of consensus on the precise definition of bullying and cyberbullying, the literature agrees that bullying is a subset of aggressive behaviour, which is a term used in the social sciences to describe behaviours which are intentionally designed to harm another who does not wish to be harmed. Much of the early research on bullying was conducted by Dan Olweus (1993), who established the notion that bullying is occurring if the behaviours include (1) a power imbalance between the bully and the bullied, (2) repeated behaviour, and (3) an intent to harm. Bullying can be direct (e.g. physical aggression or verbal abuse) or indirect (e.g. spreading rumours or exclusion) (Olweus, 1997).

The Australian Human Rights Commission defines bullying as occurring *“when people repeatedly and intentionally use words or actions against someone or a group to cause distress and risk to their wellbeing. These actions are usually done by people who have more influence or power over someone else, or who want to make someone else feel less powerful or helpless”* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023). The three criteria set out above distinguish bullying behaviours from more ordinary aggressive acts, such as fights or quarrels, which are often one-off instances and occur between persons who are equally matched. The imbalance of power and the repetitive nature of bullying behaviour make them particularly unpleasant and harmful to the victim and suggests an element of calculation and forethought on the side of the bully.

Since the introduction of the internet at the start of the century and the following explosion of instant global communication and social media, cyberbullying has become a widespread problem among children, that presents a raft of new challenges for schools and educators. There is much discussion as to whether cyberbullying is just another form of bullying or if it is a different form of aggressive behaviour entirely (Kowalski et al., 2014). Cyberbullying usually occurs outside of school, but its impact is felt in school as those involved are often in the same class, year group or school. Cyberbullying can often occur alongside traditional bullying, and the two behaviours can be woven together. As with traditional bullying, cyberbullying can be direct (e.g. sharing humiliating posts online, sending aggressive messages), or indirect (e.g. content posted online can be shared and propagated by others, becoming 'viral').

By extending Olweus' (1993) definition of bullying to cyberbullying, it can be defined as *"an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend themselves"* (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). From this perspective, cyberbullying can be seen as repeated targeting of an individual or group of individuals with the intention to cause harm through the use of any electrical communication technology (Slonje et al., 2012). Cyberbullying is an abuse of power occurring through digital or online means, with the intent of injuring others socially, psychologically or even physically. The two criteria which separate traditional bulling from more general aggressive behaviour is its repetitive nature and an imbalance of power. These two aspects are often easy to identify in cases of traditional bullying, but they can be more challenging to identify in cases of cyberbullying (Slonje et al., 2012).

2.2 The modern phenomenon of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying emerged as a social phenomenon in the early 2000s, coinciding with the rapid advancement and widespread adoption of digital technologies. Over the past two decades, not only have incidences of cyberbullying escalated, but children's intuitive grasp of digital environments has also contributed to the development of more hidden and psychologically damaging forms of cyberbullying. A significant factor exacerbating the complexity of addressing cyberbullying is the generational gap between young people and the adults responsible for their care and education.

Many parents and teachers, not having grown up immersed in digital culture, often lack a clear understanding of how modern technologies such as social media platforms, messaging apps, and online forums can be exploited to intimidate, isolate, or manipulate others. The digital fluency of children may afford perpetrators a degree of confidence in their actions, while the adults tasked with safeguarding them struggle to keep apace with the evolving digital landscape. This digital gap is reflected in the work of Macaulay et al. (2018), who found that teachers often view cyberbullying as a serious concern while still reporting limited confidence in how to identify and manage it.

Cyberbullying can happen anywhere, anytime. Digital technologies provide perpetrators and victims with 24/7 access to digital content. Targeted content can be shared, liked and reposted very quickly, and even turned into hurtful memes in a matter of minutes (Thompson, 2022). Content posted online can become public and be shared and sent many times without the knowledge of the victim, who may only become aware of the material once it has already become common knowledge amongst their peers. There is a permanence to online content that is not present in face-to-face confrontations, and the repetitive element of cyberbullying is less straightforward than in traditional bullying because one harmful act can be endlessly redistributed by others beyond the original perpetrator's control (Slonje et al., 2012). Once material is posted online it can snowball and be viewed and downloaded indefinitely. It can re-emerge anytime without warning and with an increased chance of the material spreading beyond the immediate social circles of the original parties involved. An image published online can be downloaded and distributed by others indefinitely; therefore, a single act by one perpetrator can be repeated many times by others and experienced as many times by the victim.

Although cyberbullying shares many features with traditional bullying, one of the main differences is that while perpetrators may act anonymously, they do not necessarily witness the victim's reaction, and the victim may find it difficult to escape the bullying even when they leave the school environment. Slonje et al. (2012) described this as the absence of a 'safe haven', as the victims can be reached through a variety of digital devices at any time and in any place.

2.3 The impact of bullying on students, teachers, schools and the educational experience

The negative effects of bullying are well researched and can include a range of adverse outcomes including physical health problems, behaviour and emotional problems, mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and panic attacks, as well as impacts on school attendance and academic achievement (Copeland et al., 2013). Such internalizing problems can, in extreme cases, persist into adult life and even lead to suicidal ideation. In their meta-analysis of research conducted over a period of 20 years, Hawker and Boulton (2000) found that those enduring bullying during childhood were strongly associated with depression, loneliness and low self-esteem. Bowes et al. (2015) claim that 25-40% of mental health problems in young adults are a direct result of some form of childhood bullying. Srabstein and Leventhal (2010) view such severe consequences as a public health concern, while Cowie and Jennifer (2008), claim that it could be viewed as a threat to the education system.

While the impacts of bullying are usually focused on the victims, the perpetrators often display behaviours that can carry through into adulthood. Bullies are often associated with more externalized behaviours, and anti-social behaviours and criminality later in life (Copeland et al., 2013). Hawker and Boulton (2000) found that the perpetrators of bullying were more likely to experience social-psychological adjustment problems, such as depression, loneliness and isolation, as well as a higher risk of bullying and criminality as adults. The research suggests that bullying in school is a part of a more general violent and aggressive pattern of behaviour.

During my two years with Class X, I found that the bullying was not only impacting the victims and the bullies, but the class as a whole. The bullying extended its impact beyond the immediate individuals involved and permeated the entire group, disrupting the classroom environment and the educational experience. The mere presence of bullying from a small subset of students cultivated a pervasive atmosphere of tension and insecurity, which in turn led to more conflicts among students, diminished peer relationships, and caused a general decline in classroom morale. This experience is supported by research by Harachi et al. (2006), who found that students not directly involved in bullying found it distressing and as having a negative impact on their school experience. Espelage and Swearer (2003) suggest

that a negative classroom climate affects the engagement of individual students and even leads to a school-wide decrease in commitment and participation. The research is clear that the ramifications of bullying are far-reaching and require comprehensive strategies that address the bullying incidents and cater to the well-being of the whole classroom community and beyond.

As the teacher of Class X, I was compelled to allocate substantial time and resources to address the bullying in the class. As well as detracting from my teaching time and potentially hindering the academic progress of many of the students in the class, the responsibility of having to manage the bullying incidents imposed significant emotional and physical demand on myself. The continued and repeated incidents of bullying lead to feelings of frustration, helplessness, and professional dissatisfaction. Having to navigate interactions with parents of both the bullies and the victims, each of whom presented different perspectives, expectations and challenges, exacerbated my stress levels further. My personal experiences of high stress levels decreasing my motivation, as well as the decreased quality of teaching align with the findings of Aloe et al. (2014) who found a strong correlation between student misbehaviour, including bullying, and the increased occurrence of teacher burnout. The literature highlights the need for systemic support structures which address the well-being of teachers during these challenges and assist them in maintaining instructional quality and fostering a positive and inclusive classroom environment.

By addressing bullying in schools and gaining insights directly from teachers, I hope to identify approaches that support the victims, address the behaviour of the perpetrators and inform strategies that both protect the wider classroom environment and reduce the professional strain on teachers. Promoting schools that are conducive to creating and maintaining a positive physical, psychological, and social atmosphere should be at the forefront of educational discourse, and this study has the potential to support the development of evidence-based practices that promote safer, healthier, and more inclusive learning environments for all members of the school community.

2.4 Barriers and challenges for teachers

2.4.1 Lack of understanding

The first barrier to effectively resolving bullying cases in schools is the lack of a clear and consistent understanding among teachers about what constitutes bullying. While definitions of bullying typically emphasize repetition, intent to harm, and a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993), these criteria are highly subjective and can be interpreted differently. These subjective interpretations can be amplified by generational differences between teachers because today's woke culture may be more sensitive to certain situations than previous generations, leading to a disparity in how incidents between children are perceived by their teachers. Herkama et al. (2022) found that such ambiguity among teachers contributes to inconsistent identification and responses to bullying, which can undermine school-wide prevention efforts and delay timely interventions. Without a clear and consistent understanding of what constitutes bullying, teachers may either underreact to serious incidents or overreact to minor ones (Campaert et al., 2017), leading to confusion among students and parents and potentially diminishing the credibility of anti-bullying policies.

2.4.2 Lack of teacher training

The second barrier, which is identified from my own personal experiences, is the lack of systemic training about bullying within teacher education programs. Despite the well-documented prevalence of bullying in our schools and its negative impacts on student well-being and academic outcomes, many pre-service teachers receive little or no formal instruction on how to recognize and intervene in bullying situations. In the five-year teacher education program in which I am currently participating, I have not received any training specific to bullying, nor has it been addressed on any of the courses required to become a qualified teacher. This lack of preparation means that for many newly qualified teachers, their first encounters with bullying situations will be during their early teaching experiences, which they will have to face without the necessary knowledge or strategies to respond confidently and effectively. Teachers felt a high level of responsibility to prevent bullying, but lacked the confidence in their ability to do so (Boulton, 1997). They are less likely to respond if they feel inadequately prepared to deal with bullying (Fry et al., 2019). Teacher education

courses should have a dedicated course on bullying, equipping novice teachers with the tools they need to recognize, intervene and resolve cases of bullying, and remove the burden placed on newly qualified teachers who are expected to learn these skills ‘on the job’, often through trial and error, and to the detriment of the students.

2.4.3 Lack of time and resources

A lack of time and resources can present challenges to teachers who are trying to resolve cases of bullying. During my time with Class X, persistent bullying consumed a disproportionate amount of my time and attention. Incidents at school require immediate attention and I frequently found myself engaged in discussions with the students involved while the rest of the class was left without adequate supervision or instruction. Over prolonged periods, this can become problematic and result in negative outcomes for the class as a whole, through no fault of their own. This experience is echoed in the findings of Herkama et al. (2022), where teachers reported concerns that they were unable to dedicate sufficient time to cases of bullying due to a lack of time in their daily schedules, resulting in the teachers feeling overwhelmed and isolated in their efforts to manage cases of bullying. A lack of time and resources for teachers to consistently address bullying situations could lead to an increased possibility of teachers intentionally ignoring smaller cases.

2.4.4 Working with challenging parents and families

It is important for the social development of children and for the prevention of bullying that the school and the parents convey a consistent message to the child (Ostrander et al., 2018). Ladd and Parke (2021), consider the family as the first socialization context for children, who transfer the interpersonal and social skills they learn at home into their peer contexts as they grow older; therefore, in prolonged cases of bullying, it is inevitable that the families or parents of the students will need to get involved–it is a crucial step on the path to resolution. Schools and parents can both benefit from this information exchange because there will always be children who will disclose their victimization at home but not at school, and vice versa. Likewise, there will be parents who are unaware of their child’s bullying behaviour at school (Holt et al., 2009).

Dealing with parents and families can prove challenging for teachers and can add extra emotional strain and complexity to an already difficult situation. Parents can be confrontational, dismissive, defensive or even aggressive towards teachers. In Class X, there were parents who were in denial about their child's involvement in bullying and refused to accept my perspective and observations. They sided unequivocally with their child, only empowering them further. With the full support of their parents, the bullying child was left to continue their behaviour without any fear of repercussion or consequences at home. Holt et al. (2009) also found that many parents who are aware of bullying do not take action to intervene. Other parents did not want to take the issue of bullying seriously, minimizing the harm caused or framing it as typical childhood behaviour–again empowering the perpetrators.

Family dynamics, including parental attitudes and home values, play a large role in shaping children's social behaviour and conflict resolution styles, and can sometimes reinforce bullying behaviours. Taiti et al. (2024) found that parental prejudice towards ethnic minorities was associated with increased ethnic bullying among adolescents, especially when teachers did not actively promote tolerance. Parental attitudes can create a barrier to effective intervention, and cultural or religious values imparted at home can clash with those promoted at school, creating inconsistency and tension in the child's social learning. Interventions often fail when they do not take into account the social and cultural realities of the student (Della Cioppa et al., 2015).

Parenting style and family culture play a huge role in the bully-victim dynamic. Negative parenting styles have been shown to predict more socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties in children, which can increase their risk of being bullied. Conversely, positive parenting styles build confidence in children making them less likely to be identified by bullies as a victim (Grama et al., 2024).

The parents of victims may become frustrated if bullying persists. In the eyes of many parents, it is the teacher's responsibility to resolve incidents of bullying and any failure to do so is due to the teacher and a professional failure on their behalf. Teachers must maintain a degree of confidentiality when meeting with parents and tread carefully when discussing other students. This can leave the teacher with a sense of constraint and limited options going forward, especially if the offending student's parents are unwilling to work with the families of the victims. Herkama et al.

(2022) found similar experiences in their study, noting that teachers often face parents who are "attacking sharply" or questioning the school's handling of bullying incidents, while teachers feel constrained by confidentiality: "we cannot tell anything, we are bound by confidentiality" (p. 963). The conflicting expectations and the emotionally charged nature of interactions with parents and families can create a barrier to open and constructive communication about bullying. Therefore, teachers need adequate training in not only how to address bullying in school with the students, but also how to best communicate and work with the families of the children involved.

2.4.5 Unsupportive or negative school cultures

The school culture is broadly defined as the quality and character of school life which reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices and organizational structures of the school (National School Climate Center, 2007). The culture of a school and the quality of relationships between the teachers can significantly influence how effectively bullying is addressed. In many cases, bullying can involve students from different classes or groups, and multiple teachers can be involved. With multiple teachers involved, it is crucial that they present a united front and operate from a shared understanding of what constitutes bullying and how it should be handled. Inconsistent responses or tensions between teachers can undermine their authority, confuse students, and weaken the school's anti-bullying message. The school collegial climate has a positive correlation with teachers' response to bullying (Kollerová et al., 2021).

In my own experience, I have found it challenging to work with some teachers while addressing bullying and have seen how students can quickly detect and exploit divisions between teachers, which not only complicates the resolution of bullying incidents but also undermines the credibility of the intervention. Herkama et al. (2022) found that inconsistent staff commitment and poor communication can disrupt the continuity of anti-bullying efforts. A supportive and consistent school climate is essential for meaningful intervention, as fragmented efforts or policies contribute to a negative environment that allows bullying to persist, or even a failure of teachers to intervene at all (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Conversely, teachers who feel they have the support of the school's administration and leadership have higher levels of

self-efficacy and an increased willingness to intervene in cases of bullying (Farley, 2018; Skinner et al., 2014). A strong and unified school culture–underpinned by clear policies and positive professional relationships–is fundamental to the successful prevention and resolution of bullying.

2.4.6 The emotional burden of dealing with bullying

Teacher exhaustion and burnout is heavily influenced by their daily social experiences in school (Kollerová et al., 2023). Having to insert themselves into bullying situations can add to the already congested emotional burden of teacherhood, and can strain teachers' sense of efficacy and emotional reserves. Repeated exposure to bullying situations, especially cyberbullying incidents which are usually out of teacher sight or beyond what is immediately visible, can lead to anxiety, moral distress, and self-doubt. At times with Class X I felt emotionally burdened, and my inability to resolve bullying cases led to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, shame, powerlessness and doubts over my future in the profession. These experiences were echoed by teachers in the Netherlands who described feeling "at a loss as to what to do" (van Verseveld et al., 2020, p. 57) when dealing with difficult cases of bullying. Acquadro Maran et al. (2017), similarly found that teachers often felt helpless and stressed when their interventions did not improve bullying situations, especially when they lacked effective strategies to resolve the issues.

The emotional costs of dealing with cases of bullying is not only immediate but also cumulative, increasing the risk of stress and exhaustion over time. This burden is often invisible but highly consequential for teacher well-being. The continuous emotional labour involved in responding to cases of bullying places teachers at greater risk of burnout, since surface acting (faking and hiding emotions) is positively related to the individual and interpersonal components of teacher burnout (Aldrup et al., 2023). Many teachers feel insecure about how to deal with bullying resulting in a lack of confidence in their ability to resolve the bullying (Finet et al., 2023). Without adequate teacher support or training, these emotional strains can contribute to exhaustion, decreased job satisfaction, and ultimately decisions to leave the profession.

2.5 The nature of teachers' responses and interventions

Teachers can respond to incidents of bullying in a variety of different ways (Kollerová et al., 2021). Olweus and Limber (2010), suggest that teachers should try to act as responsible and authoritative role models. They should strive to find a balance between being warm and supportive, and providing clear limits on unacceptable behaviour, ensuring that children understand the consequences of their negative behaviours. While a substantial body of research exists evaluating the effectiveness of various anti-bullying programs from around the world, this study aims to address the notable gap in the literature regarding teachers' own perspectives and experiences from the front line about how they navigate different bullying situations in practice.

There is evidence from a number of studies that teachers are not very effective at resolving cases of bullying. In their study of 2766 Dutch children, Fekkes et al. (2005) found that teachers were only successful in stopping the bullying 49% of the time. In the same study, children even reported that the bullying became worse (10%) after the teacher intervention. Similar evidence of teacher interventions inflaming the bullying situation further have been reported in England (Smith & Shu, 2000) and Australia (Rigby & Barnes, 2002).

A thorough review of the literature reveals that teachers must make a series of decisions once they are made aware of bullying occurring. The first choice is to either ignore the incident (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015; Wachs et al., 2019) or to take action. If the actions of the bullies are ignored, they may feel empowered to continue their behaviour which can lead to an increase in the frequency and intensity of the bullying behaviour (Burger et al., 2015; Yoon, 2004). Research shows that teachers are unlikely to ignore incidents of bullying (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015; Wachs et at., 2019), although some teachers may choose to observe an incident before intervening to gain a better understanding of what has happened (Wachs et al., 2019).

Once the decision to intervene has been made, the teacher must decide the best way to proceed. There is a variety of well-researched factors that influence how a teacher decides to act–situational factors such as the seriousness of the bullying, the degree of power imbalance and the nature of the behaviour–all play a role in how a

teacher decides to proceed. The teacher's awareness, understanding, self-efficacy, empathy towards the victim and their own experiences of bullying also play a role in how they decide to act (Burger et al. 2015). There is a breadth of research regarding these factors and their interplay with how teachers choose to react to bullying, but for the purposes of this research I will focus on the actual strategies the teachers decide to implement rather than why they chose to do so.

Two general approaches have been identified in bullying intervention strategies: (i) confrontational, authority-based approaches, which involve punitive or disciplinary measures against the bully (Olweus, 1993); and (ii) non-confrontational approaches, which are characterized by a softer approach with more empathy for the victim and the bully (Wachs et al., 2019). Authority-based interventions are approaches in which teachers use their authority and control to encourage changes in the bully's behaviour (Kollerová et al., 2021). Authority-based or punitive approaches can include disciplining the bully by applying certain sanctions, punishments or negative consequences that are imposed upon the student(s) who are identified as being responsible for the bullying (Olweus, 1993; Rigby et al., 2014). While contacting the parents of the bully may be perceived as a punitive measure, it can also be incorporated within a non-confrontational approach. As such, parental involvement–commonly included in most intervention strategies–can function as a component of both confrontational and non-confrontational responses to bullying.

A broader range of strategies is available for non-confrontational approaches. These may include working with the bully to explore the underlying reasons for their behaviour, foster empathy and a sense of responsibility, understand the harm caused, and support the development of alternative, non-aggressive behavioural responses (Burger et al., 2015). Teachers can also work with the victims by providing them with emotional support, increasing their assertiveness in dealing with aggressive peers, or connecting them with pro-social students (Campaert et al., 2017; Field, 2007). Enlisting the help of other adults (usually teachers) is another commonly used non-confrontational approach (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015). Finally restorative approaches such as group discussions and mediation have been used to address cases of bullying. Teacher-led group discussions provide children with an opportunity to work together on bullying prevention (Burger et al., 2022), and mediation involves a member of the school staff or a student trained in

mediation, hosting discussions with the bully and the victim together (Rigby et al., 2014).

There is a broad consensus in the literature that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to bullying resolution and that each case needs to be taken on its individual merits. Della Cioppa et al. (2015) state that interventions must be tailored to the specific needs and cultural backgrounds of the students involved. Interventions need to be adapted to the unique circumstances, relationships and dynamics of each situation, and strategies need to be combined to address the diverse and evolving nature of bullying in schools. Rigby (2014) argues that while many schools rely heavily on punitive measures, non-confrontational approaches may be more effective in specific contexts because they tend to be more sensitive to the social and emotional complexities involved. Punitive and disciplinary measures can be effective, but they are most successful when combined with other measures, and teachers who actively employ a variety of intervention strategies have better outcomes in reducing bullying incidents over time (Burger et al., 2022; van Gils et al., 2024).

Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the steps identified in the literature that teachers take when responding to incidents of bullying. It is based on a comprehensive review of the literature examining teacher intervention strategies and reflects various approaches identified in empirical studies. This model integrates key elements from confrontational and non-confrontational approaches, and provides a practical guide that illustrates the multifaceted nature of teacher decision-making in bullying situations. By combining insights from diverse sources into a single, accessible framework, the model visualizes the complex processes involved in addressing bullying in school.

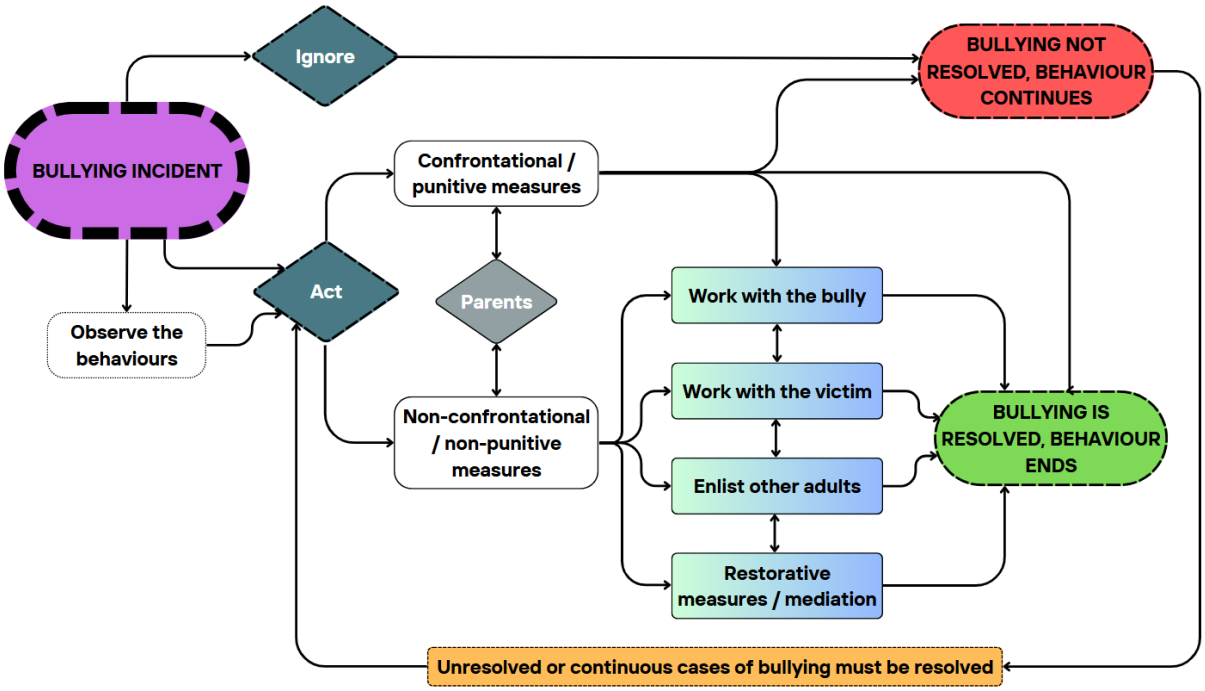

Figure 1. A synthesized flow chart illustrating the key decision points and intervention strategies teachers may follow when responding to incidents of bullying, based on findings from the literature.

2.5.1 Confrontational and punitive measures

Confrontational and punitive measures are among the most commonly used strategies by teachers when confronted with bullying. In their survey of 1378 schools in England, Thompson and Smith (2011, as cited in Rigby, 2014) found that 92% of the schools used direct sanctions as their initial reaction to incidents of bullying. Similarly, Bauman et al. (2008), reported that disciplining the bully was the most strongly endorsed approach by teachers in their US study, reflecting a general preference for confrontational or control-oriented strategies. For new cases of bullying, or for lesser incidents, taking punitive measures against the bully is the quickest and least work-intensive response for the teacher to take. Punitive measures typically involve direct sanctions such as verbal reprimands, detention, meetings with parents, school community service and other punishments designed to ensure the bully is aware that their behaviour is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

During my time with Class X, the use of disciplinary and punitive measures felt at times like the most immediate and visible response to bullying–particularly when parents of the victim demanded clear and decisive action. As time passed however, I felt that such short-term and immediate measures failed to address the causes of the

underlying behaviour. In some cases, I found that applying punitive measures, such as contacting parents or marking incidents on Wilma, simply escalated tensions with the student and their family, without changing their long-term behaviour. My experiences are reflected in Burger et al.'s (2022) work in which it is noted that punitive measures alone may fail to foster moral engagement or promote empathy in the bully, and that while disciplinary sanctions can be effective when implemented early and consistently, they are most successful when paired with other non-confrontational approaches. Wachs et al. (2019) also found that while punitive measures may stop bullying temporarily, they fail to address peer dynamics and may lead to increased covert or indirect bullying, as students find new ways to avoid detection.

Punitive measures are only effective with the support of parents. When parents acknowledge an issue and support the school's approach, disciplinary action can be reinforced at home, making it much more impactful. One of the biggest challenges I faced with Class X was dealing with the parents of a child who was bullying others. The parents would not accept that their child was bullying others and would challenge my version of events and refuse to acknowledge their child's role. Any punitive measures I took against the child were highly contested and eventually rejected. Without the support of the parents, any disciplinary action or punitive measures I took were ultimately useless, as they had zero impact on the child's behaviour. Herkama et al. (2022) reported similar experiences in their interviews with Finnish teachers who reported difficulties in working with parents. The parent-teacher dynamic can undermine the effectiveness of punitive measures by weakening home-school relationships and emboldening the child to disregard school sanctions.

A lack of training in how to navigate bullying situations influences how teachers react to them. Sairanen and Pfeffer (2011) found that teachers with no formal anti-bullying training were more likely to rely solely on punitive measures or even ignore incidents altogether. In contrast, trained teachers were better equipped to combine disciplinary actions with non-confrontational measures. Wachs et al. (2019), echo the call for further anti-bullying training for teachers to ensure they are aware that authoritarian-punitive strategies do little to contribute to successfully dealing with bullying in the long term.

While punitive and confrontational measures remain a prominent part of many teacher interventions, their effectiveness is varied and highly contextual. Punitive measures offer immediate consequences for the bullies but fail to address longer term solutions. They are reactive rather than transformative. Studies suggest that while punitive measures may serve as a necessary first step, they should not be used in isolation and should be used alongside more non-confrontational strategies (Burger et al., 2022; Wachs et al., 2019). The effectiveness of punitive measures is highly dependent on the response of the parents and the level of professional training the teachers receive, and should be contextualized within a broader, more holistic school-wide approach to bullying prevention and resolution.

2.5.2 Working with the bully

Working directly with the bully is a strategy which prioritizes understanding, dialogue and behavioural change over punishment. It aims to help the bully recognize the impact of their actions, develop empathy and alter their behaviour, and involves addressing the underlying causes of bullying behaviour through conversation and empathy-building in a non-conflictive and supportive environment. Bauman et al. (2008) found that while the teachers in their study generally supported disciplinary measures against the bullies, those with greater experience or professional training were more inclined to work directly with the bully. This finding is reinforced by Sairanen and Pfeffer (2011), who found that teachers with over 20 years of experience, or teachers who had anti-bullying training, were more likely to work with the bully than their less-experienced counterparts. These findings raise further questions about the lack of any recognized anti-bullying training or courses in pre-service teacher education programs.

In Class X I worked with a student who consistently engaged in bullying behaviour which was grounded in racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic views. Over time I learned that these views and values had been imparted upon him by his father and he used them to justify his treatment of classmates from different backgrounds. This scenario is mirrored in the findings of Grama et al. (2024), who found that parental factors such as authoritarianism and aversiveness are associated with higher rates of bullying and aggression. My attempts to address the bullying in class soon became entangled in a deeper conflict between myself and the student's father. When I

challenged the student's discriminatory views in school, I was not only confronting a disciplinary issue but also opposing a core part of the student's family identity. The father of the student was confrontational by nature and disagreed with me that his son was bullying other students–he would dismiss his behaviour as normal behaviour for a boy and pointed the finger of blame at the victims and at myself. This lack of understanding from the parent about what constitutes bullying behaviour is reflected in the findings of Stives et al. (2022), who found that when defining the term bullying, the majority of parents included intent in their definitions, while less than 20% of the surveyed parents included repetition and a power imbalance in their definitions. These divergent conceptualizations of bullying were at the core of the conflict between myself and the student's father.

Upon reflection of my experiences with this particular student and his father, I realize that I had placed the student in an impossible situation–he was left torn between two authority figures presenting opposing views. This resonates with findings from Van Niejenhuis et al. (2020), who highlighted the importance of good parent-school alignment, showing that cooperative interventions lead to more effective responses to bullying. Without such alignment, teachers can inadvertently escalate conflict and leave students caught between contradictory messages. Huang and Wan (2025) found that children who are exposed to inconsistent or authoritarian parenting styles may struggle with emotional regulation and peer relations, especially when school and home values conflict. They found that overprotective or unsupportive parents increased the risk of bullying behaviours, whereas parental warmth and emotional support reduced them. With this perspective, it is understandable that the confusion and frustration faced by the student in my class only fuelled his bullying behaviours.

Kollerová et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of strong inter-teacher relationships and a supportive collegial climate when working with bullies. They found that teachers were significantly more likely to work with the bully when they reported high levels of staff communication and trust within their schools. This suggests that to effectively challenge the attitudes and behaviours of students who bully, teachers must not only have the skills to work directly with the child, but also the backing of the school hierarchy and their fellow teachers, especially when facing pushback from families.

Working with the bully requires more than just confronting the behaviours – it requires a nuanced understanding of the child's social environment, family background and cultural influences. Teachers need to be prepared to not just address the symptom, but the underlying causes and emotional roots behind the bullying behaviour. Working with bullies can be complicated by uncooperative parents, conflicting cultural values, and school environments that may lack the systemic support necessary for effective intervention. It is unreasonable to expect that teachers with little or no training or knowledge of such complex and embroidered behaviours and interactions are prepared to intervene and act in an appropriate manor. Despite its challenges, working with the bully remains a crucial part of any successful bullying intervention strategy.

2.5.3 Working with the victim

Working with the victims of bullying presents different challenges from working with the bullies, particularly when the victim's vulnerabilities make them more susceptible to repeated targeting. In essence, the teacher's role is to help the victim cope with the actions or behaviours of others, and to support them in building the tools they need to break the cycle of victimization.

In my own teaching experience, one student stands out: a girl who, despite being kind-hearted and somewhat 'happy-go-lucky', was naïve, emotionally immature and socially underdeveloped for her age. She joined Class X midway through the year from a country outside of Europe and I immediately realized that she was going to struggle in the class, which was already problematic. Her behaviour, often awkward and laced with innocence, combined with her cultural and ethnic background, and linguistic and academic challenges, made her an easy target for the bullies. Vitoroulis and Georgiades (2017) found that immigrant students are at a higher risk of victimization when they feel low levels of belonging at school or when teacher cultural sensitivity is lacking. Similarly, Iannello et al. (2024), found that for children with immigrant backgrounds, higher social anxiety predicts future victimization, especially where children are less socially confident or where cultural/linguistic adjustment is required. The girl's ethnic background was certainly a draw for the bullies, as was her lack of social skills. In their 2005 UK study, Fox and Boulton (2005), found that both teachers and students described victims of bullying as having significantly poorer

social skills, particularly in standing up for themselves, handling peer interactions, and responding appropriately in social situations.

This student was very naïve and unaware that she had become the target of many jokes–joining in laughing when she was the target of quite cruel remarks and jokes about her appearance and behaviour. I worked closely with her for over a year and a half, and while I had some success in helping her, I could not fundamentally change her personality, and this limitation added to the complexity of resolving her situation. In some respects, she was her own worst enemy–not through any fault of her own, but she was socially underdeveloped to such an extent that she would do and say things in class that did not help her cause at all, and only served to exasperate her situation. This experience is echoed in the research of Kaukiainen et al. (2002), who found that lower social intelligence in children can be negatively associated with victimization and that children who are socially underdeveloped or have academic or learning difficulties are more likely to become victims of bullying.

With no specific training on how to support the victim of bullying, I was left feeling frustrated that I was not able to properly fulfil my professional obligation to the student. This sentiment is reflected in the findings of Sairanen and Pfeffer (2011), who found that teachers felt frustrated by their inability to provide effective support for victims due to a lack of training and confidence. Victims of bullying require more than just protection from the bullies–they need targeted social and emotional development–a specialized and nuanced area. Bauman et al. (2008), found similar results, observing that teachers were divided on how to support victims of bullying and often expressed frustration or confusion in how best to intervene when the victim's behaviour appeared to contribute to the bullying dynamic. This narrative should be distinguished from victim-blaming–no victim should ever be blamed for their victimization, but it highlights the very real difficulty teachers face when victims lack the social awareness or tools to protect themselves, and their behaviours further contribute to a bullying situation.

In Class X, a second student was the frequent target of bullying. This student was not as naïve or socially underdeveloped as the previously mentioned student but was highly emotional and extremely reactive. She was the frequent target of baiting from the bullies, who would attempt to get a reaction from her by doing or saying certain

things. This student simply could not resist reacting, whether through anger, tears, or visible frustration, essentially giving the bullies what they wanted, a reaction. In my time working with this victim, I would encourage her to be more calmly assertive and to try to ignore the baiting of the bullies. Kollerová et al. (2021) found that encouraging assertiveness or advising victims to stand up for themselves is often used by teachers, but its effectiveness is inconsistent and can backfire if the victim lacks the confidence to do so successfully. Fox and Boulton (2003) implemented a Social Skills Training (SST) program targeted at victims of bullying and found that there were no significant improvements in cases of bullying, and that over time bullying problems increased, suggesting a difficulty in maintaining behavioural change in the victims. They suggest that not all victims of bullying may benefit from social skills training because their issues may stem from deeper emotional regulation problems.

Working with the families and parents of the victims of bullying also plays an important role on the road to resolution. Ideally, parents become allies in the process–reinforcing the school's strategies at home, helping their child process events, and promoting resilience. In reality however, parents often expect immediate results regardless of the complexity of the situation. With their own child's best interests at heart, most parents cannot be blamed for having a lack of empathy or understanding towards the bully and can grow frustrated with the longer term non-confrontational measures employed by the teacher. With continued cases of bullying, I always tried to get the parents of both the bully and the victim to meet in the classroom, with me acting as a mediator. This was met with varying degrees of success where in many cases the parents of the bully would refuse to meet with the parents of the victim, and in other cases the meetings were very tense and emotions were running high. Herkama et al. (2022) found that teachers often feel unfairly held accountable by parents, and expressed frustration when parents refused to cooperate with each other.

Working with the victims of bullying is a process that requires time, patience and nuance. Bullies don't tend to choose their victims at random; they usually identify some kind of weakness in their targets which they can exploit. Working with the victims involves coordinated support between school and home that addresses the victim's vulnerabilities. Teachers must be sensitive to the child's personal and social

limitations, engage with the family in a constructive and transparent way, and be prepared for slow progress. As van Gils et al. (2024) found, successful interventions often rely on a combination of strategies, but most importantly, the victims of bullying must feel believed, supported, and safe within the school environment–only then can meaningful recovery begin.

2.5.4 Involving other adults

The complex nature of bullying cases in school means that it is often too difficult for teachers to tackle alone. This was certainly the case for my experiences with Class X, and I was fortunate enough to have a team of experienced teachers around me who I could trust to lean upon when needed. In my case, I was the only male teacher in my team, and I was surprised to find how important a role gender played when tackling the various incidences of bullying. I enlisted the help of an experienced female colleague, who would take all the girls from the class, while I would take the boys. We would discuss with each group separately and then reconvene to discuss together. I found that the girls in my class would open up to my colleague more than they did to me. This may have been a result of a lack of professional experience or knowledge on my behalf, or as Blomqvist et al. (2020) suggest, the female gender is associated with higher likelihood of disclosing to an adult, and female students often feel more comfortable disclosing sensitive experiences to female teachers who they perceive as more approachable or understanding.

Class X was a bilingual class, and while the English language levels in the class were good, the importance of the students' native language was highlighted when tackling the bullying issues. While I was able to communicate well with the students in English, for many of the students their native and emotional language was Finnish. This presented an invisible barrier between myself and the students who were not able to fully convey their feelings, thoughts and emotions in a second language. Language barriers can create social isolation and a heightened risk of bullying, and immigrants especially are at risk of higher levels of bullying victimization due to acculturation and language challenges, which can also reduce their likelihood of seeking help from teachers (Maynard et al., 2016). Enlisting the help of a trusted colleague who was a native Finn created a bridge of emotional safety for the students who could fully express themselves and feel comfortable doing so in their

native language. The importance of this linguistic connection is supported by Halvorsen et al. (2024), who found that young learners can have difficulties in expressing emotional experiences when interacting in a language that is not their native language, and that these barriers can hinder the child's ability to make themselves understood or express their emotional distress.

It is important that teachers are aware of the skills and strengths of their colleagues, recognize their own limitations, and view seeking support from colleagues not as a professional weakness but as an essential strategy for ensuring that victims receive appropriate support. Confident teachers are more likely to recognize when their own skills or knowledge are limited, and to bring in others without seeing it as a personal failure (Fischer et al., 2020). This is highly dependent on the school's collegial climate and the intrapersonal relationships within the school. Teacher collaboration and mutual trust are critical for enabling active and effective responses to bullying (Kollerová et al., 2021). Teachers need to have a shared trust, clear goals, and their values and strategies need to be aligned. Working with my colleagues provided me with different perspectives, insights and strategies that I alone could not have provided. Kollerová et al. (2021), found that there are stronger active responses to bullying in schools where teachers work in close collaboration and communicate effectively.

2.5.5 Mediation and restorative measures

Mediation and restorative measures are often discussed together in the literature, but they mean slightly different things depending on the context. Mediation is a conflict resolution approach which uses a neutral third party (typically a teacher, staff member or even another student) to facilitate dialogue between the students involved. Restorative measures focus on repairing the damage done by the bullying, and involve a dialogue between the students where the bully acknowledges the harm caused and the victim has a safe place to describe how they have been affected.

The goal of mediation is to provide an arena where both sides of a bullying incident can express their perspectives, develop a mutual understanding, and agree a way forward. The mediator will ask each student to "tell their story", and the other to listen without interrupting (Rigby, 2014). Both students should then suggest ways to move forward, and the mediator guides the students onto a mutually agreed pathway

forward. The benefit of such an approach is that the students are actively engaged in the process and can take ownership of the situation. In practice however, mediation is problematic because it assumes equal power between the parties (Rigby, 2014), and that both parties are actually interested in stopping the bullying. While mediation may work in minor peer conflicts, it is unlikely to work in more severe or repeated bullying situations like what I experienced with Class X. In essence, mediation aims for a compromise, which many could argue is not how bullying situations should be resolved as it implies the victim should compromise rather than the bully stop the behaviour.

Restorative measures embody a philosophical approach to wrongdoing where all concerned parties come together to decide how to repair the harm done after an incident has occurred (Gregory et al., 2014). It asks the questions “Who has been hurt? What are their needs? Who has the obligation to address the needs, to put right the harms, to restore relationships?” (Zehr, 2015, p. 91). The aim is to acknowledge the harm done, highlight responsibility, and heal relationships, while also addressing the power imbalances. Rather than seeking compromise, restorative approaches require the bully to recognize the impact of their actions and provide the victim with a voice in the process. Acosta et al. (2016) found that restorative practices improved the school climate and reduced behavioural problems, while Gregory et al. (2014), found that schools who employed restorative practices saw reductions in bullying and improved perceptions of safety.

Typically, restorative practices take the form of a group circle which has specific protocols or procedures that distinguish it from other classroom circles (like a morning circle). The teacher acts as the ‘circle-keeper’, and a talking piece gives the holder permission to speak. Adult stakeholders such as parents may also be invited to attend. Many teachers choose to have a centerpiece in the middle of the circle like a candle, which signifies the sacredness of the space (Marcucci, 2021). The bully is required to listen to how the victim has been affected by their actions, and to reflect upon what they were thinking about at the time and what they think now. The intention is to elicit a sense of shame or remorse from the bully, who can then make suggestions about how to move forward (Rigby, 2014).

Despite the many documented successes of restorative approaches, it may not always be suitable for all cases of bullying. If teachers are not properly trained, or if the approach is poorly implemented, outcomes can be undermined leaving students dissatisfied or even further traumatized (Marcucci, 2021). Restorative approaches require significant skill from the teacher to manage emotions and to prevent power imbalances from re-emerging. There is likely to be considerable pressure on the bully to make acceptable suggestions, especially when other people are present, so the teacher must ensure that the interaction between the bully and victim is genuine and that any resolution does not minimize the seriousness of the bullying (Rigby, 2014). The literature suggests that restorative practices hold greater potential than mediation for addressing bullying in schools, though their effectiveness is highly conditional on training, school culture, and careful facilitation.

2.6 KiVa Koulu

The information in this section of the thesis is intended to provide the reader with important contextual background for understanding bullying prevention and intervention in Finnish schools. The KiVa Koulu program has played a prominent role in Finnish anti-bullying practices over the last decade and it offers a useful framework against which teachers' experiences and strategies can be interpreted. By outlining the key principles of the program, I aim to better understand the significance of its reported decline or inconsistency in the five schools represented in this study.

The KiVa Koulu program is a research and evidence-based antibullying program developed at the University of Turku by Professor Christina Salmivalli which has also been implemented in many countries around the world. It is a self-proclaimed "gift from Finland to the rest of the world" (KiVa Program, n.d.). The program distinct from other anti-bullying programs as it provides schools and teachers with concrete and structured lessons and activities, as well as modern web-based learning environments, rather than offering "guiding principles" or "philosophies" (Kärnä et al., 2011). The KiVa program is centred around the "participant role approach" to bullying, where bullying is viewed as a group-based social process, rather than an individual problem (Salmivalli et al., 2013).

In the participant role approach to bullying, bystanders play a crucial role in bullying behaviours as they socially reward the bullies for their behaviours by joining in with

the behaviours, laughing, or merely passively observing situations without doing anything on behalf of the victim (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Bullying behaviour can be, at least partly, motivated by a pursuit of high social status in the peer group (Juvonen & Galván, 2008), and a lack of action from bystanders can provide the bullies with the sense of power that they seek. When bystanders defend victims, they can undermine the bully's social standing and create a shift in peer attitudes against them (Kärnä et al., 2011). The KiVa program focuses on changing the culture and dynamics within the peer groups that maintain bullying, rather than trying to change individual bullies or support their victims.

The KiVa program has been adopted in around 90% Finnish primary schools (Herkama et al., 2022), and thus provides an important context for understanding how teachers experience and respond to cases of bullying in Finland. When implemented correctly and consistently, KiVa offers structure and support for teacher interventions and has shown to be effective in reducing bullying and victimization (Kärnä et al., 2011).

2.6.1 Core components of the KiVa Koulu program

The KiVa Koulu program is designed as a whole-school approach to bullying and consists of two clear components – universal (prevention) actions targeted to all students, and indicated (intervention) actions to be utilized when acute cases of bullying emerge (Herkama et al., 2022). The program has three different developmentally appropriate versions for grades 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9, and each school implementing the program should designate a KiVa team, consisting of three or more teachers, who intervene in cases of bullying.

Preventative actions are designed to target all students, and form the backbone of the KiVa program. These universal actions include grade specific lessons and online games, visible KiVa symbols around the school, ready-made materials for special events, teacher manuals and parent guides (Herkama et al., 2022). This universal component of the program is typically carried out by classroom teachers and it covers a variety of issues related to group interactions in general, encouraging all students to take action to counter bullying behaviours and to support the victims.

Teachers deliver a series of structured lessons during the school year which involve discussions, group work, role-play exercises, and short films about bullying. The intended aim is to raise awareness of the role that the group plays in maintaining bullying, to increase empathy toward the victims, and to promote the students' self-efficacy to act as defenders and to shift peer norms so that bullying is socially condemned (Kärnä et al., 2011). A virtual learning environment is provided in which students can practice and strengthen the skills they have learned in the lessons, and parents are provided with a guide which reinforces the content provided at school (University of Turku & Ministry of the Interior, 2009). The materials provided by the program offer teachers concrete strategies for shaping classroom culture; however, the effectiveness of KiVa ultimately depends on how teachers implement these strategies and how consistently the school leadership supports and monitors adherence to the program.

When a specific bullying incident is identified, the school KiVa team and the classroom teacher will intervene using indicated actions. These actions consist of a series of discussions with the bullies and the victims carried out both individually and as a group by the KiVa team. In addition, the classroom teacher will meet with selected high-status classmates of the victim, challenging them to provide support for the victim (University of Turku & Ministry of the Interior, 2009).

The KiVa teacher manuals provide teachers with two primary styles of discussion: a confronting approach, where the bully is explicitly told that their behaviour will not be tolerated, and a non-confronting approach, which focuses on eliciting empathy and exploring how the bully might act differently (Johander et al., 2021). In this 2021 study analysing how teachers use these two contrasting discussion styles, Johander et al. found that teachers did not simply follow the KiVa procedures, but they chose and adapted the strategies in the teacher manual based upon their professional judgement, perceived student needs, and the shared practices of their school, with varying degrees of success.

Beyond the universal and indicated components of KiVa, there is a monitoring dimension–students and teachers complete annual online surveys, receive feedback and reports on their implementation and progress, and are encouraged to maintain

visible KiVa branding (posters, vests for recess supervision) and parent-guidance materials (Salmivalli et al., 2013).

2.6.2 Barriers and challenges to sustaining the KiVa program over time

The KiVa program provides schools with a structured framework for bullying prevention and intervention, but its long-term sustainability is solely dependent upon the hierarchy within a school and how they ensure the program is implemented consistently and to the right standards over time. Strong and consistent school leadership is crucial for sustaining KiVa over time, and changes in school hierarchy can impact how consistently KiVa is implemented.

Herkama et al. (2022) found that schools where KiVa remained embedded in everyday practice were characterized by visible leadership commitment, clear coordination, and collective staff responsibility. Teachers emphasized that sustaining KiVa required coordination, leadership, and ongoing commitment and when staff turnover occurred or leadership support weakened, implementation “messed things up” and risked declining over time (Herkama et al., 2022, p. 962). This echoes my experiences of working in schools that superficially identify as KiVa schools but have no active KiVa team or updated training. For KiVa to remain consistently implemented requires headteacher and administrative support and motivated teachers who advocate for it within the school. Teacher buy-in and ownership is essential for long-term maintenance of the program because when implementation is delegated to individual teachers without the support of the school hierarchy and administration, the program identity weakens and practice becomes inconsistent (Sainio et al., 2020).

The long-term success of KiVa depends on how completely schools deliver the program’s components. Kärnä et al. (2011), found that reductions in bullying correlated directly with implementation fidelity - how well the teachers actually taught the lessons and used the prescribed components of the program. More recently Sainio et al. (2020) found that high implementing schools have active KiVa teams, regular monitoring, and strong headteacher engagement, while low implementing schools suffered from high staff turnover and waning enthusiasm from teachers. This highlights the importance of maintenance and consistency–schools are dynamic

environments where the effectiveness of KiVa can quickly wain if leadership or staff commitment diminishes.

Teachers have a heavy workload, and there is a real risk that busy teachers may view KiVa as another unwanted element to add to their already stretched emotional and intellectual resources. Sainio et al. (2020) reported that teacher burnout and limited time were significant predictors of declining implementation, while Herkama et al. (2022) similarly found that teachers cited time pressure and competing priorities as barriers to following KiVa procedures. Effective and consistent KiVa implementation requires time and commitment from teachers. For example, the KiVa curriculum for grades 4–6 comprises ten double lessons (each lasting approximately 90 minutes) that are implemented across the school year (Kärnä et al., 2011). This represents a substantial demand on teachers' already stretched schedules and does not account for the additional time required for intervention meetings, follow-up sessions, and documentation. Johander et al. (2021) also reported that some teachers faced parental resistance, further complicating indicated cases and contributed to emotional exhaustion.

Over time, maintaining KiVa requires that new teachers are inducted into its principles and that the school culture continues to value it. Salmivalli et al. (2013) argue that bullying prevention must become a normal feature of school life, not a temporary campaign. The issue is that when leadership changes or staff turnover occurs, KiVa knowledge can dissipate, leaving only superficial identification with the program. Sainio et al. (2020) warn that without ongoing professional learning and monitoring, even high-implementing schools are at risk of losing their connection with the KiVa program.

3 Methodology

This study sought to explore Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of responding to bullying and cyberbullying. To address this aim, the following questions were formulated to guide the data collection and analysis:

1. What are Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of responding to instances of bullying and cyberbullying?

    a. How do primary school teachers in Finland conceptualize bullying and cyberbullying?

    b. What are the barriers and challenges faced by primary school teachers in Finland when dealing with bullying and cyberbullying?

    c. What strategies do primary school teachers in Finland use in response to instances of bullying and cyberbullying?

2. What forms of preparation and support do primary school teachers consider important for newly qualified teachers dealing with bullying and cyberbullying?

The study was conducted with ten Finnish primary school teachers during Autumn 2025. The study adopted an inductive qualitative exploratory design, using semi-structured interviews to investigate teachers' experiences of being involved with cases of bullying. The data was analysed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes in the teachers' approaches while allowing for attention to nuance and context.

3.1 Study design

The study adopted an inductive qualitative exploratory design (Stebbins, 2001), to explore Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of responding to cases of bullying and cyberbullying. A semi-structured interview format was chosen as it allowed teachers to express their perspectives and decision-making processes while remaining grounded in actual educational contexts. The purpose of the study was to understand the reasoning, challenges and contextual factors that influence how teachers respond to bullying in school.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely describe their experiences in their own words while ensuring that discussions remained relevant to the research questions. This design supported the study's aim to uncover not only what strategies teachers use in cases of bullying, but also why they choose particular approaches and the factors that inform their decisions.

3.2 Participants and context

The study involved ten fully qualified primary school teachers (two male and eight female) working in five different schools within the same city in Finland. All participants had more than ten years of teaching experience, ensuring that they were able to draw upon their substantial professional knowledge when reflecting on their experiences of bullying and cyberbullying. Three of the schools were mainstream Finnish primary schools, one school was a bilingual primary school and one school was a Steiner School.

Participants were recruited through personal professional contacts. This allowed access to experienced teachers who were willing to share detailed and honest accounts of their experiences while feeling at ease with the interviewer. Each participant received an information sheet outlining the purpose and nature of the study (see Appendix 1) a few days before the interview and provided informed consent prior to participation (Appendix 2). The interviewees were informed how their data would be stored and handled, and were aware that they could refuse to answer any questions or that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. No interview questions were shared with the participants in advance to ensure their spontaneous and authentic responses.

A summary of the participant characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Teacher code, age, gender, years of service & school.

Teacher code	Age	Gender	Years of service	Type of school
A1	42	Female	11	Mainstream Finnish school 1
A2	49	Male	23	Mainstream Finnish school 1
B1	46	Female	20	Bilingual (EN/FI) primary school
B2	43	Female	15	Bilingual (EN/FI) primary school
B3	43	Female	15	Bilingual (EN/FI) primary school
B4	49	Female	18	Bilingual (EN/FI) primary school
B5	48	Female	26	Bilingual (EN/FI) primary school
C1	44	Female	20	Mainstream Finnish school 2
D1	54	Male	27	Mainstream Finnish school 3
E1	43	Female	19	Steiner School

The ten participants were aged from 42 to 54, with a mean age of 46. All of the teachers had over ten years experience, with half of the teachers having over 20 years experience. All of the teachers gained their teaching qualifications in Finland and the teacher from the Steiner school had the relevant qualification for working within the Steiner educational philosophy. A2 and B4 were the vice principals of their respective schools, and B2 was the current principal of school B.

3.3 Data collection instrument and procedure

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore the teachers' experiences, strategies, and challenges in responding to bullying and cyberbullying. Semi structured interviews were selected because they provide both structure and flexibility ensuring that the discussion remained aligned with the research questions while allowing still participants to elaborate on personal experiences and contextual factors.

The interview questions were developed directly from the study's research aims and consisted of nineteen open-ended questions divided into five thematic sections (see Appendix 3). The first two sections included general questions about the participants'

teaching background and experiences, as well as their personal definitions of bullying and cyberbullying. These initial questions were intentionally designed to be introductory in nature, helping to establish rapport, put participants at ease, and encourage reflective engagement with the topic.

The third section comprised five questions aimed at exploring the strategies and approaches teachers use when addressing bullying incidents, and the factors influencing their decision-making. These questions invited teachers to describe their actions and the reasoning behind them, uncovering aspects of their decision-making process that they might not have been consciously aware of. The fourth section focused on the teachers' lived experiences of bullying in schools and was designed to elicit insights into what has been effective and what challenges have arisen in their previous interventions. These questions provided contextual grounding for the earlier discussion of strategies. Finally, the interview concluded with some reflective questions intended to allow teachers to summarize their overall views, offer advice to new teachers, and share perspectives that could inform future research and professional practice related to bullying prevention and intervention.

A pilot interview was conducted with one teacher who was not one of the interviewees to test the clarity and sequencing of questions. Some minor adjustments were made to the questions to improve flow and ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions. All interviews were conducted in English, as all participants had a strong grasp of the language and were comfortable expressing themselves in English. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and took place face-to-face. All of the interviews were organized in the teachers' school either in their classroom or in a designated school meeting room. The interviews were audio recorded with the teachers' consent and subsequently transcribed. Notes were taken during the interviews to help capture contextual observations and to highlight certain points in the interview.

3.4 Data analysis procedure

The data from the transcripts was analysed using an inductive qualitative approach. The codes and themes were allowed to emerge naturally from the data, ensuring that the data was properly represented. The coding was done two months after the interviews were conducted, ensuring I approached each transcript neutrally and

without bias. I read each interview twice, building a familiarity with each individual case before developing the initial coding scheme, which was organized into four broad sections, each corresponding to the four research questions. I applied the initial version of the coding scheme to one transcript first, after which I refined it slightly and then applied it to the remaining nine transcripts. An excerpt from the coding scheme can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: An excerpt from the coding scheme for research question 1a.

	Code	Meaning	Description
RQ1a			
	BD	Bullying definitions	Definitions of bullying or cyberbullying.
			Includes gaps in knowledge and misunderstandings of these concepts.
	CB	Cyberbullying	References to cyberbullying.
			Includes challenges, definitions, distinctions from traditional bullying, and frustrations associated with addressing it.

Each participant was allocated their own spreadsheet, with separate tabs created for each research question. Each tab had columns representing the various emerging codes and themes. For example, BC(t/r) was the code for ‘Barriers & Challenges, (time and resources)’ as ‘Barriers & Challenges’ was a central part of question 1b, and ‘time and resources’ was a major idea which emerged from the data. All ten transcripts were coded one at a time, and the entire coding process was completed twice, ensuring I had not missed any important data during the initial coding, improving the consistency and accuracy of the analysis.

Direct extracts were taken from the transcripts and pasted into the spreadsheets. Each spreadsheet built a clear picture of which areas were data-rich for each participant. No underlying or latent meanings were inferred from the data–only direct extracts were used. This approach is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study, ensuring that the findings represented the teachers’ real and lived experiences in their own words. The final themes were linked to the individual research questions, but the analysis was not always linear. The teachers often addressed multiple issues within a single response, or provided answers to different questions while answering another question.

My thesis supervisor reviewed the coding process and ensured that the analysis remained clear and grounded in the data. To improve validity, my coding scheme and a single data spreadsheet was shared with an external party with knowledge of educational research, who reviewed the organization of the codes and provided feedback on their clarity and logic.

3.5 Ethics, quality of research and limitations

This study was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the University of Turku and those of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. All stages of the research process, including the interviews and data handling procedures, were discussed and approved by my thesis supervisor. All participants gave their full informed consent and their participation in the study was completely voluntary. Particular attention was paid to the potential impact of my dual role in the study as both a colleague to the participants and as the researcher.

The study participants were recruited exclusively through my existing professional contacts as I have worked alongside each participant in some capacity during the past ten years. During the interview, the participants were provided with paper copies of the consent form and the information about the study sheet. Two paper copies of the consent form were provided and signed, one retained by the participant and one by myself. The participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary, that they could refuse to answer any questions, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. The participants were provided with my contact information and that of the thesis supervisor, and were made aware that they could contact either of us at any time regarding the research.

To enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the research, a pilot interview was conducted with a teacher who did not participate in the main study in order to refine the wording and sequencing of the questions. During the interviews, I made brief notes to capture contextual details and initial reflections on the nature of the participants' responses. Each participant was asked the same set of 18 core questions while additional follow-up questions were asked where necessary to probe more deeply or clarify meanings, ensuring that the overall flow and focus of the interviews remained consistent across all participants.

I personally conducted all interviews face-to-face, which helped maintain uniformity in questioning technique and data recording, and reduced the potential for variation in data collection procedures. All interviews were conducted on school premises, either in the participants' own classrooms or in another quiet room within the school. This setting was deliberately chosen to ensure that teachers were interviewed in a familiar and comfortable environment, which was expected to support open and reflective discussion. With the exception of one case, interviews took place at the end of the teachers' workday, thereby reducing the likelihood of interruptions and limiting time pressure. All interviews were digitally recorded using two separate devices to minimize the risk of technical failure and inadvertent data loss.

During the data analysis procedure, each teacher and school were given a designated code. The city in which the schools are located is not identified at any point, nor is any personally identifying information such as school, teacher or student names or class details. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by myself. The audio recordings and transcriptions were stored on Seafile (The University of Turku's secure, self-hosted cloud storage), and the data will be deleted once the thesis has been approved.

My status as both the researcher and colleague to the participants facilitated access and encouraged open discussion but carried a risk of bias and social desirability in the participants' responses. Bullying is a professionally sensitive topic and being interviewed by a colleague may have influenced the teachers to present their actions in a more favourable or professionally appropriate way than what actually occurred in reality. To combat this potential risk, I emphasized at the beginning of each interview that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and that I was not evaluating their professionalism. Each participant was encouraged to answer as honestly as possible, without feeling the need to impress or justify their actions, and to describe their experiences as they actually occurred.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this study. The sample of participants is small and context specific. All ten participants worked in five schools in a single Finnish city and therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all primary schools in Finland. All participants were recruited through personal professional contacts. Hence, despite efforts to minimize any potential

social desirability on the participants' behalf, it cannot be dismissed. Similarly, participants' retrospective accounts of bullying incidents may have been influenced by recall bias, meaning that events are remembered or described differently from how they actually occurred, especially in hindsight. All interviews were conducted in English, which is not the first language of the participants. While all participants were fluent in English and were given the option to answer in Finnish (an option none chose to use), the possibility remains that some nuances or emotional expressions were shaped by the use of a second language. As the sole researcher, the possibility of interpreter bias cannot be completely eliminated, but efforts were made to ground the themes in the data, to ensure that the process was completely transparent, and to thoroughly discuss the coding with my supervisor.

This study relied solely on the teachers' self-reported experiences. There were no classroom or school observations, nor were student perspectives included. Given the sensitive and unpredictable nature of bullying, direct observations of real incidences were simply not feasible or ethically appropriate. The absence of student voices and observational data means that the study only reflects how teachers perceive and describe their responses to bullying. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating student perspectives or analysis of school policies.

Despite these limitations, the study ensured the ethical participation of the interviewees and utilized consistent data collection, storage and analytical methods. The findings of the study provide an in-depth and contextually grounded account of experienced teachers' perspectives on responding to incidences of bullying and cyberbullying, and provides future teachers with valuable information which can inform their future practice.

4 Findings

In presenting the findings in this section, relevant literature is drawn upon to position the teachers' accounts within the wider research field. This allows the reader to see where the findings are in line with the existing literature and where they point to less explored aspects of teachers' experiences. References are also made to my experiences with Class X, as this was fundamental to my motivation for the study and provides a useful point of reflection alongside the findings. Certain interpretations were also made in order to emphasize the importance of a finding right in the context that it was displayed. Presenting the findings in this way helps connect the empirical data, literature, personal experiences and sound interpretations in a cohesive and purposeful manner.

4.1 How teachers understand bullying and cyberbullying

4.1.1 Bullying as repeated, intentional harm

Across the ten interviews, teachers described bullying in ways that broadly align with Olweus' (1993) definition of repeated behaviours with intent to harm, accompanied by a power imbalance between the individuals involved. The teachers' responses varied markedly in how precisely they articulated bullying: some offered definitions closely aligned with research criteria, whereas others struggled to offer satisfactory definitions. This range of understandings underscores the conceptual ambiguity teachers face when applying the term 'bullying' to complex, real-life classroom situations.

Several teachers explicitly mentioned repetition and intent. B5, for example, defined bullying as "something that goes on and on for a long period," adding that if students know they can "annoy someone easily, and it makes them angry… that is bullying too." B4 similarly described bullying as a situation where "a stronger person attacks a weaker one constantly," and that "one or two times calling someone names is not bullying, it has to be ongoing." E1 also emphasized repetition, saying it is when someone "repeatedly causes harm to another kid" and that "it has to be a repeated behaviour, because otherwise it's not bullying."

B2 built the victim's experience directly into their definition, arguing that bullying is not only about repeated acts but also about how the target experiences them, suggesting that "if a person experiences it and feels like someone is bullying them, that's bullying." The same teacher also included social exclusion in their definition, stating that "leaving someone alone or excluding them–that's also bullying."

Among the ten participants, there was some definitional convergence around repetition, intentional harm and power imbalance, particularly among B4, B5 and E1 who clearly distinguished bullying from isolated incidents or general misbehaviour. This however, was not universal. A2, B3, C1 and D1, struggled to articulate these elements explicitly, describing bullying as "inappropriate behaviour against other people", "making someone feel bad in some way" or "to cause someone to feel bad or to physically hurt someone." The fact that several fully qualified and highly experienced teachers could not provide a precise or consistent definition of bullying suggests that their knowledge of bullying is not as conceptually secure as one would expect. The suggestion that not all experienced teachers hold a stable, explicit understanding of bullying reinforces the need for more explicit attention to bullying in both teacher education and in-service training, so that teachers are not left to rely solely on intuition when deciding which situations warrant a bullying response.

Overall, the teachers showed that they understand how bullying presents in school and are able to see it in their classroom, even if they were unable to articulate a full definition of bullying. The literature places an emphasis on repetition, intentionality and power imbalance, and while most of the teachers understood these elements, their accounts of bullying reveal how blurred the edges of that definition can become in practice. There will always be a grey area between conflict, misbehaviour and bullying, and teachers must ensure they are "present all the time and keep all the little strings in your hands" (E1).

4.1.2 Conceptual ambiguity

Some of the teachers reported that in recent times the word "bullying" is being used far too frequently and broadly in their day-to-day experiences by both students and parents. This overuse of the term "bullying" contributes to disputes over what really counts as bullying and what does not. B1 described how younger students often apply the label to almost any negative interaction or whenever they feel treated

unfairly, regardless of whether there is any repetition, targeting, or power imbalance: “My class… they say ‘he bullies me’… I try to say it’s not actually bullying… it’s just a disagreement… it’s important to know what bullying is and what it isn’t.” B5 reported that the children who most loudly accuse others of bullying are sometimes the same ones who repeatedly irritate or provoke their classmates. In her view, these students both “look for trouble” and then frame the reaction as bullying. Similarly, B3 stated that “everyone is bullying all the time when it’s like them [that are the problem].”

The threshold between conflict and bullying is further highlighted by B4 and D1. One-off incidents, even if unpleasant, do not automatically constitute bullying - B4 said that “one or two times calling someone names is not bullying,” while D1 distinguished bullying from bad behaviour, arguing that “kids do behave badly without bullying.” Teachers also reported that both students and parents can have difficulties gauging the threshold between conflict and bullying. B2 described situations from her past where parents claim strongly that their child is being bullied while she is “absolutely certain that it is not bullying”, while D1 described how he often has to explain to parents that the incident they are reporting is bad behaviour rather than bullying, while assuring them that he is addressing it at school. These cases highlight the difficult task facing teachers who need to challenge the bullying label without minimizing the child’s experience or appearing indifferent.

The responses from teachers indicate that they are working in a slightly ambiguous conceptual space. When teachers, students and parents have differing understandings of what actually constitutes bullying, it puts more pressure on teachers to operate in the space between their own understanding of bullying and the more emotionally driven understanding of students and parents. This resonates with previous research from Salmivalli et al. (2013) and Kärnä et al. (2011), who claim that the differing views and understandings of bullying between different parties can only be supported by schools who have clear conceptual frameworks which support consistent responses. These conceptual disputes strengthen the argument that bullying should not be treated only as a practical classroom problem, but that teacher education programs should include both the conceptual foundations of bullying and the practical skills of bullying resolution as a compulsory part of their curriculum.

4.1.3 Cyberbullying - the same but “harder”

When asked to define cyberbullying and describe cases from their own work, most teachers reported little or no direct experience with it. This is likely due to the fact that primary aged children are less active online than older children and that cyberbullying typically becomes a more prominent issue in later school years: “first graders and second graders don’t really have cyberbullying as such. I think it’s a problem with the older ones” (B1). B1 went on to link more serious online problems to secondary schools, where pupils are more active on TikTok, Snapchat, WhatsApp and other platforms. B2 similarly framed her own primary-level experiences as limited, describing herself as “too old for this” and emphasizing that the few cases she had dealt with were mainly related to class WhatsApp groups rather than broader social media. This fits well with the research from Kowalski et al. (2014) and Slonje et al. (2012) which show that involvement in cyberbullying typically increases with age and peaks in early to mid-adolescence, when access to smartphones and social media becomes more ubiquitous. The teachers’ primary-school experiences in this study seem to reflect broader trends in when cyberbullying tends to become most visible.

Most teachers framed cyberbullying as essentially the same phenomenon as traditional bullying but taking place through digital tools - making it more difficult to see and control. A2 said “cyberbullying, I think it's the same thing it's about inappropriate like talk, messages, videos about someone else.” Similarly, D1 explained “for cyberbullying I think everything is happening online like the same thing but happening online”, and C1 said “cyberbullying, I think it's the same, but it's just working in the web.”

B3 also framed cyberbullying as “the same thing”, but via messages and group chats: “I suppose that is the same thing that someone might be lashing out on someone else… they start [message] bombing a certain person, doing it over and over again.” B4 had not experienced any cases of cyberbullying in her career but still anchored her definition in the same core features, saying “I suppose it's the same that if there's some sort of like that power imbalance.” E1 linked school and online arenas together, arguing that things that happen outside of school often have an impact in the classroom:

> “Nowadays the situation is that people are friends at school, but something is always happening in the cyber world, which affects life at school…. it can like accumulate that there's always this little kind of invisible thing you don't see.”

These descriptions of cyberbullying are consistent with the research of Slonje et al. (2012) that cyberbullying often overlaps with traditional bullying, involving the same actors and power dynamics but operating through digital channels rather than face-to-face.

Despite the definitional similarities between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, the teachers were united in describing why cyberbullying is harder to see, prove and contain in practice than traditional bullying. A1 highlighted the timing and location of incidents: “Often these cyber things happen in their free time… you don’t see it, and it’s very abstract… it’s hard to find out what actually happened.” She also emphasized the invisibility of online incidents for teachers: “You don't see it, that's true, and when it is invisible in that way… it’s hard to find out what actually happened.” She described her experiences of cyberbullying cases as involving “thousands of messages and someone deleting something… like how can I tell if this is even real or if this is fake?” concluding that she finds such cases “way harder” to deal with than face-to-face bullying.

A2 likewise described cyberbullying incidents as an “investigation” where the teacher becomes “more of a detective,” needing to collect fragments of evidence, ask multiple pupils for screenshots and accounts, and work around the fact that messages are private and cannot simply be confiscated and searched. He also underlined the problem of missing evidence: “that frustrates me the most, maybe… when you might know that there's something, but how to do it when you don't have evidence? There's just word against word.”

B5 connected social media directly to the challenges of cyberbullying: “Also this social media thing… Snapchat messages disappear… terrible situations where some pupil you couldn’t have pictured writes ‘you are so ugly and fat and I wish you would die’.” Her comment captures a growing concern regarding the connection between social media and cyberbullying that children who appear kind and well-behaved at school may participate in quite different, sometimes hidden, online behaviours. These accounts resonate with research emphasizing the anonymity, permanence and 24/7

nature of online communication as factors that complicate intervention and intensify harm for victims (Slonje et al., 2012; Tokunaga, 2010).

B2 recounted a more serious example of cyberbullying where an unknown adult was added to a class WhatsApp group and sent inappropriate messages to a student, leading to police involvement. Another serious case described by A1 involved a pornographic profile being created in her name and shared online, also ultimately involving the police. These incidents underline why several teachers characterized cyberbullying as “harder” than traditional bullying, even if they saw it as conceptually similar.

Across these accounts, teachers repeatedly highlighted two core features that make cyberbullying “the same but harder” as traditional bullying:

1. It often happens outside school hours but still affects the classroom. A1, B2, C1, D1 and E1 all gave examples where weekend or evening online conflicts led to tensions at school. Such incidences take place on the students' private devices, which creates uncertainty about how far the class teacher can intervene. D1 responded by working with parents to shut down a problematic WhatsApp group altogether, while B2 focused on discussing acceptable online behaviour in class and encouraging pupils to bring problems to adults early. These dilemmas mirror broader debates in the literature about the school’s role in addressing cyberbullying that takes place out of school but clearly impacts the school community (Kowalski et al., 2014).

2. There is often a mismatch between teacher competence and students’ online worlds. Several teachers expressed uncertainty and lack of confidence regarding cyberbullying. B2 explicitly described herself as “too old for this” while B3, C1 and D1 also struggled to articulate more than vague examples. B4 and B5 both recognized that students live increasingly online lives, and that those social dynamics can be difficult for teachers to understand or follow: “children are very like talented and skilled nowadays, so they could like steal someone's account…” (B4). This mismatch between students’ digital practices and teachers’ sense of competence is well documented in cyberbullying research by Eden et al. (2013), where teachers frequently reported feeling

> underprepared for cyberbullying cases and unsure about the most effective responses.

Overall, the teachers in this study portrayed cyberbullying as the same as an extension of traditional bullying, but more challenging to see, evidence and resolve. The main difficulties stem from the fact that cyberbullying often takes place outside of school and in digital arenas in which children are often better versed than teachers.

4.2 The barriers and challenges faced by teachers

4.2.1 Time and workload

Across the interviews, teachers repeatedly identified a lack of time and heavy workload as one of the biggest obstacles to dealing with bullying properly. The sentiment among the majority of the teachers was that they wanted to help, but felt that the limitations of being responsible for a class of children meant that they were not always able to give the time and attention needed to resolve cases of bullying.

Multiple teachers felt that dealing with bullying cases was something that had to be squeezed into small gaps in the day. C1 said:

> “I think the time. It was easier in secondary school, because… [there was more flexibility]. Here in primary school, I have to keep the lessons, so I have about five minutes each break time to deal with bullying and other things, so it's really short.”

Similarly, B3 highlighted the trade-off between dealing with bullying situations while supervising her class:

> “It’s always really hard to find the time to be talking to pupils about stuff that has happened at recess because then it's always like the rest of the class is basically neglected when I’m in the hallway with some other pupils.”

Both of these examples highlight the difficulty in being responsible for a class of children while having to be involved with bullying cases, ultimately resulting in the teacher’s attention not being fully committed to either. The stressful nature of dealing with bullying cases can also mean that once a teacher has finished discussing a

bullying issue, it can be difficult to immediately switch to a ‘calm and controlled teacher’ mindset.

Even when teachers do carve out time, bullying cases can take days of work. A2 described how one recent incident has dominated his schedule: “The time is also a problem for me, it’s very stressful.” He went on to explain that dealing with a single case can take “more than an hour today and it will continue tomorrow–just this one case!”, spreading a single situation across multiple days of interviews, phone calls and follow-up. In that time, normal teaching, planning and preparation are pushed aside. E1 also underlined the time cost of dealing with bullying and felt that the biggest challenge facing her were time constraints and the mental load: “I would say it's the time, it's very time consuming… it ruins the whole spirit of the class, and it's really like uninspiring as a teacher.”

These accounts of time constraints line up with research on teacher workload and burnout. Van Verseveld et al. (2020) reported that teachers lack the time to deal with persistent bullying problems and that teachers often feel they are “putting out fires” rather than addressing the roots of persistent bullying. A1, A2, B3, C1 and E1 all reported similar feelings that short recess breaks between lessons do not afford enough time to address such deep and complex issues and to change the underlying dynamics. Aloe et al. (2014) found that student bullying contributes strongly to teacher emotional exhaustion and burnout, and Kollerová et al. (2023) similarly showed that exposure to bullying is a major predictor of teacher exhaustion.

The time and workload issues are not only limited to teachers, but it has an impact on implementing school programs and policies. KiVa research has shown that successful implementation depends heavily on schools allocating enough time to support lessons and activities. Herkama et al. (2022) and Sainio et al. (2020), both highlight that time and coordination in schools act as central facilitators or obstacles to the implementation of KiVa policies; the data from this study suggests the latter. B1 bluntly described that she simply didn’t have time to fully implement KiVa lessons in her previous school: “it was annoying that we had to have those lessons because… not all of the lessons were good… you're busy you’ve got other things going on.”

Time and workload emerged as a core barrier shaping how the teachers in this study were able to respond to bullying. If teachers are expected to take bullying seriously, schools and teacher education programs need to recognize that current school structures do not allow teachers to fully commit the time and attention that such deep, complex social and behavioural problems require.

4.2.2 Parents as both partners and obstacles

The teachers in this study repeatedly described parents as crucial actors in bullying cases–for better and for worse. Their accounts reveal three distinct categories of parents: defensive parents who believe everything their child tells them, parents who bring their own emotional baggage into their children's school lives, and parents who genuinely act as partners.

Several teachers revealed that one of the most challenging aspects of bullying resolution is not necessarily focused on the children, but involves parents who refused to accept their child's role in cases of bullying. This resonates heavily with my own experiences of working with class X and a particular boy whose father refused to accept that his son was bullying others. B5 described how some parents respond when confronted with evidence about their child's behaviour:

> "They have, for example, put some really nasty messages about someone that you are so ugly and fat and I wish you would die or something… and it's someone who's really nice at school… and parents nowadays can be really, you know, that, 'oh, she's just saying… not my [child]', it's really common these days."

Here, B5 is describing how the parents' first reaction is to defend their child rather than to accept any wrongdoing regardless of any evidence. This matches what the research by Holt et al. (2009) found that parents are far less likely to recognize their children as bullies than as victims.

A2 also described parents who defend their children: "often you get the parents of the bully defending and that's the difficult one." Similarly, B4 explained similar situations: "if the child tells a different story at home, the parents believe them [and] they couldn't ever imagine that their child has done something here at school."

The ‘believing everything your child says’ narrative is also applicable for children who claim to be victims of bullying. While this is a deeply complex and sensitive area, the teachers suggest that it is a problem that they often need to address. B3 described parents over-identifying with their child’s victim narrative:

> “Parents insist that their child is being bullied when the child is not… and they look at it through the glasses of this bullying scheme and they just like take it word for word everything that their child has said is the truth.”

D1 also reported parents who claim that their child is a victim of bullying: “some parents are too quick to believe everything their child tells them… and you have to tell them… actually it's not bullying it's bad behaviour.” E1 also had similar experiences:

> “The problems start when you have pupils who are like colouring things at home - the situation that has happened at school, and then the parents believe, and then they're just like, are you accusing my child to be a liar?”

These descriptions show how parents who take their child’s account as unquestionable can cause challenges for teachers. Reactive parents who choose to challenge teachers without wanting to hear the teachers’ observations and opinions can turn even minor situations into unnecessary dramas:

> “I've found that sometimes parents can be quite reactive - like if they read a message or something, they're going to react immediately without thinking about it or maybe talking to their child. They just see one thing and then they just like react to it immediately.” (B5)

The stress that handling these situations can cause is not only cognitive but emotional. B2 explicitly linked dealing with parents to the need to develop a psychological shield: “and you have to kasvattaa panssari (grow your armor) also for these things, what the parents say.” This sentiment falls in line with research on teacher well-being that chronic exposure to conflict with parents, on top of pupil misbehaviour, is associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; Kollerová et al., 2023). Defensive and uncompromising parents make resolution harder and leave little room for negotiation with teachers. Holt et al. (2009) found that parents systematically underestimate their children’s bullying behaviour

and are only moderately accurate about victimization. The accounts from the teachers in this study align with these findings.

It is easy to forget that all parents were once students themselves, and they have their own histories and experiences of school, education and teachers. The teachers reported how some parents carry their own childhood baggage from school into their interactions with teachers as parents:

> “A lot of parents have baggage from their own school years … the ones who have experienced bullying themselves are very sensitive about it and they sort of easily find that their child is being bullied… they blame the school as an institute for everything… and teachers are part of the problem and then you are the one to blame for everything.” (B1)

A2 reported similar thoughts: “unfortunately the parents have their own attitude what is their opinion from their old school times, and they think that the school is the same than their time.” B3 said, “some parents are a bit over sensitive about it and probably have had some bad experience”, and B5 empathized with parents who may have had a difficult time at school themselves:

> “Sometimes even the worst parents, I understand them but also I want to think that there's something inside of them that we don't know, we can't see that there are reasons, because we don't always know what has happened [to them].”

These accounts show how bullying is not always about a current incident, but it can be entwined with the parents’ own experiences of school. This aligns with research on family-peer linkages showing that parents’ past experiences can shape how they relate to schools and how they respond to their child’s peer problems (Ladd & Parke, 2021). If parents view schools and teachers as something that has caused them harm or distress in their past, they are more likely to view the teacher as an adversary as opposed to a partner.

B5 alluded to how family culture and the relationships between parents and children can impact how these parents interact with schools and teachers. She recounted a former headteacher’s comment that children can function as a kind of “narcissistic extension” of their parents, so any criticism of the child is heard as criticism of the

parent. This can result in extreme reactions from some parents despite relatively mild incidents. This fits with Grama et al.'s (2024) research showing that certain parental characteristics like aversiveness and conflict are associated with higher rates of bullying victimization in their children - the family culture is structurally primed for defensive or hostile responses.

Fortunately, the teachers did not report parents only as problems - they also detailed examples of supportive and co-operative parents who were valuable allies on the road to resolution. B2 said that she has had generally good experiences dealing with parents and that she "always tries to find this kind of cooperation with them…." B4 also reported that she has been "really lucky" with parents and that she has generally got along with them well. She said that she "tries to build cooperation with them" and form relationships with parents based on mutual trust and understanding:

> "I try to understand them in certain things and try to be flexible, listen to them and sort of give them the feeling that they are right and they are doing it correct and that's how I find that I have managed to have good cooperation with them. Flexibility."

B4 based her philosophy on reciprocity and works under the hope that she tries to find co-operation, and the parents will respond in kind: "I also want to show them that I do my work here. I'll try my best and hopefully you do your work at home and you try your best."

A1 and B4 both described incidences of parents working together without the involvement of the teachers to try to resolve bullying cases. B4 said that she felt lucky that the parents were willing to take the burden from her and work together for the benefit of their children:

> "The parents sent me a message saying that they would like to like contact each other and not [do everything] via me so I was lucky… it was helpful that the parents were willing to contact each other without me being involved."

A1 also reported a similar incident:

> "The parents had actively been dealing with that before I even heard of it… the mom took contact with the other moms and then at some point, they decided

> to also tell me that something's going on, but they had had been dealing with that by themselves already, which I appreciate."

When parents share the goal of helping their children, the teacher's role becomes much more manageable: rather than acting as a go-between sending messages and organizing meetings, they can help facilitate a joint solution. These positive examples mirror evidence from Grama et al. (2024), that warm, structured, and involved parents can act as a protective factor against both bullying perpetration and victimization.

The teachers in this study portrayed parents as key figures in bullying cases - some are deeply entangled in the situation, some carry baggage which only exasperates situations and some act as crucial allies. This aligns with the wider literature, which portrays parents as both risk and protective factors in children's peer relationships (Grama et al., 2024; Ladd & Parke, 2021). The challenge for teachers is not only to respond to children's behaviour, but to navigate these complex home-school dynamics by building partnerships and by growing "armour" where necessary.

4.2.3 Fading initiatives and inconsistent policies

Beyond the time constraints and parental dynamics, the teachers also pointed to inconsistent school policies and fading anti-bullying initiatives such as KiVa Koulu not as active barriers to bullying resolution, but rather as neutral backdrops. Several teachers had experience of the KiVa Koulu program, but largely as something that had faded away over time. E1 described it simply: "we had the KiVa koulu thing but it just... it just kind of faded away." Similar responses were heard from C1 and B3: "it has been here, but I think it's an old thing" (C1); "it never got air under its wings" (B3). Concerningly, some teachers couldn't say if KiVa was active in their current schools or not: "I don't know how it goes. I haven't seen any KiVa things around me in the last three and a half years. I think I would be aware of it if it was [active], so I don't think it is." (A1); "I haven't heard or seen anything about it in my current school… teachers kind of don't use it, I don't know why" (D1).

B1 contrasted her previous school with a functioning KiVa team with her current one:

> "In [my previous school] we had it as like compulsory thing that the teachers had to do. And it was sort of divided into months. I think there's like 10

> lessons, so it was quite easy... If a student or a parent would contact me, I would tell them that we have this team that will take care of it. I would fill out a form… and then they would take care of it.
>
> There's not like a Kiva team here, there's nothing. And I don't think anybody's sort of in charge of bullying, everybody will take care of the situations on their own."

B3 recounted how she was enthusiastic to be involved with the KiVa program as a member of the KiVa team, but when she returned to work after maternity leave, it was no longer active:

> "I was like enthusiastic… the lessons and then the methods… it was huge, because its science based… When I came back there were no longer even those vests saying KiVa koulu… the lessons that were supposed to be held like weekly or whatever… they were like readymade and they were good and again science based."

She also recalled how before she left the school for her maternity leave, some of the teachers were resistant to the KiVa Koulu program because they "didn't feel comfortable with it" and that some teachers felt that they could just pass on the KiVa lessons to the KiVa team and wash their hands of any further involvement with bullying cases: "the point is that the teacher is doing that stuff with the class and getting to know the class and creating that good atmosphere in the class. It's not the point that someone else is coming there."

These accounts of frustration with the faded KiVa koulu program match almost exactly with the warnings heeded by Herkama et al. (2022) and Sainio et al. (2020), who describe schools where KiVa starts well with structured lessons and enthusiastic teams, but gradually fades when leadership changes, time is not protected and no one is clearly responsible. B4 (the deputy head teacher) cited the financial cost as a possible reason why KiVa ultimately faded in her school: "it used to be free, but after a couple of years they started charging and then we were not interested in anything more because it was pretty expensive."

According to the teachers in this study, all that really remains of the KiVa Koulu program are fragments: old vests, posters, documents and a few half-remembered

lessons. This raises important questions about the future of bullying prevention in Finnish schools. If the program is no longer active, yet remnants still remain, its decline may not yet be fully visible. The bigger question is what will happen in five or ten years, when even these remnants have disappeared and the program has been completely forgotten? There is a real risk that schools could lose the benefits of the program, namely a shared language around bullying and clear frameworks to operate within, which could weaken prevention detection and implementation over time.

Teachers described a similar pattern in talk about school bullying policies, with some claiming that they were not aware of clear, written school policies: “I don’t know if we have a clear bullying policy but we have this about the values of our school” (A2). A1 also described being unsure about bullying policies in her school: “nothing I suppose written down. Well, the school rules say something about like, respecting others and some stuff like this, but not like for say a bullying policy….” The same teacher later captured her uncertainty regarding her school’s policy: “like, do we all come up with our own ways, or is there some sort of policy?”

The policies that were mentioned appeared to be local fixes rather than school-wide frameworks. After a particularly difficult bullying case involving challenging parents, E1’s school introduced a policy to protect their teachers:

> “The parents were lying about what teachers had said on the phone, they lied. So we have this new way of working so we write everything down so there is this paper trail. This is like our new policy now so that there is no chance that these parents can lie about what the teacher has said on the phone.”

This is an example of a policy which is a reaction to a parent-teacher dispute, but it doesn’t address the broader question of how bullying cases should be handled in school. Like Van Verseveld et al. (2020) found, many teachers feel they are improvising in difficult bullying situations despite their schools having some form of anti-bullying activities.

4.2.4 Social and cultural factors

The teachers in this study repeatedly linked bullying to broader social and cultural contexts, particularly with regards to gender, culture and the growing influence of social media. These factors did not present themselves as barriers as such, instead

providing added context which shaped how bullying presented itself and how teachers were able to recognize and respond to it.

A clear theme that emerged from the interviews was the different challenges presented between boys' bullying and girls' bullying. Several teachers commented that boys' bullying is often easier to notice and resolve because it is more likely to be physical or openly confrontational, while girls' bullying tends to be more subtle, emotional and hidden. A2 commented:

> "Boys react immediately, like the fighting usually… you can take the boys, sit down, let's deal with this now… but the girls, they're like hiding, it's more like cyberbullying. It's leaving somebody out of the group, or it's more a hidden thing."

B1 echoed those thoughts:

> "When boys are bullying it's more physical and it's more visible… we shake hands then it's done and we move forward. With girls it's not that visible… and it's so sort of subtle that you don't see it - it goes on for longer."

The teachers agreed that typically boys' bullying cases involved more visible aggression and direct conflict, whereas girls' bullying was described in more relational forms such as exclusion, rumour spreading and group politics. These observations are supported by the work of Björkqvist (2018), who claimed that girls use more indirect aggression and boys more physical aggression.

B3, B4, B5, C1 and E1 all made similar comments about boys' and girls' bullying. Without exception, all of these teachers also said that they found resolving bullying between boys as 'easier' to resolve than bullying between girls. A2 said he can "talk more straight to boys", but with girls he needs to trat girls more "delicately" and treat them "gently like silk." He also referred to his dealings with boys' bullying like "conversations", but with girls it was more of a "negotiation." Both B5 and E1 said that girls can be more "sneaky", and E1 also described that working with boys can be more "straightforward." These comments suggest that indirect and relational aggression is harder for teachers to observe than direct and physical aggression and therefore, harder to resolve. Despite these differences, B4 said that some old adages

still ring true: “some people hate it nowadays if you say that *‘boys will be boys and girls will be girls’*… but I still would say that boys will be boys.”

The teachers also linked bullying to broader changes in the social climate and family life. B4 claimed that the cultural mixing could be a contributing factor: “I can't really say that there's more bullying nowadays, but the atmosphere is more aggressive like since there are more different backgrounds and different cultures mixed… behaviour in general is more aggressive.” She later expanded her argument beyond cultural mixing to include everyday communication at home:

> “Children aren't able to have normal discussions anymore. They don't have discussions at home while eating, they are not having meals together, everybody eats on their own time… they might have their phones there all the time. So they are not having an understanding conversation where people listen to each other.”

B4’s comments suggest that she views bullying as a part of a wider breakdown in communication, social tolerance and family values, resonating with the work of Ladd and Parke (2021), who argue that children’s behaviour is shaped by the emotional climate and daily practices of home life.

Despite some teachers describing bullying related tensions related to culture or ethnicity (B2), most teachers did not talk about culture as a source of bullying, B5 even downplayed it saying that she had worked with children from many different cultural backgrounds and that although “there are sometimes some cultural things,” she would not say they mattered “much more than other things.”

The influence of social media on the modern bullying landscape cannot be underestimated, but the teachers in this study had limited experience of serious cyberbullying in primary school. Despite their relative lack of experience, several teachers described how online life was affecting how their students relate to each other:

> “What I’m worried about is the way people behave in social media… even when they are still children, they can be really quite mean… I always say that you wouldn't say this face to face to someone but unfortunately, I think the generation that we are growing now can say already anything.” (B4)

Here, B3 is suggesting that social media is not only a place where bullying happens, rather its existence is influencing how children interact with each other in the real world. This interpretation aligns with the research of Slonje et al. (2012), who suggests that online communication is normalizing more harsh and less empathetic forms of interactions between children, and blurring the line between the school and home social worlds. The connection here suggests that social media affects teachers' work directly and indirectly, because it influences how children communicate, behave and empathize with each other while in school.

Collectively, the teachers' accounts show that they experience bullying as being profoundly shaped by gender, family and societal changes, and the growing influence of social media. Boys' bullying was seen as easier to recognize and resolve due to its more physical and direct nature, while girls' bullying was more challenging to be involved with due to its subtle, relational and concealed nature. Cultural aspects appeared less frequently, but when they did, they affected peer relationships between children as well as parent-teacher relationships. Social media and 21st century communication was seen as not only a setting for online victimization, but as a key player in a wider shift in how children communicate with each other and with their teachers. These findings connect with research on how family and cultural influences can shape children's peer behaviour and involvement with bullying (Ladd & Parke, 2021), and how digital media is creating new demands for teachers by blurring the boundary between school and non-school peer interactions and relationships (Slonje et al., 2012).

4.3 Strategies and responses used by teachers

4.3.1 Discussions, meetings and monitoring

The flow chart presented earlier in Figure 1 presents multiple possible routes for the teacher to take once a bullying incident is brought to their attention. This literature-based flow chart now appears too broad and neatly branched. The interview data suggests that, in practice, teachers' responses are much more linear and discussion based. When the teachers were asked to describe what they actually do in the face of bullying situations, the clearest pattern was not one of widespread and differentiated strategies, but a much narrower and more repetitive response: They

talked to the children involved. What emerged from the interviews was that all the teachers followed a relatively stable series of events, beginning with talking privately to the victim, then to the alleged bully, then, where applicable, to speak to witnesses, friends or other children, and then ultimately a discussion with all the children together. B4 described this process very clearly.

> “I would first interview all the persons that are involved like probably start from the victim... I have to convince them that whatever they tell me stays between us… and I tell them that this is so serious that I need to talk about this to those other children and also their parents.”

B5 described a similar starting point: “the first thing is of course that I talk separately with those who that includes, and sometimes it works that it ends there, but often it doesn't - it depends how deep that thing is already.” Similarly, A2 described his first steps and why he doesn’t bring discuss with the children together as the first step: “The first thing is to discuss with them. Usually I start separately… if I immediately put them together the fighting will continue… one by one I talk so I try to build a picture.” A2 went on to recount a failed example of an immediate joint meeting:

> “Okay then let’s rest a few days, take a breath and come again one by one and then we can talk… but that was that was the biggest mistake I have done after the fighting was to start to talk immediately together.”

B1, B2, B3, C1 and E1 all described the same process of talking to the children privately, beginning with the victim, before moving on to group discussions. Some of the teachers preferred to move on from individual discussions to group discussions quickly, while others like A2 and C1 said that they may deliberately delay moving on to the group meeting as they have learned that immediate face-to-face discussions can escalate rather than resolve the situation. These accounts clearly show that in practice, the teachers used one basic method: talk first, gather information, and then move to a group discussion.

A2 alluded to the language and tone he uses in his meetings with victims and bullies. He emphasized how he is careful to be fair to all parties and that he tries not to condemn anyone:

> “I don't condemn anything… I just try to be neutral in this game… I send greetings for the boys even the boy who did it–so you have to deal with the case–you did wrong but okay that's life. I don't condemn… everybody makes mistakes.”

A2 explained that in his opinion, condemning students ultimately works against him: “they start to oppose you right away when you attack”, but by taking a neutral stance he can “try to find out the reason behind [the behaviour].” B4 employed a similar philosophy:

> “I try to be on both sides… I told [the bully] that I still like them and they have so much good in them. So I'm also on their side because I feel that sometimes there are reasons that make them like act in a certain way. So I’m trying to be neutral.”

Some of the teachers explicitly mentioned how their discussions would be accompanied by some form of recording or documentation: “Take an A4 notebook, write things down because you can hardly remember the evening anymore when people tell you stuff, and if many people tell you stuff about something that has happened, it's better to happen in writing” (B3). E1 described how her school has a policy to “write everything down” and create a “paper trail.” The documentation does not replace the discussions, it supports it, and the process remains: Teachers talk to the children individually, document, and move forward with the process.

A1 added another layer to the documentation by describing how she has used the students’ own words to shape their resolution. While describing a bullying case she was involved in, she recalled that during the meeting, she acted as a “secretary” and that they would “make a contract and that everyone would sign it.” The contract was written on the students’ own terms, giving them ownership of the situation. While A1 was the only teacher to mention making a written agreement with the students, it was still fundamentally a discussion-based response as the goal was to talk through the behaviours and secure a commitment from the students to move forward.

The flow chart presented in Figure 1 suggests a broad repertoire of bullying responses at teachers’ disposal, yet when the teachers in this study described their real practice, they rarely spoke in these terms. Instead, they described a series of

iterative conversations, generally following the same pattern: talk with the students separately; talk with any other students involved as witnesses or participants; talk with all students together; involve parents depending on the severity of the case; and continue with follow-up meetings and discussions.

The discussion-led pattern demonstrated by the teachers in this study is represented in the literature. Bauman and Del Rio (2006) found that responses to bullying were more likely to involve talking and less likely to involve strong disciplinary action. Rigby (2014) offers a range of discussion-based approaches which rely heavily on discussion rather than punishment, and Wachs et al. (2019) found that supportive and cooperative responses yielded better outcomes than authoritarian or punitive ones.

The literature presents these approaches as distinct, named strategies, whereas the teachers in this study describe their responses as the everyday teacher work of interviewing, listening, clarifying, and following up. This would suggest that there is a lack of knowledge on the teachers' behalf about what they are actually doing. They are not employing any particular strategy or drawing on a clearly defined intervention framework, they are simply doing what 'feels right'. This links strongly to the findings of Fry et al. (2019) who reported that trainee teachers often lacked a precise vocabulary for bullying and tended to fall back on limited, practical responses shaped by school culture and other staff.

The findings from this study suggest that holding discussions with the students involved in cases of bullying is not one strategy among many–it is the backbone of their response. Figure 1 remains a useful map of possible teacher intervention pathways, but it will need to be redesigned later in the thesis to reflect what the data actually shows. In practice, the first move is almost always to talk, the second move is usually to talk again, and only after that can the situation be escalated.

4.3.2 Working with parents

Parental involvement was a prominent feature in the teachers' intervention strategy accounts, but how it presented itself varied between the different teachers. The teachers described how they made constant judgements for each different bullying situation about how and when the parents should be contacted, and how much

information should be shared with them. There was noticeable tension in some of the conversations about parental involvement, which is reflected in the literature. Ladd and Parke (2021), argue that parents are active shapers of their children's peer relationships, and other studies such as Holt et al. (2009) and Stives et al. (2022), show that parents do not always recognize bullying accurately, especially when their child is acting as a perpetrator. The emotional tension teachers experience when working with parents, together with the often more emotionally driven responses parents themselves bring to these situations, is something teachers need to recognize and understand if they are to facilitate a successful resolution.

A clear difference emerged from the interviews regarding the threshold for contacting parents about bullying situations. E1 described how she contacts the parents immediately after the first meeting: "I'll individually interview these kids and others if they have seen something and we'll like write it down on a memo or something and we'll phone the parents." For E1, contacting the parents at the first step is built into her response and reflects the view that they should be brought into the situation quickly. E1 presents parents as necessary partners in bullying intervention, but it also assumes a level of parent-school alignment that, as Ostrander et al. (2018) show, cannot always be taken for granted.

For other teachers, the threshold for contacting parents is much higher: "I'm not contacting parents every single day… I try to solve like minor things here… like do you really need to inform the parents about each tiny little thing at school?" B5 also described a similar approach where she would only contact the parents if the initial discussions were unsuccessful: "If it doesn't work, I always contact home and then maybe they come here and we talk." A2 discussed how he uses the threat of involving parents as a deterrent for continuing the behaviour:

> "I usually tell them that okay now we try to deal with this together without our parents, and then I tell the bully that if this continues the next step is that the parents will come here and we'll discuss this."

These accounts suggest that some teachers treat parent contact as a later-stage strategy, not a default first step. In practice, the teachers often tried to contain low-level incidents at school and only moved to contact the parents if the behaviour persisted. This suggests that many teachers may be aware that parental involvement

can be a poisoned chalice–it can escalate situations as well as help them, so they avoid immediately involving parents. As discussed earlier, some teachers described how some parents bring their own emotional baggage which can clash with the teacher's response.

The teachers also showed clear preferences about how they choose to contact parents regarding bullying situations. Most of the teachers preferred to call parents rather than sending traditional Wilma messages. The main reason for this was because of the sensitive and emotional subject matter:

> "I always phone because I think it's easier to speak about things instead of sending messages because the message can always be misunderstood… so I think speaking is much better than sending messages." (C1)

A1, B2 and B5 also described similar preferences for calling parents which aligns with the idea that home-school communication is not just an information transfer, but is often emotionally charged and shaped by different external factors. Ostrander et al. (2018) found that teachers' anti-bullying work can break down when home and school are not working from the same values and assumptions. Speaking directly to parents allows for tone, clarification, questions and immediate information in a way that Wilma messages do not.

Written communication, however, was not completely ignored. B4 reported using it strategically when she expected a reactive or emotional response: "I think that sometimes you are being fair if you call the parents, but sometimes I feel that if they get to read the message first, they can ventilate a bit before they are in touch with me." This is a more tactical use of Wilma as a medium which can be used when parents need space or time to process their feelings before engaging further. Parents often define bullying through immediate harm and emotional impact, rather than the more refined criteria that teachers use (Stives et al. 2022); therefore, a Wilma message could provide a needed buffer between their immediate reaction and subsequent response. The consideration given to the 'how' of contacting parents suggests that the teachers in this study were well aware that they were not just contacting neutral homes, but that they were often entering family systems that could either support or undermine their efforts.

Confidentiality is an important facet of a teacher's work, and this was touched upon by B4: "I never tell the parents what kind of punishment [the other child] gets here, because I think that all the children have a right to their privacy." Parents have a right to know what is happening with their own child at school, but when it comes to details about other children, the lines become a little more uncertain. This raises an important ethical point: Teachers need to decide whose information belongs to whom and what exactly they can share with parents. Parents of the victim often want concrete proof that the bully has had some kind of punishment, but teachers are under no obligation to share such information, which can leave the parents of the victims feeling frustrated, excluded from the process, and unconvinced that the school has responded adequately.

The teachers in this study described working with parents not as an isolated step on the road to resolution, but as something which is weaved into the entire process, presenting its own practical and emotional challenges. Teachers used their judgement to decide when to contact the parents - whether it be immediately or after discussions with the students. Most of the teachers preferred to call parents because they understood the sensitive and emotional nature of bullying situations. Throughout these small decisions, the teachers had to balance openness with confidentiality, and fairness with the practical need to protect both the pupils involved and themselves, all with the knowledge that some families could misread, resist or intensify the situation. For the teachers in this study, working with the parents was not just a simple act of informing home, but an ongoing act of judgement, diplomacy and understanding.

4.3.3 Multi-professional and external collaboration

Although discussions with the pupils were the default first response, the interviews showed that the teachers did not view themselves entirely as the only adults responsible for the bullying situations and would turn to other professionals when they felt necessary. Enlisting the help, advice and support of other school professionals was a common theme from the teachers and it is strongly represented in the literature. Bauman et al., (2008), Salmivalli et al., (2013) and Wachs et al., (2019), all suggest that bullying is best addressed through whole-school and multi-professional approaches with a network of adults, rather than isolated action by an individual teacher. In Figure 1, 'enlisting other adults' appears as one possible

branch, but the data suggests that it would be better represented as a larger area in which discussions and further measures take place. Most of the teachers turned to other adults not as a separate or stand-alone strategy, but they used it as an added layer of support and expertise to operate within.

Several teachers (A1, B1, B3, B4 and E1) described school-based support staff as essential partners in bullying cases. Multiple teachers described how they involved other school professionals (usually another teacher, the special needs teacher or the school curator) to help them with the burden of dealing with bullying cases:

> “If somebody knows the class well, I would ask them to join me so it wouldn't be just me and a student… I need to write down notes to sort of keep up with who said what and what actually happened so then it's good that there's somebody else not just me and my memory.” (B1)

The ‘when’ of enlisting other adults was left to the teachers’ discretion and instincts depending on how well they knew their students and how serious they deemed the incident to be. Most teachers decided to either enlist other adults immediately during the first discussion, or during the second discussion if the behaviours had continued or escalated. Despite these accounts, B2 described how she actually prefers to tackle bullying incidents alone: “sometimes I ask other teachers, what have they seen, for example, but no, I don't call them to come with me. So I prefer to kind of do it alone.” B2’s account shows that despite the general consensus among the other teachers, she prefers to do things alone, highlighting the subjective and personal nature of teacherhood.

The motivations for enlisting other adults were usually grounded in sharing the burden and improving the quality of the decision making. A1 described how involving another adult can help inject new impetus into an ongoing case and how the new adult can “grab the keys and do something about it.” B4 described how a second adult can help validate her observations and opinions and offer support when conducting difficult meetings with parents. She also described how another person can “ask questions that I probably wouldn't if the parents are sometimes too familiar to me… they can be more... not outsiders, but like less biased.” B3 and B5 both described how it’s helpful to have a “second opinion” on difficult cases, and A1 mentioned how different adults may “see some things on a different scale - like how

serious something is.” In these examples, collaboration with other adults worked as a way of sharing responsibility, joint thinking, providing extra support for the teachers and reducing personal biases. These findings fit well with the research from Kollerová et al. (2021), who found that school communication and collegial processes are linked to more active responses to bullying.

Enlisting other adults is often viewed through the lens of how it helps the teacher cope, but A2 makes the distinction that it can directly benefit the student, who may feel more comfortable talking to an ‘adult friend’ rather than the teacher who brings with them an implicit air of authority that the curator may not have.

> “I think that's the good thing that they're not teachers, because they can go to the level of the pupils. The pupils can tell more to them than the teachers… I think it's more like an adult friend… like a link between students and teachers.” (A2)

A2’s description of how the students may perceive the school curator differently than the teachers, resulting in them talking more openly and honestly aligns with the work of Ostrander et al. (2018), who found that school support staff often have a better understanding of children’s social-emotional needs and can provide a less threatening setting than the classroom for sensitive conversations.

C1 described how she has used other adults in her bullying resolution as a way to escalate the situation and strengthen its seriousness: “it's sometimes better if the one who is bullying has to answer to two teachers, then it makes it a more serious thing.” Here, C1 is using another adult as a symbolic gesture–they are not only a witness or supporter, but they are part of the message that the situation is being taken seriously.

Another interesting pattern emerged from the data was that of ‘who’ teachers choose to involve in bullying cases. The teachers did not just pick a random adult, but they chose particular people who could influence the tone, authority and emotion of the conversations. Above all, the teachers felt most comfortable choosing someone they knew, they could trust and who had similar pedagogical values:

> “If you have good colleagues, you can always speak to them and exchange ideas and ask what they would do… it's very helpful if you have colleagues that you can count on you can trust.” (B4)

B5 and C1 gave similar accounts, suggesting that enlisting other adults was not effective just for being multi-professional, but that it mattered who was involved, what their relationship was like with the teacher and the students, and what knowledge and experience they brought to the table. The teachers needed to feel they could trust that whoever they invited into the situation would actually be able to offer something of value, and not inflame things further by sending mixed messages or confused expectations. The teachers needed to feel that they could present a united front to the students hence, they chose their allies carefully.

There were some mentions in the interviews where more serious cases of bullying were moved beyond the school entirely. E1 described a more serious case involving nude photos and an ex-student. The school contacted Ankkuritiimi, a Finnish multi-agency support structure, even though the pupil was no longer in their school: “we took the Ankkuritiimi… we intervened even though it wasn’t our case anymore.” B2 also described an incident where an unknown adult was added to a class WhatsApp group, ultimately resulting in the police being involved, and similarly A1 was forced to involve the police in a case involving the creation of an online pornographic profile.

These cases are important because they show the outer limit of teacher response. Teachers and schools need to make judgements about when an incident is no longer a school discipline issue or even a teacher-led case. There is no solid framework showing where these boundaries lie and it highlights how digital cases especially can quickly blur into criminal or safeguarding concerns that require external involvement rather than school-only solutions.

The accounts from this study support the broader bullying research that bullying intervention is most effective when it is embedded in a whole-school and multi-professional system, rather than being left to the teacher alone to handle. Bauman et al. (2008) and Burger et al. (2015) both identify enlisting other adults as a core response type, while Wachs et al. (2019) show that more supportive and cooperative approaches tend to outperform authoritarian or punitive ones. The data from this study shows what these principles look like in practice: teachers turn to carefully selected colleagues, school curators, and to external agencies for more serious issues.

4.3.4 Universal and preventive measures

Holding meetings and discussions with students and involving parents and other adults are both reactive measures. The teachers in this study described a second layer of work which was more universal and preventative. These measures were not presented as formal intervention strategies, but were built into the teachers' everyday practice and teaching philosophy. Grouping, seating arrangements, classroom climate, groupwork and small behavioural corrections were all examples of these universal and preventative measures. These everyday routines formed an important part of how teachers tried to prevent bullying from taking root and are clearly outlined in the KiVa koulu philosophy, which highlights universal, whole-school approaches which encourage belonging and a positive classroom climate.

A common strategy used by the teachers in this study was in how they used seating arrangements, pairings and groupwork to encourage 'tactical mixing' and reduce exclusion. A1 described how she works to ensure that the students work with different classmates, rather than always working with their friends: "I've been putting extra effort into mixing them, I have created the seating arrangement… so that they get into the habit of accepting that they have to be able to work with different people." A2 also described how he has learned from his experiences to not allow his students to sit where they choose in class:

> "A few years ago I allowed them to sit beside each other but not anymore. Now they sit individually and I separate them because if I allowed them to choose their places they went with their friends and they left somebody out. Now I mix them completely… and change them two to three times a year… lessons are calmer, the group dynamic is better."

B2 also describes how she organizes her classroom to maximize cooperation: "I try to make all the arrangements; I make them sit next to each other or whenever we do group work so that they get to know each other." Despite their efforts, the teachers were realistic about the fact that such measures are not always successful. A1 described how some students will try to 'cheat' when she does random seating arrangements so they can be close to their friends and A2 was realistic about how some classes are simply "easier" to work with. While seating arrangements and group mixing are an important facet of universal and preventative measures, it is

worth noting that they were not always automatically welcomed by the students, and the teachers often faced some pushback from their students. These organizational choices are explicitly tied to improving the group dynamics, and they reflect a broader idea found in the KiVa koulu philosophy that bullying is not only about the individuals involved, but about the peer group processes and classroom norms (Herkama et al., 2022; Salmivalli et al., 2013).

As well as the physical distribution of students in the classroom and in groups, the teachers also described a more socio-emotional element to their work in terms of how they model interaction, build a safe and happy classroom environment and ensure their students know how to work and cooperate with their peers. B2 described that she is doing a ‘long term job’ with her students and how she talks about being inclusive with her class frequently. B4 and C1 both mentioned that any kind of cooperative work they do in their class is essentially anti-bullying work, and D1 eloquently described how he views his role as a bullying preventor rather than a reactor:

> “Much needs to be done before [bullying] not after it, so I think that teachers need to build that kind of climate in the classroom. So I’m trying to prevent things before they happen. We do so much more about grouping and we talk about how we should treat each other. I concentrate on creating that informal climate because that's the main reason how children experience school life.” (D1)

These accounts describe how the teachers’ anti-bullying work is not a separate or linear process, but is more about building a class atmosphere where the students feel safe, connected and happy. B1 described how she implements anti-bullying ideas into her everyday teaching and lesson plans without explicitly telling the students:

> “I implement more lessons that have something to do with, not necessarily bullying as such, but like how to be nice… we do artwork or write notes or have a book that we read about being polite or how to be friends or watch videos, so something subtle that they don't [realize is about bullying].”

E1 described how she had created a routine around preventative work:

> “Every day we have this friend recess, where all my pupils have to play together. We have this box where they take out the name of the game and they have to play it, and everyone has to be friends and no one can leave the game… but they like it.”

This is a concrete example of how preventative measures can be built into everyday practice. E1’s ‘friend recess’ had developed in response to a group of students excluding one particular girl from their play. This was targeted action to reduce exclusion and build a better classroom environment, and she later linked it directly to helping the students learn that exclusion is itself a form of bullying. B5 similarly described how she uses targeted action in the form of micro-interventions in her day-to-day teaching: “In the classroom, if I see someone laughing at someone even a little, I always take that… you don’t do that… sometimes I ‘make a mountain out of a molehill’.” Here, rather than waiting for serious incidents to occur, B5 takes small, minor behaviours such as laughing and signs of exclusion as opportunities to intervene and reinforce the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

The teachers in this study viewed grouping, climate building and repeated micro-interventions as core to their anti-bullying work, even when they do not label it in such a way. These approaches align closely with the universal elements of the KiVa koulu program and research that more cooperative, classroom responses are key to more successful outcomes (Wachs et al., 2019). In the literature, the universal aspect of bullying prevention is often presented in quite polished terms such as carefully planned lessons and whole-school initiatives; but the teachers in this study described it more plainly in terms of the physical distribution of children in the classroom, structuring activities, mixing groups and stopping the ‘little things’ before they escalate. It suggests that universal and preventative work is not always experienced as a named strategy, it is simply embedded in the everyday work of a teacher.

4.3.5 Punitive measures

Across the interviews, punishments and punitive measures were discussed mainly as a last resort and rarely appeared as the first or central move. Most teachers were ambivalent about punishing children who were bullying others, but understood that from the victim’s perspective, and their parents’ perspective, punishments were the only visible recourse that would satisfy them. Bauman et al. (2008) and Burger et al.

(2015) both found that teachers' responses to bullying often included some form of disciplinary measures, while Wachs et al. (2019) reports that collaborative and supportive strategies are often associated with better outcomes than purely authoritarian ones.

Several teachers (A2, B1, B4, C1) framed punitive measures as something they try not to rely on because they feel it doesn't address the underlying reasons for bullying behaviour, and because it shuts down meaningful dialogue. A2 said that he never relies on punishments as his first move because some students are happy to take the punishment, and then continue with the behaviour: "I think if you give punishment, then the pupil will say, 'what is there to talk about now? You gave me punishment already'. So the punishment marks the end of it." A2's observation is consistent with Rigby (2014), who claims that purely punitive responses may stop the behaviour temporarily, but they do not necessarily shift peer norms or relationships.

While none of the teachers claimed to use punitive measures as their first response, neither did they argue that punitive measures were never appropriate. Instead, they tended to reserve them for serious threats, repeated aggression, or clear violence: "If you hit somebody, then you have detention–if it's something physical… I only gave detention if you threatened somebody in a serious way or if you were physical somehow" (B1). Here, B1 describes her threshold for punishment as usually related to some kind of physical violence, but what she described was more akin to one-off incidents of violence rather than sustained bullying. Burger et al. (2022) reported that disciplinary sanctions given in response to low-to-moderate severity incidents were associated with a reduced likelihood of bullying over time, so the teachers in this study support the idea that punitive measures can be successful as one component of an intervention, but only when taken as a part of a larger strategy.

Some teachers reported using small punishments like activity bans or temporary restrictions. B1 described how she would instruct children to have separate areas of the yard during recess and ban certain students from playing with others. B2 said that she would ban students from playing football for a week, or they have to stay with her during recess for a time as some kind of mild punishment. These middle-ground consequences are more immediate and manageable than detentions, and less severe than further measures, but they still don't address the underlying causes

of the behaviours. Burger et al. (2022), classified such small sanctions as ‘low-to-moderate severity disciplinary actions’, and wrote that they may function as practical boundary setting without framing the child as inherently “bad.” These small-scale sanctions reflect the reality of teacherhood, where time constraints, supervision demands and daily practicalities dictate what can be realistically done within the limits of a normal school day.

E1 described how the most meaningful punishment was nothing punitive, but it was having to face a serious and structured meeting with multiple adults. She described how the weight of a situation came from confronting it in front of teachers and parents: “The biggest punishment is for them to have to speak about it and have to confront the situation, and when there's all the parents and all these adults.” This maps closely with Rigby’s (2014) claims that accountability and social repair are central mechanisms in discussions and also with the indicative actions of the KiVa koulu program, where follow-up discussions and accountability are built into the intervention structure (Herkama et al., 2022; Salmivalli et al., 2013).

One incident which stood out from the data was D1’s account of how he used behaviour grading on the report card as a form of punishment for students who had bullied another student. He described using the sanction to teach the students a “lesson” following their exclusionary behaviour, resulting in a strong backlash from the parents:

> “I gave them all a seven, because I think it would be a good lesson for them if you do something like that on purpose… but the parents got really angry. They called me [and told me] I've ruined their summer… I said okay, but I think it's a good lesson for them.”

While most teachers were cautious about punishments, D1 stands out in how he described using sanctions to create a “lesson.” He used students’ grading as a moral signal that their exclusionary behaviour was not acceptable. In schools, sanctions can often be used as public signals of values rather than as deterrents, but this case highlights how sanctions and punishments can provoke conflicts with parents and disputes about fairness and the teachers’ right to judge behaviours. Parents of accused bullies may feel like sanctions and punishments are too strong, while the parents of the victims often want stronger, more visible evidence that the school has

‘done something’, often meaning a stronger punishment or sanction for the bully: “The parents are usually demanding some kind of results and maybe detention, but that's not usually very productive. It doesn't really help anybody.” (E1)

Once again, the tensions between schools and homes are highlighted here. Parent-school misalignment can undermine intervention, especially if parents push for retaliation based on a different moral framing than that of the school (Ostrander et al., 2018). The interviews also reveal that none of the schools had a clear framework regarding punitive measures–each case is left to the teacher’s discretion. While teachers in Finland are trusted to make these kinds of informed judgements, it could be argued that the subjective nature of their responses could increase inconsistency and reduce the effectiveness of the anti-bullying message in their school.

Figure 1 represents confrontational/punitive measures as a distinct route alongside non-confrontational approaches, but the data from the interviews reveals that teachers viewed punitive measures, punishments or sanctions as a small tool embedded inside a largely discussion-led process. This ‘tool’ was used sparingly, sensitively, symbolically and even as teachable moments, rather than as a mechanism for behavioural change. The revised model should show punitive measures as a conditional add-on, triggered by repetition, severity, violence or continued behaviours.

4.4 Teacher education, experience and advice for new teachers

4.4.1 Gaps in teacher education

A consistent message that emerged from the interviews was that the teachers felt that their teacher education had provided them with no explicit preparation for being involved with cases of bullying either as a concept or as a set of practical skills. Bauman et al. (2008) found that the teachers in their study had not received anti-bullying training during preservice preparation and emphasized that teacher education needs to include practical skill development, not only awareness. A1 described how she could not recall bullying being addressed in her studies: “I don't remember that in university that it would have been a part of my studies in any way–hopefully it is nowadays.” Similar experiences were recalled by all of the teachers,

with none of them remembering bullying as a visible or structured component of their university education.

The teachers felt that their lack of training or education about bullying manifested itself in a lack of preparation for the social realities of being a teacher. A1 argued that newly qualified teachers are “caught off guard” because core parts of the job are not properly addressed in their training: “You do get a lot of information and knowledge about many things, but there's nothing about bullying… I’m a qualified teacher and I have no tools when it comes to doing this work.”

A1’s suggestion is not that universities can hand students a bullying handbook, but that they could at least build applied thinking and shared language through practical examples and discussion:

> “It wouldn't even have to give you like the right answers, but it could give you some ideas like how to approach a case in your mind… or just like having a small group, think about a case from a real life… but that would prepare you to think about how I would deal with this, because it will be your part of your work to deal with this social aspect.”

A1 echoes the findings of Fry et al. (2019), who found that trainee teachers often lack a precise vocabulary for peer victimization and feel underprepared to respond in practice. B5 described how her teacher education did not prepare her in any way for interacting with parents: “during my studies we didn't have that at all - not in any teaching practice or anything. They didn't demand that we needed to go to one parent's evening… I was 23 and in my first autumn I held a parents' evening–what did I know?” This is particularly relevant because as discussed earlier, parental involvement is not only emotionally draining but is central to bullying resolution.

C1 described how she had received some in-service training from her local authority: “I have had some training organized by [city]. I think that kind of training should be taught to trainee teachers. There were different example cases and then there are some ways how to handle those.” This supports the idea that teachers learn a lot of their skills in the workplace, which may produce uneven practice across schools with different leaderships and priorities.

Interestingly, E1, who was educated via the Steiner route of training provided a contrasting model of teacher education through her more extended practical teaching practices: “the whole fall semester, we work in a school, so we have a lot of these practical studies. You go into one class, and you are there for the whole fall semester… it's really good, you see what this work is about.” While the Steiner method does not claim to be superior to traditional academic approaches, it suggests that practical, guided exposure to teaching is a plausible way to narrow the gap between academic preparation and the realities of bullying work, especially when so many of the teachers described their knowledge of bullying as coming exclusively from their worked experiences, rather than from their academic backgrounds.

The teachers in this study suggest that the teacher education they experienced placed a stronger emphasis on academic and theoretical preparation than on the applied and emotional work that bullying cases demand. The assumption here is that practical competence will emerge through experience. They agreed that bullying should be an explicit part of teacher training which provides preservice teachers with conceptual clarity and preparation for student and parent collaboration. The ‘how’ of such training, however, remained unclear. These findings align with Fry et al. (2019), who reported that preservice teachers commonly feel underprepared for bullying, as well as Burger et al. (2015), who argue that bullying prevention should have greater prominence in teacher education.

4.4.2 The value of experience

Across all ten interviews, one theme remained consistent: all the teachers thought that bullying work became easier alongside one crucial element of teacherhood– experience. Despite supporting the idea of more bullying training for preservice teachers, the teachers agreed that the core skills needed to handle bullying situations - judging seriousness, understanding group dynamics, investigating incidents and speaking to parents, all develop through lived experiences and are almost impossible to teach in the classroom. B2, B3 and B4 all explicitly stated that “experience is one of the only things which cannot be taught” (B2), and B4 also added that it is akin to developing your own teaching style, which is inherently linked to your own personality. B2 compared teaching-based skill acquisition to like learning a language: “you just have to practice.” The idea that experience is a crucial element of

successful bullying intervention is strengthened by the work of Berliner (2001), who explicitly frames teacher expertise as something that is developed through years of classroom experience, not just theory. He claims that experienced teachers make faster and more accurate interpretations of classroom events than novice teachers, who appear more rule-bound and less able to read subtle social dynamics.

A second strand of experience that emerged from the interviews was that many teachers described a process of trial and error during their careers - finding out through practice what works and what does not. B1, B4 and C1 all described how they had developed “tools” over their teaching career not by repeating the same routines, but by varying their responses and refining their approaches. This ‘learning on the job’ is not only a case of teachers learning what strategies and approaches work, but understanding the structural limits of the school, and persisting with multiple strategies without expecting immediate results. This iterative process is reflected in the work of van Verseveld et al. (2020), who found that teachers used similar processes of trial-and-error in response to ongoing bullying cases that do not resolve quickly.

The ‘learning through experience’ narrative was not only related to children, but also to parents. A2 described how some parents may treat younger and less experienced teachers differently, and how teachers garner more respect from parents the older they get: “I was very young… the parents were older and maybe they treated me as a young kid. I think when you're older they respect you more when you have more knowledge about how to react [to bullying].” B5 connected experience to the emotional strain of dealing with parents, and advised setting clear work/home boundaries to avoid burnout, which connects with the findings of Kollerová et al. (2023), who found that bullying work is emotionally draining, and part of the teacher expertise is knowing how to survive it without burning out.

Some teachers described experience as having a social aspect developed through meetings and conversations with colleagues and other school professionals. Multiple teachers mentioned how asking for help and advice from other teachers was an important way to build experience, because they are essentially accessing the lived experiences of their colleagues. A1 explained how experience can be built through mentoring and solidarity:

> “In this profession there's a lot of solidarity, and we understand that we're all dealing with same [nonsense] here every day, so we are willing to help and at least I feel like I always get the help I ask for, and also, I'm happy to help.”

A1’s thoughts align strongly with Kollerová et al. (2021), who found that teaching experience was the only characteristic positively related to bullying responses, and argued for mentoring as a practical solution.

The teachers in this study did not present bullying resolution as a linear process, but as a dynamic set of judgements shaped by relationships and context. These are exactly the kind of skills that cannot be taught in the abstract form, but can be developed and strengthened over time through practical experiences. The interviews suggest that while teachers could be introduced to concepts and example cases during teacher education, competence in bullying work is largely built through experience: repeated practice, difficult conversations, understanding parents, flexibility, and the strategic use of colleagues and support staff. The reality of teacherhood is that experience is vitally important, but remains the one thing which cannot be taught, it can only be gained.

4.4.3 Advice for future teachers

When asked what advice the teachers in this study would give to newly qualified teachers, their responses yielded three consistent themes: (i) don’t try to handle bullying situations alone; (ii) protect your own boundaries and well-being; and (iii) build relational knowledge of your students so you can respond early and effectively.

The strongest message that came from the teachers was that bullying should not be treated as a teacher’s individual responsibility, nor should it be a measure of a teacher’s professional competence. C1 put this the most clearly:

> “Ask for help from other teachers… speak with the others. Teamwork is something which we have to do here… don't be afraid to ask for help– everyone should. I ask for help even if I have done this for 21 years.”

C1’s words are important because she plainly states that even after two decades of experience, she is not afraid to ask for help from her colleagues when faced with cases of bullying. A1, A2, B1, B4 and B5 also all explicitly stated that their main piece

of advice for newly qualified teachers was that asking for help is not a professional failure, but a professional responsibility.

B1 highlighted a common trap that inexperienced teachers can fall into–trying to tackle bullying cases alone as a way to prove their professional competence to others:

> “Don't be afraid to ask someone because I think maybe a lot of people want to impress, ‘I can deal with this myself’, and I understand that, of course you want to impress. Also, as an older teacher when you come to a new school, you want to show that you are capable.”

A1 also echoed these thoughts: “some new teachers might want to prove themselves like ‘I can deal with this myself’ but that can't be the case with bullying.” B1 added a practical element to her advice that was repeated by other teachers that the best adults to involve are not necessarily the most experienced teachers, but those who know the students: “I would get somebody who is experienced in the situations, or most importantly, I would get somebody who knows the children.” These suggestions are reflected well in bullying research, where ‘enlisting other adults’ is a common and legitimate bullying response (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015), and they also fit Kollerová et al. (2021), who highlight the role of teacher mentoring and collegial resources in bullying intervention strategies.

The second message appeared less frequently but was strongly expressed by B5 in particular was about managing your own workload in a sustainable way. Some of the teachers warned that being involved in bullying work, often as a key figure and the go-between for different parties, can easily bleed over into a teachers own personal time including evenings and weekends. This is not a sustainable way to function and can easily lead to stress related burnout, or at least have an impact on a teacher’s personal well-being. B5 stated this clearly: “Limit your work. Don't do, you know, 24/7… have your work and have your life… when I get home, I’m with my kids… I rarely think about work… when I close the door, that’s it.”

B5’s comments clearly link to the work of Aloe et al. (2014) and Kollerová et al. (2023), who both found strong links between bullying and teacher exhaustion. The ability to set personal boundaries, especially regarding when and how parents

contact you, as well as managing your own energy resources, is not self-indulgent, but is a practical necessity to be able to continue responding to bullying cases effectively over time.

The final strand of advice focused less on procedures and strategies, and more on teacher presence and relational knowledge. The teachers described being visibly attentive to their students' needs and developing close relationships with them wherever possible. These close relationships appeared to help the teachers in their preventative work and universal measures. The school day does not only take place in the classroom, but there are multiple breaks, transitions and other situations that are just as important for a positive classroom climate. E1 expressed how she advises new teachers to always be aware of the different situations during the day, especially transitions:

> "I would give this practical advice that how to see the kids and how to see these situations, transitions, like when they're going out to recess, that you keep your eye on the situation and with your presence try to calm things down."

E1 is describing how bullying often unfolds in small, easily missed moments, but by showing her students that she is present and aware, she can minimize any potential issues.

A2 framed the same idea as a priority for new teachers, and highlighted the issue of addressing problems quickly: "the most important part is that you have to react somehow, don't let it be… you have to show that you care… show that you are interested to help solve the case." Showing students that you are aware of bullying situations and are trying to do something aligns with the research of Burger et al. (2022) who emphasize that children can interpret adult silence as permission, and teacher non-intervention is associated with higher likelihood of bullying in schools.

Several teachers expressed the importance of knowing their students on a deep level as a key predictor of bullying resolution. Knowing family histories, who is vulnerable, who influences others and where the hidden dynamics sit can play an important role in preventing bullying and implementing universal measures, as well as during bullying resolution strategies. B2 linked bullying work directly to knowing her

students: “I think it's about knowing the student, it's related to bullying… you have to know your students.” B4 echoed the importance of knowing her students: “it depends so much on the children who are involved, how reliable they are, if they tell the side of the story and can you buy it right away.” C1 perhaps described best why knowing her students is a cornerstone of her teaching philosophy:

> “The only reason I was able to fix this situation was because I knew the students. I think that's the most important thing: I try to know my students. I try to know them really well and I try to speak with them a lot.”

E1 made a similar point, and mentioned the challenges faced by short-term or substitute teachers: “this all comes from knowing your students, which takes time... if you just go straight into somewhere, you don't know anybody, it's much harder… it's a big relationship.” In her view, effective bullying response is tied to the long-term relationship between teacher and student, where children are more likely to feel shame, accountability and willingness to change in the face of a familiar teacher that they do not want to disappoint. Research from ten Bokkel et al. (2023), found similar patterns in their meta-analysis of 65 primary studies that teachers’ emphasis on knowing their students was highly associated with lower levels of bullying perpetration and peer victimization.

Overall, the teachers’ advice was not a set of formal methods, but practical conditions for effective bullying intervention: (i) A reliable and knowledgeable support network; (ii) sustainable boundaries and manageable workload; and (iii) relational and emotional knowledge of students. These three conditions help explain the broader pattern in the findings from this study that teachers’ bullying resolution strategies (discussing, clarifying, working with parents and monitoring), often appear simple, but they rely on underlying conditions that are difficult to teach abstractly: the confidence to seek help, to manage your own workload and know your own limits, and the ability to connect with your students and stay present throughout the entire school day.

5 Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Purpose of the study

Bullying and cyberbullying have been an issue in schools for decades and continue to present challenges for students and teachers. My own personal experiences of dealing with persistent bullying cases in primary school drove me to conduct this research, with the goal of uncovering the processes and the nuanced decision making involved in such an emotional and complex issue so that I could improve my future practice and offer practical guidance for newly qualified teachers. While schools may have policies and structured programs in place, the day-to-day work of recognizing and responding to cases of bullying falls to the classroom teachers, who must use their knowledge, experience and understanding of complex social processes to make judgements about what has happened, how to respond to it and ultimately how to resolve it.

Encouragingly, the teachers in this study reported relatively limited exposure to bullying as a regular occurrence in their classrooms, and even fewer described clear cases of cyberbullying. This suggests that my own experiences with Class X were exceptional and may not reflect the wider landscape of bullying and cyberbullying occurring in primary schools in Finland. However, this is a limited conclusion as this study was a qualitative study. Further large-scale studies are needed in order to understand the extent of classroom teachers' experiences of dealing with bullying and cyberbullying.

The purpose of this study was to explore Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of responding to bullying and cyberbullying, with particular attention paid to the practical challenges they face, the strategies they use in real school contexts, and their advice to newly qualified teachers. As such, the study proposed the following research questions:

1. What are Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of responding to instances of bullying and cyberbullying?

    a. How do primary school teachers in Finland conceptualize bullying and cyberbullying?

b. What are the barriers and challenges faced by primary school teachers in Finland when dealing with bullying and cyberbullying?

c. What strategies do primary school teachers in Finland use in response to instances of bullying and cyberbullying?

2. What forms of preparation and support do primary school teachers consider important for newly qualified teachers dealing with bullying and cyberbullying?

By examining the teachers' accounts across these areas, the study aimed to provide a practice-based understanding of bullying responses in Finnish primary schools. The findings are intended to inform teachers who wish to improve their practice, highlight the areas that experienced teachers find most challenging, and to encourage teacher education institutes to consider practical bullying response training as a core professional competence. This information reflects the realities of teacherhood in the modern classroom and should ultimately benefit the students, schools and teachers themselves.

5.2 Discussion of findings

5.2.1 How do primary school teachers in Finland conceptualize bullying and cyberbullying?

The findings revealed a degree of conceptual ambiguity surrounding bullying among the teachers, who provided varying definitions of bullying despite their combined experience. While some of the teachers were able to identify some of the key elements of bullying, namely repetition, intentional harm and a power imbalance, others struggled to articulate a clear definition and described instead general conflict or bad behaviour. Similar concerns appear in the literature. Bauman and Del Rio (2006) found that preservice teachers often struggle to differentiate between bullying and other forms of social aggression. In practice, this conceptual ambiguity is reflected in the teachers' abilities to recognize and respond to bullying, highlighting the importance of clear conceptual understanding before entering the classroom.

Closely related to this conceptual ambiguity was the feeling among some teachers that the term 'bullying' is being increasingly overused in schools. An increased awareness and exposure to bullying have led some students and parents to label a

wide range of negative interactions as bullying, when they are in fact not. This over-exposure can blur the threshold between bad behaviour and bullying, and leads to more uncertainty in schools and more confusion among teachers. Conceptual ambiguity around bullying, particularly related to repetition and power imbalance, can lead to the misclassification of incidents (Rigby, 2014). For the teachers in this study, this uncertainty added an extra layer of work because responding to claims of bullying often began with a process of clarification and framing, before deciding whether to move on to action or not.

The majority of the teachers in this study reported relatively limited exposure to cyberbullying in primary school settings and many felt that cyberbullying was more of a problem for older (teenage) students. Despite this lack of exposure, many described cyberbullying as essentially ‘the same but harder’ than traditional bullying. This perception reflects the idea that the underlying social dynamics of cyberbullying remain the same as traditional bullying, but the technological context complicates detection, understanding and intervention. Indeed, Cyberbullying often mirrors existing peer dynamics and relationships, rather than representing a separate phenomenon (Slonje et al., 2012). For the teachers in this study, the main challenge of cyberbullying was not in the motives or dynamics, but in identifying and proving behaviours that have happened in the digital world.

Another frequently highlighted issue with cyberbullying was that it often occurs outside of school hours, but it bleeds into the classroom. Incidents that begin in WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok or Instagram can resurface during the school day. Such incidents can appear quickly, leaving the teachers confused about where sudden classroom incidents have come from, and how they are to tackle incidents that have originated beyond the physical boundaries of the school. The teachers who had experienced such incidents described trying to reconstruct events that had happened online as substantial ‘detective work’. This investigative aspect is alluded to in the work of Bauman et al. (2008), who assert that cyberbullying cases often involve fragmented evidence, deleted messages, and conflicting accounts, making them difficult for teachers to verify and resolve. Additionally, several teachers mentioned a perceived mismatch between their own digital competence and that of their students. The rapidly evolving online environments inhabited by pupils can complicate adult involvement, and some teachers described feelings of helplessness

trying to insert themselves into arenas of which they have very little knowledge, experience or know-how. These factors combined introduce added layers of complexity and uncertainty for teachers, who may already feel ill equipped to intervene effectively.

5.2.2 The barriers and challenges faced by Finnish primary school teachers when responding to bullying and cyberbullying

The time and workload teachers need to commit to dealing with bullying cases was repeatedly highlighted in this study. The teachers described trying to handle bullying incidents during short recess breaks, or while simultaneously being responsible for the rest of their class. Ideally, a teacher would have the time and resources to carefully investigate, clarify and discuss the complexities of a bullying case. In practice, however, time constraints limit teachers' ability to dedicate the time and resources needed to fully investigate and address bullying incidents and often push teachers towards the most immediately available response. Therefore, lack of time and resources can reduce both the likelihood and quality of teacher intervention (Kollerová et al., 2023) as teachers often feel they are 'putting out fires' rather than addressing the deeper causes of bullying (van Verseveld et al., 2020). The workload and time restraints described by the teachers in this study directly limit the depth, consistency and success of their responses.

Parents and families were described by the teachers in this study as crucial actors in bullying cases. While good communication and shared values with parents can dramatically increase the possibility of resolution, some parents can act as severe obstacles and even inflame situations. The teachers described disagreements with parents who had different understandings of what constitutes bullying, what is appropriate behaviour, and how to move forward. School-parent misalignment can undermine anti-bullying efforts, especially where families and schools do not share the same behavioural expectations (Ostrander et al., 2018).

Some teachers described how some parents used the term bullying more broadly than they did, with some parents claiming that mild conflict or general misbehaviour constituted bullying. Conversely, some parents would deny accusations of bullying from their child, even with clear evidence to the contrary. This could be because many parents define bullying primarily in terms of harm rather than repetition or

power imbalance (Stives et al., 2022) and tend to be more aware of their child's victimization than of their child's perpetration (Holt et al., 2009). The findings from this study support the narrative from the literature that working with parents can be challenging not because parents are inherently difficult, but because meetings sit at the intersection between school and family, where emotions often run high, past experiences are remembered, and conceptual disagreements can complicate attempts to move forward (Holt et al., 2009; Ostrander et al., 2018; Stives et al., 2022). A useful direction for future research would be to examine how teacher education might better prepare teachers for these definitional and relational tensions with families, and to identify practices that support constructive and trusting parent-teacher partnerships by documenting successful examples of home-school collaboration in bullying cases.

Finland has one of the most well-known school-based anti-bullying programs in the world, the KiVa Koulu program. In recent times, however, the program has faded, with teachers describing KiVa Koulu as a remnant of the past, surviving only as a name and as a few leftover posters and materials. The transition of the KiVa Koulu program to a paid model appears to have discouraged many schools from continuing its implementation, resulting in the label of KiVa Koulu surviving without any active infrastructure. Herkama et al. (2022) identified leadership support, shared staff responsibility, and time allocation as key conditions for the sustainability of the KiVa program over time, but the findings from this study suggest that these conditions have not been met, at least for the five schools in the study. The teachers' accounts suggest that when the KiVa program was active and implemented correctly, it was useful and produced positive results, but without an active team, regular lessons or clearly maintained procedures, anti-bullying work becomes individualized and inconsistent. Future research could be done to establish the degree of the program's degradation in Finland, and to establish which parts of the program remain active and how it is represented in schools.

The teachers in this study frequently referenced how their experiences of bullying were influenced by the wider social and cultural context. Gendered peer dynamics, changing online cultures, and cultural or value-related tensions between families and schools were all cited as playing a role in the modern bullying landscape. Boys' bullying was often described as more straight-forward, visible and physical, while

girls' bullying was seen as more relational, covert and difficult to prove. Björkqvist (2018) reached similar findings that girls use more indirect aggression and boys more physical aggression. Exclusion, reputation damage and manipulation are less visible than direct aggression, and therefore easier for teachers to miss or minimize. Many of the teachers also noted how social media has changed the tone of peer interactions at school, and normalized harsher language and interactions among peers.

The barriers and challenges faced by the teachers in this study did not operate in isolation, rather, time pressures, parental conflicts, faded initiatives and wider social factors all interacted with each other to make every bullying case uniquely challenging. When faced with these barriers, teachers are less likely to employ complex multi-step intervention models, and more likely to rely on the most immediate strategy available–talking to the pupils involved. This helps explain the main finding from the strategies section: that discussion-based responses to bullying dominate not necessarily a result of teacher preference, but a result of their practical adaptation to constrained conditions. The barriers and challenges presented by the teachers in this study do not merely make bullying work more difficult, they actively shape what kinds of responses remain viable for the teachers to explore.

5.2.3 Strategies used by Finnish primary school teachers when responding to bullying and cyberbullying

The teachers in this study described responding to bullying primarily through discussion-based interventions. Without exception, the teachers described their first steps as gathering information and clarifying conflicting accounts, followed by discussions with the students involved, usually beginning with the victim, followed by witnesses and finally the alleged bully. Discussions were held individually to ensure that the students could speak freely without the presence of the accused perpetrator. Some teachers mentioned the importance of allowing some time after an incident, particularly if it was physical or violent, to give the students an opportunity to calm down and clear their thoughts before any discussions took place. This discussion-based approach is in line with research which address how teachers often rely on conversational approaches when addressing bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Rigby, 2014).

During the discussions with students, the teachers described how they drew on their experience to guide the conversations, and how they tried to remain neutral, avoided using accusatory language, and attempted to understand the underlying causes of the behaviours. Indeed, teachers are found to frequently rely on informal investigative strategies shaped by experience rather than any formal training (Fry et al., 2019). The role of the victim was also highlighted, with some teachers noting that it sometimes required careful examination, particularly where ongoing conflict or provocation was suspected. Many teachers described the importance of clear documentation and maintaining written records to create a paper trail in case the situation escalated. Decisions about involving school staff were typically based on professional judgement, knowledge of colleagues' strengths, and inter-collegial relationships.

Working with parents and families formed another key element of teachers' strategies. The teachers described making judgements about when and how to involve parents based upon their knowledge of the students and their families. Most teachers would try to resolve minor incidents at school without contacting parents, but the more serious or repeated cases were more likely to involve parental contact. Several teachers emphasized that for cases of bullying, they preferred to contact parents by phone. Bullying is a sensitive and emotionally charged issue and many teachers felt that contacting parents by phone was preferable to sending written messages, as a phone call provides a more personal form of communication and allows parents to ask questions and exchange information more freely. Written messages can also be easily misinterpreted and misunderstood in their tone and content, so the general consensus was that phone calls were preferable.

The teachers also recognized that communication with parents was often emotionally charged and shaped by the parents' expectations, experiences and perceptions of fairness. Parental expectations can significantly influence how schools respond to bullying incidents (Ostrander et al., 2018) and parents and teachers frequently operate with different understandings of bullying (Stives et al., 2022). The issue of confidentiality was highlighted by some teachers–while parents of the victims often wanted visible evidence that the bully had received some form of punishment, the teachers are not always able to disclose details about disciplinary measures involving other children, leaving the parents of the victims feeling that justice has not been

served or that the school is not taking the bullying seriously. The interviews showed the complex nature of home-school relationships, and that working with the parents was not a single step in the intervention process, but that it could occur at multiple points depending on the individual circumstances.

Ostrander et al. (2018), claim that successful anti-bullying interventions require cooperation between teachers, school leadership, and external professionals. The teachers in this study similarly suggested that multi-professional collaboration played an important role in bullying resolution in their experiences. Many teachers emphasized how involving a colleague or other school professional in the process could improve the quality of decision making, ease the emotional burden, and benefit the students involved, reflecting the importance of coordinated responses involving multiple adults in bullying cases (Wachs et al., 2019). Teachers described making careful judgements about who to involve, usually selecting someone who knows the students, who has similar pedagogical values and with whom they have a good personal or professional working relationship. Only in more severe cases where the behaviours were repeated and could not be resolved within the school, were external agencies like social services or the police involved.

In addition to actively responding to cases of bullying, the teachers described a second layer of anti-bullying work as universal and preventative practices designed to minimize the occurrence of bullying in the first place. These practices were rarely framed as formal anti-bullying processes, but were instead embedded into the daily classroom practices and routines which included regularly changing seating arrangements, mixing pupils into different working groups, encouraging cooperative learning, and addressing minor behavioural issues before they escalated into more serious conflicts. Many of the teachers also emphasized how they model respectful interactions, foster a positive classroom environment, and ensure that their students feel safe, secure and seen in their classroom. These descriptions paint universal measures not as a separate or labelled activity, but as an ongoing part of classroom management and relationship building. This closely represents the universal components of the KiVa koulu program, which emphasize whole-class discussions, peer norms, and the development of positive classroom climates as key elements of bullying prevention (Salmivalli et al., 2013).

Punitive measures were framed by the teachers as a last resort, and many expressed their skepticism about the long-term effectiveness of punitive measures against bullies because they felt it did not address the underlying causes of bullying behaviour, and that many students would take their punishment as ‘payment’ for their behaviour. Rigby (2014) and Bauman et al. (2008) both support this idea that punitive approaches alone rarely produce lasting behavioural change. Despite these reservations, the teachers acknowledged that punishments and sanctions could play a role in serious cases, particularly where physical aggression or threats were involved. In these cases, temporary restrictions such as activity bans or detentions were sometimes applied. Interestingly, some teachers described that for the more sensitive students, the most significant consequence was the experience of participating in a serious meeting with multiple adults, where their behaviours and actions were openly discussed.

An important finding from this study lies not only in the strategies that the teachers described, but in the strategies weaned from the literature which were absent from the teachers’ descriptions. None of the teachers suggested that they would ignore a bullying incident if they became aware of it, nor did they describe standing back to observe an incident before deciding whether to intervene. Both of these responses were identified in previous research (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015; Wachs et al., 2019), but we cannot rule out the possibility that the teachers would ignore or observe a bullying incident, and did not want to mention it during their interview because of social desirability factors. Similarly, the confrontational or authority-based approaches described by Olweus (1993), were not represented as first responses in the data, with the teachers consistently preferring non-confrontational, discussion-based approaches. ‘Working with the bully’ and ‘working with the victim’ were presented as separate strategies in the literature (Bauman et al., 2008; Sairanen and Pfeffer, 2011), but the data from this study suggested that both appeared to be combined into the same broader practice of talking through the situation with the pupils involved. Additionally, neither mediation nor restorative practice was explicitly mentioned by the teachers in this study, although aspects of these approaches were visible in some accounts of involving other adults in the process. Finally, a key element of the KiVa Koulu program is that it is grounded in the participant role approach, which views bullying as a group-based social process. None of the

teachers articulated this, even those who were active members of KiVa teams in the past. Whether the teachers in this study were not aware of these strategies, or if they merely chose to ignore them is not known, but it does suggest that the bullying intervention literature presents a much broader repertoire of strategies than what was described by the teachers in this study. Had the teachers in this study encountered a greater number and wider range of cases of bullying, they may have drawn on a broader range of strategies. Similarly, the absence of these approaches could be linked to gaps in teacher education, as the participants reported receiving no formal training on bullying intervention during their studies.

The findings from this study suggest that teachers do not typically follow a rigid intervention strategy when responding to cases of bullying. Instead, their responses are shaped by a flexible discussion-based process that evolves with the specific individual details of each case. There is no ‘one-fits-all’ strategy, instead the teachers rely on their experience, expertise and knowledge of the students and their families to guide their discussion-based process. To synthesize these findings, Figure 2 presents a revised model of bullying response based on the information provided by the teachers in this study. Unlike Figure 1, which presents a linear model based upon the literature, Figure 2 illustrates a cyclical process grounded within universal and preventative measures. The outer ring of the model highlights the universal preventative measures employed by the teachers which are central to maintaining a positive classroom environment and minimizing the potential for bullying behaviour. All the actions occur within this sphere of universal preventative measures, and the stronger they are, the less likely it is for bullying to occur. Once a bullying incident is identified, phase 1 begins, and the teachers investigate, clarify and gather information followed by individual discussions with the victims, witnesses and bullies. All the students are then brought together for a joint discussion. Parents, colleagues and other school professionals are placed centrally within the process as they can be involved at any time depending on the needs of the specific case. Phase 2 involves monitoring of the situation, regular ‘check-ins’ with the students, and further discussions if needed. Ideally, bullying cases could be resolved before the teachers decide to move to phase 3 - escalation. This final phase is for the more serious and ongoing cases of bullying where external agencies such as social services, Ankkuritiimi or the police are involved. This revised model illustrates the teachers’

real-world practices and allows for the flexibility and nuances of individual bullying cases.

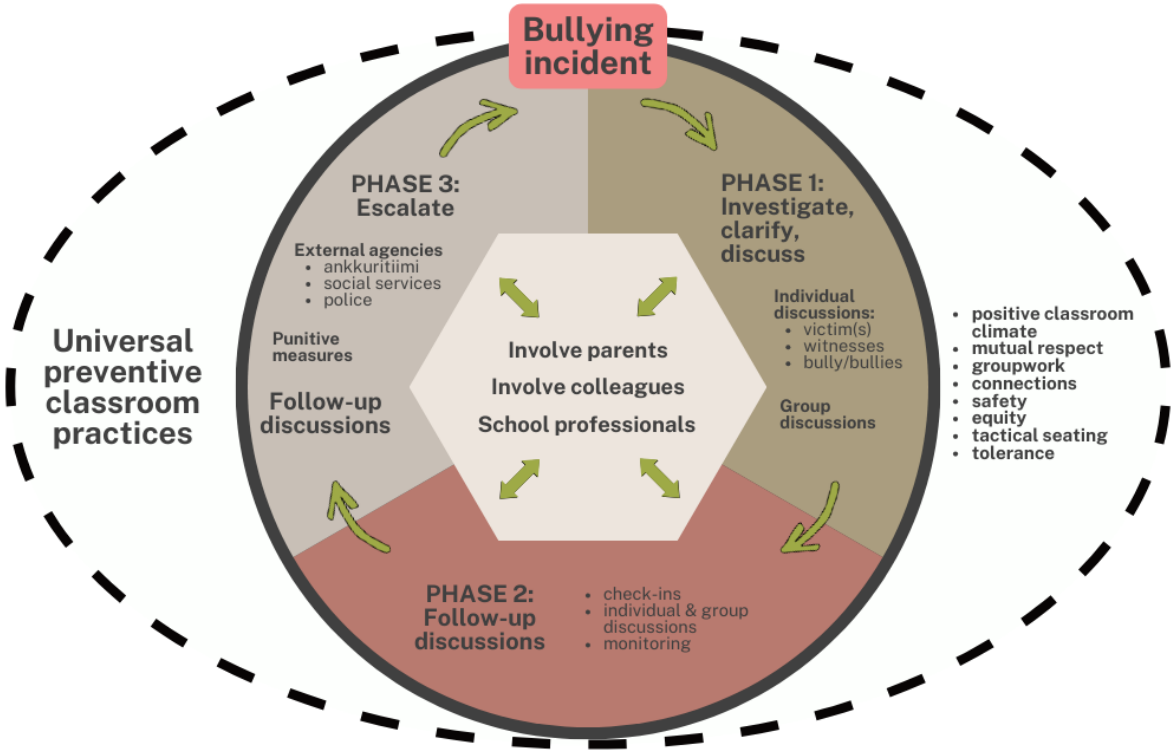

Figure 2. Model of teacher responses to bullying incidents in Finnish primary schools based on the interview findings. The diagram illustrates a cyclical process of investigation, discussion, follow-up, and potential escalation, with parents and other professionals framed as central to the process. Universal preventive classroom practices form the broader context within which these responses occur.

5.2.4 Looking to the future: support and advice for newly qualified teachers

Teacher education programs often provide limited preparation for dealing with bullying dynamics in real classrooms (Bauman et al., 2008); Fry et al., 2019). One of the clearest findings emerging from the study was also the perceived gap between teacher education and the practical realities of dealing with bullying situations in schools. The teachers in this study expressed most uncertainty about dealing with cyberbullying, which suggests that pre-service teachers would benefit from targeted education and support in recognizing, investigating and responding to online incidents, and managing the fallout when incidents emerge in the classroom. None of the teachers in this study had received any formal education or training about bullying, neither conceptual nor practical, in their own teacher training. Instead, they described entering the classroom with a strong academic foundation, but with little or

no guidance on how to navigate bullying situations or manage emotionally charged situations with parents. Burger et al. (2015) similarly found that teachers often reported learning about bullying responses informally once they begin teaching rather than during their teacher education.

Interestingly, the one teacher who had taken the Steiner teacher education route, described her training as placing a greater emphasis on practical training and guided classroom experience, which raises questions about the balance between academic and practical preparation in Finnish teacher education. Current teacher education programs in Finland appear to operate on the assumption that practical competence will develop naturally through experience, which is likely true. The findings of this study however, suggest that some targeted preparation centred around the practical skills is needed. Engaging in bullying-based discussions with students and parents could help reduce the initial uncertainty experienced by many newly qualified teachers. Future research could explore how teacher education programs might better integrate practical training on bullying responses and parental involvement alongside existing academic components.

The teachers in this study repeatedly described how they rely upon their professional experience when dealing with bullying cases and how their experience itself is the main tool they use when dealing with such sensitive situations. Literature documents that teachers' responses to student behaviour are shaped by their accumulated professional experience (van Verseveld et al., 2020). Similarly, in this study, the teachers had developed confidence and competence in their ability to recognize the patterns of bullying, the dynamics of classroom relationships and the expectations of parents over time. Some teachers also mentioned that their current approach and outlook on bullying had developed through a process of trial and error–refining their responses over time.

Teacher experience also appeared to influence their relationships with parents, with some teachers suggesting that parents may have more confidence in older, more experienced teachers, which dictates how the parents choose to interact with the teachers. Some teachers also noted how they have learned from their colleagues and other school professionals by observing how others handled difficult situations and asking for advice and incorporating these insights into their own practice. These

insights address the importance of collaborative professional environments in supporting teachers' responses to bullying (Kollerová et al., 2021). The findings reveal that while some practical skills can be taught, the nuanced social and emotional skills needed by teachers to navigate complex bullying situations only develop through lived experiences and professional interaction within the school environment.

When asked what advice the teachers would give to newly qualified teachers, their responses focused less on specific intervention strategies and more on the conditions that allow effective responses to develop. Three main themes emerged: the importance of seeking help and support, protecting personal well-being, and building strong relational knowledge of the students. The first strand of advice is reflected in the broader literature showing that collaborative school cultures and professional networks are important for effective bullying intervention (Bauman et al., 2008; Kollerová et al., 2021). Secondly, the emotionally draining nature of dealing with bullying cases can impact a teacher's personal well-being; therefore, teachers must learn how to maintain professional boundaries and set clear limits to avoid becoming overly involved in bullying cases and overwhelmed by the demands of the job. Finally, the importance of forming connections with their students and knowing their personalities, relationships and histories was highlighted by the teachers. Having a deep knowledge of their students allows the teachers to detect subtle changes in their behaviour, intervene earlier in conflicts and tailor their responses to the individual students' needs. Taken together, the teachers' advices suggest that effective bullying responses hinge on supportive professional environments, sustainable working conditions, and a deep relational understanding of their students.

5.3 Conclusions

This study set out to explore how Finnish primary school teachers experience responding to bullying and cyberbullying in everyday school practice. The findings suggest that responding to bullying in Finnish primary schools is a process shaped by professional judgement, relational knowledge of students, and the structural conditions of the school in which they work.

The findings revealed four key insights. First, the variety of teachers' conceptual knowledge of bullying and cyberbullying should be addressed by school or larger

communities to provide better support for teachers and students. Additionally, clearer conceptual preparation should be provided in teacher education. Second, structural constraints such as limited time and resources and complex interactions with parents shape how the teachers are able to respond to incidents of bullying. Social and cultural factors, including gender, the influence of social media and broader social patterns also formed part of the context in which teachers interpret and respond to cases of bullying. Therefore, teachers' responses to bullying and cyberbullying reflect a combination of available resources and context. Third, the variety of teachers' knowledge and experience of bullying cases do not result in varied responses to bullying. Teachers rely on a limited variety of strategies which may suggest that different strategies should be taken into consideration by teacher training at all levels. Finally, professional experience, collegial support and relational knowledge of students seem to be key factors in managing bullying situations.

The four key insights point to important conclusions for teacher education. Bullying remains completely unacknowledged formally in modern teacher training programs in Finland which leaves newly qualified teachers without proper tools to deal with bullying and cyberbullying cases at schools given that they lack sufficient experiences. Therefore, teacher education programs should incorporate more explicit preparation for bullying intervention, including conceptual understanding, discussion techniques, and strategies for communicating with parents in emotionally charged situations.

This study has highlighted how responding to bullying in Finnish primary schools is not simply a matter of applying predefined intervention strategies, but is an ongoing process of professional judgement shaped by the expertise and experiences of teachers who need to work within school-specific structures. Recognizing these realities is essential for developing more effective support for teachers, strengthening home-school relationships, and creating school environments in which bullying can be addressed constructively and sustainably.

Recommendations for future research

Further studies could explore how teacher education programs could address bullying, and whether practical training in investigating, discussing and communicating with parents would improve early career teachers' preparedness. A

broader approach can reveal how student teachers in Finland perceive their preparedness for dealing with bullying and cyberbullying. Another possible avenue for this would be to compare the preparedness of newly qualified teachers who completed the traditional academically focused teacher education program with those who completed the more practically oriented Steiner teacher education program. A second area of research could focus on teacher-parent interactions in bullying cases, and provide a deeper insight into the emotional tensions and expectations that shape these discussions. A third line of research could be including students and parents and investigate how bullying incidents are experienced and resolved at school through their perspectives, although access to willing and available participants would make such research difficult to conduct. Finally, research can address broader teacher populations in Finland and survey the teachers about their conceptions of bullying and cyberbullying, their challenges and strategies in dealing with bullying and cyberbullying, and how/if they were trained for these challenges. The potential differences based on certain demographic and school variables can be detected in this way as well.

Personal reflections on the study

Writing this thesis has been a valuable experience for me, both personally and academically. My motivation for the study was driven by my experiences with ‘Class X’, with whom my two years of teaching were fraught with bullying and emotionally draining daily challenges. I was able to improve or resolve some of the situations with Class X, while others continued, leaving me with a veiled sense of professional failure. At times, my experiences with Class X left me questioning my own competence as a teacher and whether I was suited to the profession at all.

Reflecting on this time, I realize that I tried to carry too much of the burden alone. I sought support from my colleagues and from the headteacher, but I was not open enough about how difficult I was finding the situation although I should have been more honest and forceful when seeking support. This thesis has taught me that bullying should be a shared responsibility in schools and the class teacher should not be expected to manage such situations in isolation. Effective bullying resolution depends not only on the teacher, but on the structures and people around them.

I have also reflected critically on some of my decisions during that time. One thing I would do differently in the future is that I would contact the parents directly by phone, rather than relying on Wilma messages. Through the accounts of the teachers in this study, I have come to better understand how sensitive bullying situations are and how easily written communication can be misinterpreted or escalate tensions. I also recognize that I allowed the problems with the class to affect me personally, as I internalized the difficulties of the class as a reflection of my own shortcomings as their teacher.

This thesis has given me a strong sense of perspective on my teaching experiences, and I also feel somewhat vindicated regarding my experiences with Class X. The teachers in this study had almost 200 years of combined teaching experience between them, and none of them described anything like what I experienced with Class X–the class and the situation were simply exceptional, and not representative of everyday classroom life in Finland. I was just unlucky to encounter such an unusually difficult combination of behaviours, families and dynamics. This thesis has helped me see that I did not fail the class through lack of effort, nor was I at fault or were my efforts in vain. I am now able to separate this one very difficult teaching experience from my broader identity as a teacher and understand that teachers can act thoughtfully, consistently and compassionately and still not be able to resolve every bullying case they encounter.

Along with these reflections on my past, I certainly feel better prepared for the future. I feel I have a much deeper understanding of bullying and the practical realities of responding to it, and that I have gained something that approaches professional expertise in this area. If the knowledge and insight gained through this thesis enable me to help just one child in the future, then this process will have been worthwhile.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Study information sheet sent to participants

Finnish Primary School Teachers' Experiences of Responding to Bullying and Cyberbullying

This research forms part of my master's degree in primary teacher education at the University of Turku. The purpose of this study is to explore how primary school teachers in Finland experience and respond to cases of bullying and cyberbullying among pupils. The study aims to identify the strategies teachers use when dealing with cases of bullying, the barriers and challenges they encounter, and the reasons behind the choices they make. By examining the experiences and strategies of experienced teachers, the study hopes to provide insights that could support future teacher training and strengthen anti-bullying practices in Finnish schools.

The motivation behind this research stems from my own experiences as a teacher working with challenging classes where bullying and conflict were frequent issues. I often felt that the line between conflict and bullying was complex, and that the best course of action was not always clear. Bullying incidents were often complicated by differing cultural and social values between home and school, and the complex relationships between the pupils. These experiences have driven me to seek a better understanding of how more experienced teachers make decisions in bullying situations, and how they can be better supported in this demanding aspect of their work.

10 participants will take part in an individual, semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 - 60 minutes. Interviews may be conducted face-to-face or online (via Zoom or other online platforms), depending on what is most convenient for the participant. The interview will include open-ended questions about bullying and cyberbullying situations. Participation in the interviews is voluntary, and participants may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

All information provided will be treated with strict confidentiality. The interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed. A qualitative approach will be used to interpret

the data and identify themes that capture the teachers' experiences and ideas. No names, school names, or identifying details will appear in the final report, and the participants will remain completely anonymous. The data will be securely stored and destroyed once the thesis has been approved.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me:

Gregg Adams

Email: grstad@utu.fi Phone: 044 307 1884

Master's Degree Program in Primary Teacher Education,

University of Turku.

Appendix 2 – Participant consent form

Participant Consent Form

Hello, my name is Gregg Adams and as a part of my master's degree in Primary Teacher Education at the University of Turku, I am conducting research investigating how teachers respond to incidences of bullying and cyberbullying at school. As a part of the research, I request to conduct an interview with you to learn about your experiences, strategies and ideas. The interview will last around one hour and your participation in the interview is completely voluntary.

The interview will be conducted in a one-to-one setting, face-to-face or online, as you prefer and at your convenience. The data that you provide will not be provided to the school in which you are teaching or to any other institutions. The interview does not involve any psychological or physical tasks and is not likely to provide you with any benefits, apart from being involved in educational research about bullying. I will ask to audio-record the interview - you may allow, refuse, or allow for only certain parts of the interview to be recorded. I may contact you for further explanation on certain topics after this interview, and you may either refuse to provide further information or choose to answer my questions.

If you volunteer to participate in the interview, your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent possible. I will keep your name in my records, but your name, the name of the schools in which you teach, or any student names will not be included in the research. My thesis supervisor and myself will be the only researchers who have access to the data you provide. The data you provide will be stored in a safe place where other people have no access. This form is prepared as two copies, one for your records, and one for the study. The data that you provide will be destroyed once the thesis has been approved.

You are free to ask questions at any moment of the interview. If you have questions before deciding to volunteer, please feel free to ask. You may refuse to participate before the interview begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable.

If you want to ask me any further questions in the future about the study, please feel free to contact me at the following address (you may contact me anonymously, if you

prefer): 044 307 1884 or grstad@utu.fi. The study is supervised by Prof. Dr. Çiğdem Haser at the University of Turku. If you have any concerns or questions, you can also contact her: cigdem.haser@utu.fi.

If you are happy to volunteer for the interview, please write your name and surname, the date and provide your signature on space provided below.

Thank you,

Gregg Adams

Full Name: _____ Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3 – Interview questions

1. Can you tell me a little about your background and teaching experience (e.g., years teaching, grade levels, roles in school)?
2. How do you define bullying and cyberbullying in your school context?
3. Have you ever received any formal or informal training regarding bullying or bullying resolution?
4. What in your opinion are the biggest barriers or challenges facing teachers when dealing with cases of bullying and cyberbullying?
5. What are the factors that influence how you approach a bullying situation?
6. When you encounter bullying in school, what are the first steps you usually take?
7. If these initial measures are not successful, what are your next steps?
8. How do you ensure that the bullying behaviour has actually stopped?
9. Can you give a specific example from your experiences of a bullying situation and how you resolved it?
10. Now, can you describe a cyberbullying case and how your response was similar or different?
11. When you've worked with other teachers or staff to handle bullying, how did that collaboration shape your response?
12. What kinds of responses from parents have you found most helpful and unhelpful?
13. Have there been any situations where you felt restricted in what you can do?
14. Are there any strategies or approaches you have tried that did not work as well?
15. Over the course of your career, how have your approaches to bullying changed? What have you learned from your experiences and observations?

16. Based on your experiences, what specific kinds of training or knowledge should new teachers receive about bullying and cyberbullying before entering the classroom?

17. What kind of advice would you give to newly qualified teachers facing their first bullying case, what would you tell them?

18. Is there anything else you would like to say about bullying in schools which we have not covered in the interview?