A STREET-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE:
NEW JERSEY MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATORS MAKE SENSE OF THE
ANTI-BULLYING BILL OF RIGHTS

by
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A STREET-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE: NEW JERSEY MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATORS

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Street-Level Perspective:

New Jersey Middle School Educators Make Sense of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights

By Kristen G. Kugelman

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Bullying behavior has significant academic and emotional implications (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2010; New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate, 2009). Using a phenomenological case study approach, this dissertation sought to understand how educators, as street-level bureaucrats, made sense of New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR, 2010) given the human, social and material resources at their disposal. The lived experiences of educators in two public middle schools were illuminated.

Findings suggested that the resources available at the local level impact the quality of the organizational sense making process. Therefore, context does matter. It was evident that educators, as street-level bureaucrats, have access to a significant source of power within their local community. With respect to the ABR, this power was either frustrated by fear of legal consequences or it flourished as educators acted as civic entrepreneurs (Durose, 2011). The significance of this study was that it highlighted the way that power, located within local school districts, might be harnessed to support the implementation of research-based policy initiatives. A quality sense making experience is critical. While the findings from this study are not generalizable, they may be transferable and suggest additional studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the willingness of the two participating school districts and the staff who graciously gave their time to be interviewed. Ironically, *lack of time* was a significant finding of this research as presenting a barrier to achieving a quality sense making process, yet the committed educators at “South Hills” and “Central Valley” shared this precious commodity with me. I am truly grateful to these individuals.

Just as essential in the successful culmination of this process was the continuing support and guidance of my academic advisor and committee member, Dr. James Giarelli and the chair of my committee, Dr. Catherine Lugg. Not only did they provide continuous wisdom and insight, they conveyed their unwavering belief in my ability to bring this work to successful completion. I cannot express the depth of my gratitude to Dr. Giarelli and Dr. Lugg for believing in me, challenging me and guiding me. Dr. Katrina Bulkley rounded out my committee as the member from outside of Rutgers. Her perspective and suggestions added a depth to this study that was invaluable.

Throughout this process, I was supported and encouraged by numerous friends and colleagues. Some had traveled this path. Some had not. Thanks to all! Of course, I owe the biggest debt of gratitude to my parents, who have consistently and unconditionally supported me in all my endeavors. While I know that they are proud of this accomplishment, it is my hope that the future opportunities created as a result of this process serve as way to honor them and acknowledge the gifts they have imparted to me.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my brother, Rick. His memory continues to inspire my journey.

L. Richard Kugelman, Jr.
September 30, 1966-September 6, 1992
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Chapter 1:

Introduction

This dissertation sought to explore how educators in two New Jersey middle schools interpreted and made sense of the State’s mandated 2010 Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (ABR, P.L. 2010, Chapter 122, N.J.S.A. 18A: 37-13) designed to strengthen P.L. 2002 Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying Act (HIB). It explored educators’ understandings and perceptions of the policy by examining how they individually and collectively utilized various resources in an effort to make sense of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) and ultimately incorporate it into the day-to-day activities of their schools.

According to Stone (2012), policy is something that happens within a community. Therefore, examining and comparing the local communities of two New Jersey middle schools was the best place to begin to understand how New Jersey’s ABR was brought to life at the local level. The aim of this dissertation was twofold. First, it sought to provide a deeper understanding of the cognitive process of sense making that educators engaged in as they grappled with understanding the ABR policy. Second, it was designed to examine a potential phenomenon of power (Stone, 2012, p. 34) available to two distinct communities of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) as they attempted to interpret a policy mandated from outside the school.

Stone (2012) contends, “power is a phenomenon of communities” intended to “subordinate individual self-interest to other interests” (p. 34). This power is fueled
by passion rather than pure reason (Stone, 2012) and provided an interesting way
to examine New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights policy.

The term ‘policy’ is a multi-faceted word that has been defined in many ways. Fitz, Davies and Evans (2006) suggest policies “can be thought of as outcomes of
contested preferences expressed within the state and civil society” (p. 17). However, the fundamental ideas of social and moral purpose underlie all of the
meanings of ‘policy.’ Policy, whether formal or informal, helps to create order within
society and to support the well-being of people (Braun, Ball, & Maguire, 2011;
Fowler, 2009). Elected and appointed officials at various levels of bureaucracy are
tasked with establishing policy that is clearly focused and serves to establish some
degree of structure and continuity. However, as Stone (2012) argues, policy making
cannot be relegated to a purely rational model of decision-making. Values matter
(Fitz, Davies, & Evans, 2006; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). At all levels of society, from
researchers to policy analysts to decision makers to those tasked with policy
implementation, people “must bring their own values into the picture” (Stone, 2012,
p. 10). While a purely rational model of making public policy provides an orderly,
consistent framework for decision-making, it ignores “our emotional feelings and
moral intuitions [which are] both powerful parts of human motivation and precious
parts of our life experience” (Stone, 2012, p. 11). From this perspective, policy
mandated from outside of any local context will always exist in tension with the
emotions, experiences and values of local actors.

Over the last several decades, there has been a strong movement towards
using evidenced-based research in the policymaking process in the fields of health,
social services and education throughout North America, Europe and other economically developed countries (Huston, 2008). This trend is an affirmation that research and strong evidence should be the guiding forces in the adoption of new legislation and social programs that will be the instruments of societal law and order. Regardless of the evidence used in development, there is often a gap during the implementation phase between the intent of the policy and what is ultimately enacted at the local level (Fowler, 2009; Supovitz & Weinbaum, 2008). Although Supovitz and Weinbaum (2008) suggest that policy implementation is a relatively benign process that simply carries out a particular directive, this appears not to be a completely accurate description. Human beings are not mechanistic automatons, so it is not surprising that variations and mutations occur as the implementation process unfolds. Value conflicts arise as research knowledge moves into the realm of policy creation and then trickles down to local sites for dissemination and action (Abbott, MacDonald, Hay, & McCuaig, 2011). Therefore context, as well as values, matters.

Bernstein (1996) describes three systemic contexts through which knowledge and/or policy is produced and reproduced. The primary context is the field of production, such as the intellectual or research field. The recontextualizing field is where primary, research-based knowledge is transformed into policy knowledge. This field is also tasked with transferring the knowledge to the secondary field, which is the site of dissemination and action. Implementation, therefore, is much more complex than its definition implies. According to Bernstein, those individuals in the secondary field who engage with policies are making
judgments and decisions based on their own system of values and existing perceptions. The space between the recontextualizing and secondary fields is an ambiguous place where a community of actors interacts in ways that potentially transform or reject the original policy message (Coburn, 2001, 2005a; Hill, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). It is within this localized space of making sense that there appears to be a phenomenon of power that can potentially be harnessed to positively affect how research-based policy is understood and, ultimately, implemented within educational communities.

**Background and Statement of the Problem**

As a State employee with degrees in political science and education and a doctoral student at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, I was interested in understanding how New Jersey’s educational policies are operationalized at the local school site and why various outcomes often result. As a practitioner in the fields of education and social services who has been a street-level bureaucrat in different institutional settings, my goal was to gain insight into the supports and barriers to research-based policy implementation. The literature on the challenges inherent in the implementation process has emerged in stages over the years. This literature offers different reasons accounting for the gap between policy and practice in schools and also what engenders success.

Some of the earliest research posited that a primary cause for implementation failure was a lack of knowledge, skill and will on the part of the implementers (Fowler, 2009; McLaughlin, 1987). Although, educators may have appeared resistant, the reality often was that they were not given the resources
needed to do what the new policy asked of them (Fowler, 2009). In other cases, it appeared that the multiple channels that a policy flowed through prior to actually reaching the school site caused the distortion of the message, much like in the game of telephone (McLaughlin, 1987). Some conventional implementation models suggested that it was the individual actors (Spillane, 2004) and the structure and organization of the system (Fowler, 2009) that were primarily responsible for the lack of success of many new policies and reform efforts.

Although the implementation process is never an easy one, there are some school districts where policy implementation has met with success. Strong central office support, coupled with a collegial teamwork approach from educators and a substantial amount of persistence and hard work, can yield promising results (Fowler, 2009; Spillane, 1998). However, as reforms become more ambitious, policies become more intricate, and priorities compete for attention, educators are faced with adopting “new and unfamiliar approaches to teaching” (Fowler, 2009, p. 278). Faced with this challenge, it is evident that individual teachers are actors themselves and even if they have adequate resources and training, implementation results can vary from site to site (Spillane, 2004). This finding has engendered a new wave of research that turns attention to the cognitive process of sense making to explain some of the ways that policy implementation varies.

Researchers have begun to closely examine the ways local districts and schools come to understand policy that emanates from outside the local district. This process of making sense out of a policy involves the construction of understandings that are filtered through the lens of an individual's knowledge,
experience and worldviews (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 1998, 1999). According to Cohen and Weiss (1993) research-based policy messages supplement, rather than replace educators’ prior knowledge and practice. Individuals are tasked with figuring out “what policy means in order to decide whether and how to ignore, adapt, or adopt policymakers’ recommendations into their practice” (Spillane, 2000, p. 145) through the process of individual cognition (Spillane, et. al., 2002). From this perspective, educators as street-level bureaucrats are a class of people who play a crucial role in the policy implementation process and warrant further study.

The context within which these implementers operate also has an important impact on what gets attended to and how it gets accomplished (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 2000; Spillane, 1998) because sense making is not carried out in a vacuum nor conducted solely as an individual endeavor (Spillane, 2004). Bandura (2006) concurs that people do not act autonomously. Interdependency is paramount to goal achievement, especially in an organizational setting. People act together, pooling “their knowledge, skills and resources” (Bandura, 2006, p. 165). The social, human and material resources available to individuals within a local context are important influences on the unfolding of the collective sense making process (Spillane, 2004). From this perspective, mandated policies, such as New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) could potentially be interpreted, understood and acted upon by educators in a variety of ways because of the unique role street-level bureaucrats play and the sense making efforts in which they engage in at the organizational level.
The History of Anti-Bullying Legislation in New Jersey

Bullying among school-age children is nothing new. However, it was not until the 1970s that Scandinavian professor Dan Olweus began to conduct research on this phenomenon (Olweus, 1994). By the 1980s and 1990s, school bullying was a significant topic of discussion in the United States and other countries (Olweus, 1994). The 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado attracted national attention after twelve students, one teacher and the two gunmen were left dead (Rosenberg, 1999). In 2002, New Jersey was one of the many states that adopted anti-bullying legislation as a result of the Columbine tragedy ("N.J.’s New Anti Bullying", 2011). New Jersey Governor James McGreevey signed the 2002 Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying law into effect. The law required schools to adopt policies prohibiting harassment, intimidation and bullying on school property, at school functions and on school buses (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2013). However, no staff training was required and schools were only “encouraged” to incorporate bullying prevention programs and initiatives into their curriculum (New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate, 2009, p. 13). Although school districts were required to establish reporting and investigation procedures, there was no guidance provided to establish such processes and no oversight to ensure compliance. By 2002 standards, New Jersey’s Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying law (HIB) appeared quite comprehensive, even though some critics at the time believed that it “failed to provide enough protection for kids and consequences for non-compliant school officials” (Livio, 2010, para. 1). Ultimately, the critics’ concerns proved to be valid.
In the landmark case, *L.W. v. Toms River Regional Schools Board of Education*, 189 NJ, 381, 390 (2007), the New Jersey Supreme Court unanimously ruled that a school district can be held liable for harassment under the Law Against Discrimination (LAD, NJSA 10:5-12, 1945) in situations where the school district knew or should have known that a student was being harassed and failed to take reasonable action to remediate the situation. In this case, a Toms River student was bullied because of his perceived sexual orientation, forcing him to transfer to a different school. The court found that the school district did not respond reasonably to bias-based bullying and harassment between students that created a hostile educational environment (*L.W. v Toms River Regional Board of Education*, 2007). Protections afforded by the Law Against Discrimination (LAD), however, are limited to providing relief to individuals who are targets of bullying based on membership in one of the protected categories, such as race, gender, sexual orientation or disability (New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate, 2009). To offer more universal protection, it became evident that a more comprehensive anti-bullying platform was necessary to meet the needs of school districts and, ultimately, of all students.

Given the weaknesses in the 2002 HIB law, significant research and discussion began that included not only legislators, but Garden State Equality, the Anti-Defamation League and the New Jersey Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention (Garden State Equality, n.d.). In 2009, the New Jersey Commission on Bullying in Schools (NJCBS) issued a report, *There Isn’t a Moment to Lose*, outlining reforms to address bullying in schools. The report emphasized that improving safety and civility in schools by improving school climate was a key to addressing HIB-
related issues (New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate, 2009). As research and debate continued, however, there was apparent apprehension “that something could go wrong in New Jersey given the weakness of the current law” (Garden State Equality, n.d., para. 3).

These discussions were underway when something did go terribly wrong in New Jersey. On September 22, 2010, Rutgers freshman, Tyler Clementi, committed suicide by jumping off of the George Washington Bridge. Clementi, a gay man, was a victim of cyber-bullying when his roommate and another student spied on him using a webcam to broadcast an intimate encounter. National and international attention was focused on the trial of Clementi’s roommate who was accused of invasion of privacy, bias intimidation and evidence tampering.

On October 25, 2010, a little more than a month following Clementi’s death, the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights was introduced in the New Jersey State Assembly (Livio, 2010), legislation that incorporated many of the ideas brought forth by the New Jersey Commission on Bullying in Schools. Work on enhancements to the existing HIB law had been in process for well over a year, according to Steven Goldstein, Chairman of GSE (Garden State Equity, n.d.; Friedman, 2010a) and now public and political attention was keenly focused on this issue. By November 16, 2010, the proposed legislation had cleared the Assembly and the Education Committees and was headed for a vote in the full Senate and Assembly (Friedman, 2010a). With bipartisan support and a total of 74 co-sponsors, there was clearly enough momentum behind this legislation to easily pass both houses in Trenton (Friedman, 2010b). Governor Chris Christie was quoted as saying that he would give
the bill "careful review and consideration" (Friedman, 2010a, para. 10). Even with the swift and decisive action taken by the members of the Legislature, and the apparent public support for improving anti-bullying measures, Christie’s choice of words seemed cautious and tentative.

Two days later, on November 18, New Jersey’s democratic leadership, Congressman Rush Holt and Senator Frank Lautenberg, introduced the Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act in the U.S. House and Senate. This legislation, although not as stringent as the one proposed in New Jersey, would require all colleges receiving federal aid to amend their harassment policies (Heyboer, 2010). Funding would be provided for these institutions to start their own anti-bullying programs. With clear support for this type of legislation in New Jersey, and a renewed focus in Washington, D.C., Governor Chris Christie signed New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) on January 5, 2011.

**New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights**

The 2010 ABR strengthens and clarifies the definition of bullying, outlines specific investigation and reporting procedures, includes response timeframes, and requires attention be focused on improving school climate. To facilitate this process, districts are required to appoint an Anti-Bullying Coordinator and each school is required to appoint an Anti-Bullying Specialist and create a School Safety Team (Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act, 2010). The responsibilities of these roles are detailed within the legislation.

The definition of bullying was initially clarified and broadened as a result of the legislation and it continues to be revised and refined to better meet the needs of
school districts and the students (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2013, 2014).

However, there remains significant confusion surrounding the definition of bullying which has presented challenges to educators in the identification of the behavior. The current definition includes incidents that are physical, verbal or electronic in nature and occur on school property, at school-sponsored functions or on school buses. While it is easier to identify when one of the legally protected categories, or characteristics is present, the ABR only lists these characteristics as examples, leaving an ambiguous ‘other’ category for educators to grapple with. A thresh-hold consideration is whether or not the behavior “disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students and that a reasonable person should know...[the behavior] will have the effect of physically or emotionally harming a student or placing a student in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm” (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2013, p. 13). Noting the ongoing confusion, the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force proposed further clarification of the definition in their 2014 Annual Report by referring to an imbalance of power as a hallmark of bullying behavior, which they cite is at the core of the anti-bullying research and literature.

Reporting procedures have also been significantly enhanced in the ABR, including the reporting and tracking of all bullying incidents. Principals must be informed of a bullying incident the same day it occurs. Written reports must be submitted within two days. The principal must inform the parents of all parties involved. A formal investigation will be initiated by the Anti-Bullying Specialist within one day of the event and conclude no later than ten days after the written
The results of the investigation must be reported to the superintendent within two days of the conclusion of the investigation and to the Board at the next meeting. The report must detail the interventions put into place, which could include remediation, suspension or expulsion of the bully. Every semester, the superintendent must submit a report to the Board of Education documenting all incidents of bullying (Anti-Bullying Bills of Rights Act, 2010). Ultimately, each school and each district will be graded on how well they perform these duties (Dietzenn, 2011) and this information will be available on each districts’ web site for public view. Previously, the implementation of anti-bullying programs in schools did not include comprehensive documentation, monitoring by the State or public notification. Now, all districts in New Jersey are mandated to comply.

Additionally, the ABR requires schools to focus attention and resources on school climate issues through the creation of a School Safety Team, led by the appointed Anti-Bullying Specialist in each school (Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act, 2010). According to its 2009 report, the Commission on Bullying in Schools suggests that “how [schools] report, investigate and respond to incidents of HIB is determined by the values, beliefs, attitudes and norms that create the school climate” (New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate, 2009, p. 38). The Commission further notes that, “a school’s climate and culture have the most significant impact on informing the potential for HIB. Therefore, strengthening school culture and climate is the single best way to reduce HIB in schools” (New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate, 2009, p. 6). The New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force echoed this
sentiment in its January 26, 2013 Interim Report when it noted that “at the heart of the spirit of the ABR” is the need for the School Safety Team to attend to “systemic processes and practices in the school to address school climate issues such as HIB” (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2013, p. 22). Not only does the 2010 ABR establish a process for schools to respond to potential bullying incidents, it puts a strong emphasis on building respectful, cooperative school communities that may reduce the opportunity or need for students to engage in unhealthy bullying behavior. Given that the research suggests that this behavior negatively impacts both social and academic performance of students (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2010; New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate, 2009), the School Safety Team represents efforts to proactively and systematically reduce bullying behavior in schools.

A Bullying Prevention Fund was created in recognition of the possibility of an increased financial burden to school districts in implementing all of the requirements of the new law. It was intended to provide grants to school districts for training purposes, given that HIB training of all school staff and School Board members is now mandatory. However, no money was ever put into this fund and no provisions were made to ensure funding in the future (Dietzenn, 2011).

Interestingly, a small hamlet in Warren County, Allamuchy Township, challenged the anti-bullying law and its unfunded mandates by appealing to The Council on Local Mandates. This little known council was created in 1995 under the “State Mandate, State Pay” amendment to the New Jersey Constitution. The council has sole authority to rule on whether or not a state law fits the category of an “unfunded
mandate.” There is no appeals process (Rundquist, 2012). In a 7-2 vote, the council ruled that the state can change the ABR law or provide funding and they had 60 days to take action (Rundquist, 2012).

To maintain the ABR in its current form, Governor Christie signed an amendment, on March 26, 2012, that allocated monies to the Bullying Prevention Fund. This gesture allowed “New Jersey school districts to vie for up to $1 million in funding for anti-bullying efforts” (Portnoy, 2012, p. 1). A district could qualify for a grant by clearly demonstrating that it had explored all bullying prevention programs and approaches that were available at no cost (Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act, 2012). Based on this action, the ABR was no longer an unfunded mandate for this fiscal year.

The March 2012 amendment to the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights also created the seven-member New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force (NJABTF), mentioned previously. The Republican Governor appointed four members, the Democratic Senate President and Assembly Speaker each appointed one member and then they jointly chose the seventh (Portnoy, 2012). This task force is charged with establishing guidelines for districts to assist them in implementing the law, examining implementation efforts, drafting model regulations and making recommendations to the Commissioner of Education, and preparing reports (NJABTF, 2013). The task force submitted an Interim Report on January 26, 2013, 180 days after the first organizational meeting and the first annual report was submitted on January 26, 2014. Reporting will continue for a period of three years. The survey and focus group data collected by the task force represent the majority
of the limited research available to date regarding New Jersey’s ABR. This dissertation sought to extend and deepen the research base by looking in-depth at two of the New Jersey middle schools attempting to understand and implement the policy.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

Given the scant independent research on New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) policy and how it is understood and implemented, this dissertation sought to use the research literature as a lens to understand how educators, as street-level bureaucrats, in two New Jersey public middle schools made sense of the ABR. This dissertation also identified potential gaps between research-based policy and local actor understanding. This is an important area of study given the seriousness of bullying. According to statistics provided by that U.S. Department of Education, in the 2007-2008 school year, 25% of public school students across the United States reported that bullying occurred among students on a daily or weekly basis. Middle schools reported a higher percentage of bullying incidents compared to elementary and high schools (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2010). A 2009 study conducted by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that “the number of New Jersey students who were bullied was one percentage point higher than the national median” (Dietzenn, 2011, p. 1). Hence, New Jersey now boasts one of the toughest anti-bullying laws on the books in the United States (Hu, 2011; N.J.’s New Anti-Bullying, 2011; Perez-Pena, 2012).
A phenomenonological case study approach was used to conduct this research. According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenology is appropriate in attempting to “understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences...in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (p. 60). Using bounded cases, allowed a rich description of ABR policy interpretation to be articulated by going deep into the lives and experiences of school personnel in two New Jersey middle schools. This research sought to address the following questions:

How do educators in two New Jersey public middle schools make sense of the mandated 2010 Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights policy?

What are educators’, as street-level bureaucrats, interpretations and understandings of the policy?

How do the contextual factors of human, social and material resources affect the way these street level bureaucrats make sense of this policy?

This dissertation sought to understand how specific local contextual factors affect the way in which individuals in these New Jersey middle schools made sense of the mandated ABR policy and ultimately put it into practice. Given the significant impact of bullying behavior, it was necessary to determine if efforts to address this issue are truly substantive or merely symbolic in nature. Recognizing that street-level bureaucrats in a school have agency, both individually and collectively, it was essential to acquire a strong understanding of the cognitive processes involved in interpreting and applying state-level policy and how local contextual factors supported or hindered the sense-making process. A better understanding of this
process, its supports and barriers, provided insight into the phenomenon of power available to communities of street-level bureaucrats in the policy implementation process.

**Significance**

A better understanding of the collective power available to street-level bureaucrats, as a result of the sense-making process, may suggest ways of improving the implementation outcomes of research-based policy. This examination of the way in which street-level bureaucrats in two New Jersey middle schools interpreted and applied the provisions of the ABR policy indicated the existence of a power source that could potentially be tapped to improve the way state-level policy is designed to meet the needs of local sites. Since there was little research focused on the sense-making process of research-based behavior policies in general, and no research on the sense-making process related to the ABR in New Jersey specifically, this study was both timely and relevant. Concerted efforts to narrow the gap between research-based behavior policy and practice by understanding the sense-making process of street-level bureaucrats could assist in achieving better educational outcomes for children overall.

**Summary**

As research and debate continue about the policy implementation process, it was necessary to build on what is known and unknown. The latest wave of implementation research focuses increased attention on educators as actors in this
complicated process, suggesting that this may account for the variation in implementation results from site to site. Educators are also a class of street-level bureaucrats who have agency. However, people do not live autonomously (Bandura, 2006). Through “collective agency, [individuals] pool their knowledge, skills and resources and act in concert to shape their future” (Bandura, 2006, p. 165). Therefore, using the organizational process of sense making allowed this research to delve deeper into the understandings of educators who are at the center of the implementation conundrum. To explore this idea, New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights provided an excellent lens. Little research has been conducted on this policy to date and no research appears to examine the sense making process of behavior-based educational policies in general. An understanding of how the ABR in two middle schools is interpreted and acted upon by local communities of educators may inform ways to better support implementation efforts around this policy. The need to effectively address bullying behavior in schools is an important issue facing New Jersey and every other state in the nation due to the negative impact of bullying behavior on children and society. This dissertation now turns to the literature to lay a foundation for a better understanding of the nature and purpose behind this research.
Chapter 2:
Review of the Literature and the Conceptual Framework

This study sought to understand how New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights policy was interpreted and understood by educators at two public middle school sites. Following a brief review of the evolution of policy implementation, this literature review examined how educators, as street-level bureaucrats, engaged in the organizational process of sense making. Research on street-level bureaucrats, as a distinct class of organizational actors, was examined to understand how they made sense of policy mandated from outside the local context. Specifically, this review examined existing research in the areas of curriculum and behavioral reform policies to explore how educators, as street-level bureaucrats, engaged in the sense making process. Current research on bullying behavior in schools will highlight the need for both effective, research-based anti-bullying policies to firmly take hold in schools and for a better understanding of how these policies are interpreted and, ultimately, implemented. By surfacing the gaps in the research related to how educators interpreted and made sense of school behavior policies, a strong case can be made for the relevance and timeliness of this study.

Critical research has been conducted in the disciplines of education and social services in an effort to understand how federal and state policy is implemented locally. Research on the “War on Poverty” programs and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) suggested that local resistance and competing priorities were the culprits hindering implementation of these federal programs (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Overall, this first generation of
implementation research, conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, gave rise to the belief that there was a lack of capacity and will on the part of the local actors to acquiesce to the policy mandates (McLaughlin, 1987; Odden, 1991; Supovitz & Weinbaum, 2008).

In the second wave of implementation research, conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, researchers began to look beyond the initial phases of implementation and discovered that “enduring footprints” actually did appear in certain programs (Supovitz & Weinbaum, 2008, p. 3). A process of “mutual adaptation” was noted in which both local and higher level government actors made program adjustments to better suit specific needs and circumstances (Odden, 1991, p. 7). Ultimately, it was believed that through bargaining, tailoring and adapting, programs do get implemented locally, to the satisfaction of all stakeholders (Odden, 1991).

Stage three of the implementation research, which began in the 1980s, goes beyond implementation to consider how to get a particular program to work, noting the difference between compliance and change. McLaughlin (1987) takes the discussion from a macro perspective to a micro perspective suggesting that to understand program impact, it is necessary to focus on those who deliver a particular service. Emerging research indicates that local school districts and their personnel often implement key reform elements with sufficient capacity and will (Firestone, 1989; Fuhrman, Clune, & Elmore, 1988) lending support to the idea that “change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit” (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 147). It is the individual, or street-level bureaucrat (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977) who has the
capacity to interpret policy and affect the implementation process and therefore, was the focus of this study.

**Street-Level Bureaucrats**

Street-level bureaucrats are public service workers, such as teachers, social workers, police officers and other government employees who have direct contact with the citizens they serve and often work in difficult circumstances. Frequently, street-level bureaucrats operate in systems with inadequate resources, unclear objectives, and working conditions that dampen morale (Lipsky, 2010). According to Lipsky, these front line workers frequently must adopt coping behaviors in an effort to bridge the gap between mandated policy and what they need to do their job. In a climate of scare resources, it becomes imperative for front line workers to make certain decisions. Ultimately, Lipsky (2010) contends that street-level bureaucrats make policy by making decisions about how they work with individuals.

Although most street-level bureaucrats strive to do good work within the confines of these uncertain and unsupportive environments, in order to do so, they often must make decisions and adjustments to cope (Lipsky, 2010). The common paradox faced by street-level bureaucrats is that even though their work is “often highly scripted” by outside mandates, they are called to improvise to meet the actual needs of the individuals they serve, which leads to the use of discretion (Lipsky, 2010, p. xii). However, Lipsky identifies a second defining characteristic of street-level bureaucrats that he suggests is inherent in the nature of their work. Street-level bureaucrats are faced with the reality that they cannot routinely attain ideal
performance outcomes for the individuals they serve due to the “limitations of the work structure” (Lipsky, 2010, p. xvii). As a result, Lipsky suggests that there are three potential responses that street-level bureaucrats have to cope with the challenges they face. Street-level bureaucrats may:

1. Develop patterns of practice that allow them to maximize available resources and organize the work effort.

2. Modify their conceptions of the job to reduce the gap between the starting point and the end goal knowing that there are limited resources available.

3. Modify their conceptions of the recipient of the work efforts by narrowing the gap between the starting point and the end goal to accommodate the reality of the situation (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 82-83).

Each of these responses involves the use of discretion in making choices about what to do and how to do it. Ultimately, street-level bureaucrats are attempting to make the best decisions they can under the circumstances they encounter. These decisions are often “satisfactory rather than optimal” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 82), but they allow street-level bureaucrats to operate effectively within the structural confines of the organization.

**SLBs as Organizational Actors**

According to Lipsky, not every discretionary decision is one that is contrary to organizational goals. Sometimes, the decisions made by street-level bureaucrats align very closely. Therefore Lipsky (2010) suggests that it is not just the decisions
that need to be examined, but the “mental and organizational processes” if we are to truly understand the “routines and subjective responses street-level bureaucrats develop in order to cope with the difficulties and ambiguities of their jobs” (p. 82).

The organizational theory of sense making offers a perspective to better understand how street-level bureaucrats establish patterns of practice and modify their mental conceptions of both their work and their clients so they can more effectively operate within the organizational structure.

Karl Weick (2001), a leading organizational theorist, posits that equivocality or ambiguity is the basic problem of any organization. Weick focuses on the task of organizing as opposed to the unit of the organization because he envisions organizing as a sequence of events that ultimately bring the organization into existence (Gioia, 2006; Weick, 2001) and is carried out by individual actors. These specific organizing events are important because they can provide meaning in chaotic environments where there are competing demands or unclear objectives (Weick, 2001) such as in the world of the street-level bureaucrat.

Weick (1995) identifies seven properties of the cognitive sense making process. First, it is grounded in the construction of identity. Each person’s individual experiences are an essential part of his/her makeup. Second, sense making is an ongoing process that is always in play as life events unfold. Individuals are always evaluating situations. Third, it is a retrospective process where individuals rely on what they know or have already learned in an effort to make sense of circumstances. Fourth, sense making is a social process. Interactions with other people are critical to forming new understandings. Fifth, it does not occur in a vacuum. The thoughts
and actions of others in the environment provide critical information. Sixth, sense making is based on the cues that a specific event provides to make it plausible. Plausibility is not synonymous with accuracy. It infers that the assigned meaning seems right under the present circumstances. Seventh, the idea of plausibility in sense making implies that there is sufficient justification available for an individual to be satisfied with the conclusions drawn. The ideas of identity construction, or “who we think we are” and plausibility are given the most weight in the sense making process.

Sense making theory posits that individuals use their existing knowledge base and experiences in an effort to interpret and understand conditions in their world (Kolko, 2010; Spillane, 2004; Spillane, et al., 2002; Weick, 2001). Experience is the fundamental building block of all learning (Dewey, 1997; Kolko, 2010). In effect, sense making is a process that can describe how individuals interpret the demands made on them and integrate new information into their existing schema (Spillane, et al., 2002) by simplifying tasks and perceptions (Lipsky, 2010). Instinctively people are drawn to ideas that are familiar to help manage and process new information (Spillane, 2004). Such informational cues are filtered through existing knowledge, experiences and beliefs. Individuals seek to organize their thoughts and experiences in an effort to create order and structure (Dewey, 2012; Weick, 1995). These cognitive activities closely align with Lipsky’s (2010) contention that street-level bureaucrats strive to mentally simplify and reduce the complexity of tasks, thereby creating manageable routines that can be more easily
assimilated into their day-to-day activities. In the face of uncertainty, people attempt to create order out of chaos (Weick, 2001).

Through what could be seen as a sense making process, street-level bureaucrats, try to manage the ambiguous nature of messages and transform them into ones that are understandable and predictable, allowing them to effectively function in uncertain environments. Although these individuals may be tasked with micro-level actions, these actions have potentially large consequences (Lipsky 2010; McLaughlin, 1987; Weick, 2001). By using discretionary practices, street-level bureaucrats, the smallest organizational unit, play a significant role in determining the deliverables of an organization.

Looking at the work of street-level bureaucrats, and educators in particular, through this lens may provide a better understanding of how they make decisions and what factors are significant in the process. Parallel processes can be identified between the components of Weick’s sense making theory (2001) and the responses street-level bureaucrats adopt to do their jobs. Since street-level decisions become enacted policy, it is important to closely examine and understand the processes that street-level bureaucrats engage in, especially given Lipsky’s contention that street-level decisions, under certain conditions, often do mesh with organizational goals (2010).

**SLBs and Discretion**

The idea that a significant level of discretion is inherent in the job of the street-level bureaucrat has been demonstrated in the research time and again since the seminal work of Weatherly and Lipsky (1977). Studies across disciplines from
corrections, education and social welfare agree on the inevitability of the use of
discretion by these front line workers (Durose, 2011; Kelly, 1994; Maynard-Moody
&Musheno, 2000; Maynard-Moody, Musheno, & Palumbo, 1990; Riccucci, 2005;
Taylor, 2007; Weisert, 1994). Studies have found that street-level bureaucrats seek
ways to implement policies working within the confines of scare resources, little
training and a lack of clear direction (Kelly, 1994; Riccucci, 2005; Weatherly &
Lipsky, 1977). Whether schools are addressing curricular or behavioral reform or
states are engaging in the reform of social programs, the individuals closest to the
clients being served are tasked with making important decisions on a daily basis.

Street-level bureaucrats often resort to using their discretion in climates
where rules and procedures are too cumbersome to manage. There is consistency
within the research suggesting that the more rules, regulations and constraints
organizations place on front line workers, the more these individuals are forced to
adapt and interpret policy mandates in an effort to cope with the demands of their
jobs (Durose, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Wastell, White, Broadhurst,
Peckover, & Pithouse, 2010). Many street-level bureaucrats serve those who are
most vulnerable and needy, such as children, the elderly and the poor. Both
quantitative and qualitative research methods have been employed to come to a
deeper understanding of the discretionary practices of street-level bureaucrats
given the significant reach this class of individuals has into the lives of ordinary
citizens (Kelly, 1994; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Maynard-Moody, et al.,
1990; Riccucci, 2005; Scott, 1997; Wastell, et al., 2010). Efforts have been made to
determine if the use of discretion is merely a coping mechanism, or if it is a way of
infusing personal values and beliefs into the democratic process. The values and preferences of street-level bureaucrats can determine who gets what and how much (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Maynard-Moody, et al., 1990; Noguera, 1995; Riccucci, 2005; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Concern that the power street-level bureaucrats wield can have “serious implications for democracy when the de facto formation of public policy becomes captive to the personal inclinations of the individual service provider” (Scott, 1997, p. 53) has given rise to further study of the role of discretionary practices and how decisions are made. I now turn to an examination of literature that highlights the ways in which street-level bureaucrats use their discretion to make plausible decisions, in situ, that afford them a sufficient degree of satisfaction in knowing that these decisions are acceptable rather than ideal.

The Role of Local Context

Context has been identified as being a key variable in the policy implementation process (Abbott, MacDonald, Hay & McCuaig, 2011; Brooks, 2006; Stone, 2012), as well as being a key factor in the discretionary practices of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). Educational reform efforts, specifically, seem to hinge on the context within which they occur (Brooks, 2006; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Spillane, 2002). Every organization has a unique and distinct demeanor that is a by-product of site-specific social and environmental factors. Public schools are no exception. School context, in general terms, speaks to the inter-relatedness of all facets of a school. It includes an array of “local conditions” including resources, relationships, use of knowledge, norms, and rate of turnover (Corbett, Dawson, &
Three specific categories of resources, human, social and material, have been deemed essential in the process of affecting deep and meaningful conversations that will lead to substantive change (Coburn, 2001; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1999). Research has shown that these contextual factors influence the sense making process (Coburn, 2001; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1999), and, according to Spillane (1999), the way in which individuals’ sense making experience is situated in schools can make a difference in the way policies are ultimately interpreted and implemented. With this in mind, this literature review looked at research that examined the role that resources play in determining how street-level bureaucrats made sense of policies that originated from the outside.

**Human, Social and Material Resources**

Spillane (2004) defines human resources as the knowledge, expertise and experience of individuals; social resources include the communication networks developed within a particular site; and material resources include not only tangible media supports, but also the allocation of time and staff. When school environments support the growth and development of educators with these types of resources, the chance of a new policy initiative taking hold with fidelity is greater (Spillane, 1999). Given that school context matters, it is important to understand how and in what ways the availability and allocation of these resources influences interpretation and successful policy implementation. Research on how the contextual factors of human, social and material resources influences the sense making process in schools was examined to further identify potential opportunities for street-level bureaucrats to utilize discretionary powers in the implementation process.
Human Resources.

When policy messages are sent to local school districts, they are not static ideas that are replicated verbatim into the environment. Individuals, at the local level, must interpret and construct meaning to infuse life into these messages (Spillane, et al., 2002). What meaning a particular policy holds for any individual depends greatly on human resources, including knowledge, experience and beliefs (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 1999; Spillane, et al., 2002; Weick, 1979). When confronted with myriad signals from the environment, people, including district policy makers, will attend to the ones that are most familiar. In general, individuals engage in a process of retrospection, or using past experience to inform and clarify future decisions (Dewey, 2012; Weick, 1995).

Spillane (2004) highlights the use of Weick’s theory of sense making to look at the local implementation of standards-based reform at the local school site. This study of mathematics reform in Michigan found that district leaders gravitated toward the elements of the reform that were familiar and resonated with their existing knowledge base (Spillane, 2000). Spillane (2004) describes sense making as a conserving process such that individuals tend “to preserve existing frames [of reference] rather than radically alter them” (p. 89). What resulted in Michigan was more attention being paid to form rather than function and surface changes rather than structural changes (Spillane, 2000). District leaders connected with the language of “manipulatives”, real-life story problems and the process of grouping, but failed to internalize the concept of mathematical thinking that was intended. The lack of available human resources in the form of knowledge, expertise and skills
resulted in the inability of most district leaders to attend to the deeper, pedagogical meanings of this mathematics reform and therefore, the spirit of the policy was often missed (Spillane, 2004). This gap in understanding on the part of district leaders has a direct effect on the information disseminated to educators on the street-level.

**Social Resources.**

The individual component of the sense making process, although critical is not enough to reduce and manage the equivocality in organizations that Weick (2001) describes in his theory of organizing. Sense making is largely a social process involving active communication between and among participants (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 2004; Weick, 2001). Through social interaction, negotiation, signaling and communication, school personnel strive to understand and make sense of new policy messages (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 1999). The social, human and material resources available through collegial networks have the potential to facilitate individuals’ understanding of new initiatives (Spillane, 2004). Across studies in schools, there are two primary conditions that appear to enhance and support the collective sense making process and ultimately lead to stronger fidelity of implementation of reform initiatives: who is talking to whom and the nature of these conversations (Coburn, 2001, 2005b; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1999).

From a philosophical perspective, John Dewey contributes to the conversation when he makes a clear distinction between information and wisdom. According to Dewey, information is knowledge that is acquired and stored. Wisdom, however, is
“knowledge operating in the direction of powers to the better living of life” (Dewey, 2012). Quality conversations lead to wiser and more profound understandings.

In Coburn’s (2001) qualitative case study of how teachers come to interpret messages about reading instruction, her findings suggest that teachers initially seek out like minded-colleagues. These informal, interpersonal interactions are the venues in which local actors share their worldviews with each other and begin to shape the ideas and concepts that eventually emerge about the reading instruction process. These spaces, or ‘zones of enactment’, where teachers come together to construct their ideas, influence the extent to which practice actually changes (Spillane, 1999). Within these enactment zones there are three key elements for optimal success: teachers having conversations with each other and with outside experts, a clear focus on understanding the reform and putting it into practice, and the availability of material resources that further the ongoing dialog (Spillane, 1999).

Teachers may self-select with whom they communicate which often leads to a higher degree of homogeneity among worldviews (Coburn, 2001). Or, a greater degree of pedagogical diversity may be achieved in settings such as grade level meetings where a broader range of worldviews and practices are shared (Coburn, 2001). While diversity within these informal settings can provide an opportunity to challenge existing worldviews and thinking, it can also hinder effective communication if the gap between views is too great. Striking a delicate balance in these informal settings appears to be important for the conversations to successfully go beyond surface meanings and delve into structural meanings, which will
ultimately be the precursor to any substantive change in practice. It is within these group interactions that insights and understandings can be brought to light in a way not otherwise possible (Spillane, 1999).

Conversations that occur within schools and among teachers are clearly important in making sense of new policy initiatives. However, some studies suggest that conversations with non-system actors or professionals positioned outside the school offer a significant opportunity to enhance the depth and richness of policy and practice discussions (Coburn, 2005a; Cohen & Hill, 2000). A cross-case analysis conducted by Coburn (2005a) found that the policy messages that emanate from non-system actors are often more consequential for classroom practice. The three teachers in this study reportedly were “more likely to respond to connections with non-system actors in ways that brought messages into the classroom in substantive ways” (Coburn, 2005a, p. 34). These teachers appeared to be moving in the direction of structural changes to their underlying pedagogical beliefs and assumptions based on the connections they forged with independent professional development providers. Coburn (2005a) suggests that higher intensity connections, activities occurring within close proximity to the classroom and the level of voluntariness played a significant role in achieving the desired pedagogical shift. These findings support Spillane’s (1999) zones of enactment theory, which contends that the “expansiveness and quality” (p. 170) of these zones are critical in facilitating rich discussions and engendering change. Outside experts can bring a depth and legitimacy to the process of reform that can help build social capital and support teachers’ restructuring of worldviews. There is clear support for the ideas that who
is talking to whom and the nature of these conversations are key elements in the sense making process. Researchers and philosophers seem to concur that the depth of conversations and thought processes lead to higher-level thinking and understanding (Dewey, 2012; Coburn, 2005a; Spillane, 1999), key ingredients of sense making.

In Spillane’s (1999) mixed methods study of math reform, the quantitative data revealed that across the study of 25 teachers, there were vast differences in what was implemented at the classroom level. The qualitative data revealed that only four teachers made extensive changes in their core practice of mathematics. These four teachers had expansive zones of enactment that went beyond the walls of the classroom and often extended beyond the school to include outside experts. The availability of sufficient human, social and material resources contributed to an integral communication network that fostered the growth and development of teachers’ understanding about mathematics reform and supported a shift in thinking and teaching behavior.

**Material Resources.**

The combination of reading relevant material, engaging in substantive discussions of standards, watching video tapes, talking to, watching and observing the practice of colleagues all contributed to a deep and meaningful pedagogical shift (Spillane, 1999) in the previously mentioned study of mathematics reform. Time and materials are vital supports for the human and social resource dimensions.

The fact that deep, rich communication is likely to enhance individuals’ understanding of the structural changes inherent in educational reform initiatives
(Coburn, 2001; Little, 2003; Spillane, 1999) supports Weick’s (2001) contention that “richer, qualitative information” (p. 10) is a precursor to reducing equivocality in organizations. It is within these rich conversations that it becomes possible for individuals with different frames of reference or worldviews to consider changing positions. The depth or richness in communication is directly related to the extent that face-to-face personal interaction takes place (Weick, 2001), which will vary from site to site because the environment has the ability to “shape patterns of action and belief within schools” (Coburn, 2001, p. 146). Therefore, the availability and allocation of various types of resources is a critical contextual component that needs to be considered within the sense making process.

**Administrators as Gatekeepers of Resource Allocation**

Studies concur that a local school context that supports teachers’ learning, growth and development, is an effective way to bring about the deep, rich communication necessary to engender substantive changes in pedagogy (Coburn, 2001, 2005a; Coburn & Russell, 2008). According to Coburn (2001), informal, internal alliances and the nature and structure of formal networks are both powerful components of the sense making process. Educators, working in schools that support strong professional development communities are more likely to make changes in their instructional practices (Coburn & Russell, 2008). Many studies point to the pivotal role of districts and district leaders in setting the tone for the types of social interactions that are so critical in creating a supportive local context (Coburn, 2001; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Little, 2003; Spillane, et al., 2002). It is
within this supportive context that the critical depth of communication needed to affect structural changes can be developed.

Sense making, according to Spillane (2004), not only requires the availability of human, social and material resources, it requires the appropriate activation of them as well. District leaders and administrators are, in effect, the gatekeepers of resource allocation (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1998, 1999, 2000) and the facilitators of the sense making process (Coburn, 2001). School leaders not only have the opportunity to shape the frequency and depth of the conversations that take place, they overtly or covertly convey expectations to staff (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1998). District leaders, in essence, shape the sense making process by creating conditions that “encourage teachers to critically examine their world views and practices” (Coburn, 2001, p. 162). These conditions are supported or hindered by the purposeful dissemination of the vital resources of human, social and material capital needed to facilitate the sense making process and support successful policy implementation.

**Lack of Resources: A Space for Discretion**

In the absence of sufficient resources, human, social or material, it can be challenging for any group of street-level bureaucrats to advance a new policy initiative. A lack of human resources, defined as knowledge, skills and expertise, on the part of district leaders can lead to insufficient human, social and material resources being disseminated at the street-level. An absence of needed resources opens the door for the use of discretion. Weatherly and Lipsky (1977) studied special education reform in Massachusetts and concluded that individuals in a
climate rife with new procedures and demands, but few additional resources, used their discretion to allocate existing resources and serve clients. Although educators wanted to fully comply with the new policy, they were constrained by a lack of material and human resources and challenged by competing priorities. Ultimately, these street-level bureaucrats were forced to use their discretion “to routinize, ration resources, control uncertainties, and define tasks to derive satisfactory solutions to new demands” (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977, p. 194). Their discretionary efforts brought forth a plausible, rather than ideal, outcome that seemed appropriate and acceptable under the conditions of the day.

Weatherly and Lipsky suggest that their findings are not unique to the field of special education, but are illustrative of typical coping behaviors of street-level bureaucrats as a class. In the absence of a deeper level of knowledge, expertise and skills, individuals may default to relying on their individual values and beliefs to guide their understanding and interpretation of policy messages (Beck, Czerniak, & Lumpe, 2000; Spillane, 1998).

Durose (2011), uses the phrase ‘civic entrepreneur’ to describe the actual role of the street-level bureaucrat. This terminology broadens and deepens Lipsky’s definition of discretion in which individuals operate more within bureaucratic constraints (Durose, 2011). The idea of civic entrepreneurship suggests that frontline workers are now operating in a place formally occupied by traditional organizational structures. Durose (2001) suggests that the breakdown in the organizational structure has left a gap that is being filled by the street-level bureaucrat. What results is an opportunity for creativity and innovation among
those on the front lines. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) echo the sentiment that discretionary practices of the street-level bureaucrat can be a source of creativity as workers, in their capacity as citizen-agents, seek to solve problems and meet the needs of those they serve within the confines of the bureaucratic process. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) suggest, however, that although rules and procedures are abundant, they provide only weak constraints on the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats.

In their narrative accounts of street-level bureaucrats in police departments, vocational rehabilitation centers and one middle school, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) suggest that these front line workers, by necessity, substitute pragmatism for the unrealistic views of the policy makers. In environments where rules and procedures may be vague, nebulous and often overbearing, workers engage in the use of discretion, which can be impacted by “personal biases” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 85), especially in the absence of needed resources. Lipsky (2010) suggests that this behavior is the result of street-level bureaucrats attempting to preserve their self-concept and their belief in their own competence.

**Lack of Resources: A Space for Values and Beliefs**

Initially, street-level bureaucrats were considered to be independent agents using discretion as a means of routinizing and managing the demands placed on them in the workplace (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Thirty years later, while there is still agreement that discretion is inherent in the work of street-level bureaucrats, attention is being turned to the individual worker to better understand how he or she thinks and behaves. It is not just knowledge and experiences that impact what
gets attended to. Beliefs also matter (Beck, et al., 2000; Spillane, 1998, 2004; Spillane, et al., 2002). According to Bandura (1986), beliefs can be important indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives. They can also be influential in determining if and how educational policies get implemented in the spirit in which they were intended (Beck, et al., 2000; Spillane, 1998). While beliefs and subsequent actions are subject to change, it is not likely that an increase in organizational control will be the impetus. It is therefore necessary to better understand the beliefs and motivations of street-level bureaucrats and how they come to make sense of their world because they are “essential to understanding the modern state” (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, p. 333).

The most insightful research examining the reach of personal beliefs in the work of street-level bureaucrats has been obtained through qualitative studies that surface the voices of the individuals themselves. The picture of the street-level individual that emerges is one that is significantly juxtaposed against the attributes of the ‘state’ or organization (Durose, 2011; Kelly, 1994; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Riccucci, 2005). The organization is the body that creates the rules and procedures from afar. It is removed from the point of contact with those directly affected and it is only able to view the end-users in terms of abstractions. Street-level bureaucrats, on the other hand, have an up close perspective of those whom they serve. They are in the business of building relationships and therefore, act in a much more pragmatic manner. The stories captured by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) distinguish between state-agents and citizen-agents. These citizen-agents do not describe themselves as policy makers and although they may have
significant discretionary power at their disposal, they are bound by relationships, not rules in the work that they perform (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). Lipsky (2010) also identifies the relationships between street-level bureaucrats and the individuals they serve as being a significant organizational variable requiring further study at the local level in an effort to better understand the policy implementation process.

**Mandated School Behavior and Discipline Policies**

To this point, this literature review has focused on policies designed to improve academic performance and the delivery of social service programs to better understand how street-level bureaucrats implement policy locally. To further understand how mandated policies are implemented in schools, this review has turned to the cognitive process of sense making to delve deeper into the interpretive process used by street-level bureaucrats. There is abundant research focused on how educators make sense of mandated academic policies and these studies are an informative part of this review. Since this study, however, examined New Jersey's Anti Bullying Bill of Rights policy, it was necessary to look at existing research addressing behavior and discipline programs in schools. While there is critical research focused on understanding how educators interpret and implement academic policy mandated from outside the local environment, there is scant research that focuses on mandated, non-academic policies. In fact, when it comes to examining the discrepancies between the research and practice of school-based
behavior policies, the gap in the literature is, in general, “especially acute” (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Although effective evidence-based discipline and behavior practices have been identified (Emmer, 1994; Nelson, 1996; Rosenshine, 1986), the suggested strategies are noticeably absent in schools (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Discipline and behavior policies are more personal in nature than academic policies in that they seek to alter human conduct. Policies related to behavior, discipline and conduct are potentially more challenging to implement with fidelity due to the range of values and beliefs held by individuals on these issues. Implementation challenges, exacerbated by a lack of appropriate resources could drive educators, as street-level bureaucrats, to exert their discretionary powers in an attempt to manage their work. It is this nebulous space where street-level bureaucrats may utilize discretion, guided by personal values and beliefs, to implement behavior policy that warrants further examination. This literature review will now look at what is known about the interpretation and implementation of mandated school behavior policies and the role of the discretionary practices of street-level bureaucrats in this process.

Zero-Tolerance in Schools

The concept of ‘zero-tolerance’ was borne out of state and federal drug enforcement policies in the 1980s precipitated by the national ‘war on drugs.’ The idea was that all drug-related offences, no matter the degree of severity, should be punished. However, as these community-based policies were losing favor and being phased out in the late 1980s and early 1990s, school districts across the country were beginning to embrace the zero-tolerance approach to address problems of
drugs, gangs and disruptive behavior (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). In 1994, President Clinton signed the *Gun-Free Schools Act* requiring all schools to adopt a zero-tolerance policy imposing a one-year suspension on students who brought a firearm on campus. Failure by schools to comply with this law would result in a loss of federal dollars from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Martinez, 2009). Although the term ‘firearm’ was changed to ‘weapon’ in 1995, the overall intent of the policy remained narrow. It was the local school districts themselves that began to increase the scope of the policy to include drugs, alcohol, fighting and other behavioral issues they deemed disruptive (Martinez, 2009), spurred on by tragedies such as the 1999 Columbine school shootings (Schachter, 2010).

According to an evidentiary review conducted by the American Psychological Association (2008), "there are surprisingly few data that could directly test the assumptions of a zero-tolerance approach to school data" (p. 852). Research that does exist is focused on program outcomes and effects to gauge if these policies are working as intended (Browne-Davis, 2011; Martinez, 2009; Schachter, 2010; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Across the board, there is agreement of scant evidence that zero-tolerance policies actually increase school safety or even lead to an improvement in student behavior. In fact, findings indicate that the unintended effects of these policies may have significant negative consequences for students and communities (Browne-Davis, 2011; Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Force, 2008; Kajs, 2006; Martinez, 2009).
Lack of Resources.

Research on the zero-tolerance approach suggests the possibility that these policies may be more symbolic in nature, designed to reassure schools and communities that strong action is being taken to promote safety in schools (Noguera, 1995; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). A lack of resources appears to have an impact on the nature of what kinds of policies actually get implemented (American Psychological Association, 2008; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Teachers are often “underprepared,” “ill-equipped” and “inexperienced” (Skiba & Peterson, 2000, p. 337) in the use of effective classroom management strategies (American Psychological Association, 2008). Unsupported and insufficiently trained to handle behavioral issues, teachers may adopt coping strategies to best manage their work environments, a practice previously discussed as characteristic of street-level bureaucrats. In the absence of appropriate resources, individuals may use discretion to develop these coping strategies and the resultant practice becomes the local school-site “policy.”

Misuse or Abuse of Policy.

With a lack of resources available for support, it is not surprising that research on the implementation of zero-tolerance policies cite significant misuse of the policy as it was intended to be applied (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Martinez, 2009; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Looking at an urban school district in Michigan, Dunbar and Villarruel (2002) examined principals’ responses to such policies to understand how implementation was achieved at the local level. This cross-case research design used a policy analysis framework to examine the perceptions of
school leaders and the potential effects on implementation. The findings of this study suggest that principals have varying interpretations of zero-tolerance policies based on their personal values and beliefs. Guiding these interpretations are varying levels of compassion and common sense (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002). The differences in interpretations ultimately led to the variation in implementation, or compliance with the legislative mandate. Where there was a lack of substantive comprehension on the part of a school leader, policy implementation was often more superficial than substantive (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002).

While individual values and beliefs may result in misuse of policy, Martinez (2009) suggests that abuse can also be an outgrowth of this discretionary use of power. Zero-tolerance has been used to address behavior incidents not intended to be covered under such a policy, often with damaging effects on students (Kaj, 2006; Martinez, 2009). Because local environmental factors are often not considered under a zero-tolerance framework, application of the policy is ultimately left to “street-level bureaucrats [who decide] when and how to interpret rules” (Osher & Quinn, 2003, p. 53). This flaw opens the door for administrators to potentially manipulate the law based on their interpretation (Martinez, 2009). Often the negative, unintended consequences that arise during the policy implementation process are an outgrowth of such differences in individual interpretation (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002). The potentially harmful unintended consequences that result from zero tolerance policies make further examination of mandated behavior policies a truly necessary endeavor.
Once again, from a philosophical perspective, Dewey contributes to the conversation with his contention that “problems of conduct are the deepest and most common problems of life” and the manner in which these problems are handled “radiates into every other mental attitude” (Dewey, 2012). This assertion is a powerful reason to clearly understand the way that behavior-based school policies are interpreted and implemented in schools.

Not only is there consensus among researchers that the unintended consequences of zero-tolerance have a significant negative impact on students (American Psychological Association, 2008; Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Kaj, 2006; Martinez, 2009; Skiba & Peterson, 2000), there is research that proposes alternatives that include proactive and preventive behavioral strategies (American Psychological Association, 2008; Martinez, 2009; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Comprehensive models propose a tri-level approach based on building partnerships among school, families and community to address and correct minor disruptions (American Psychological Association, 2008; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). It is these minor disruptions, such as bullying, that appear to be the precursor to more serious school violence (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams & Farris, 1998; Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

**Bullying Prevention Programs in Schools**

Bullying among school-age children is nothing new. However, it was not until the 1970s that Scandinavian professor Dan Olweus began to conduct research on this phenomenon (Olweus, 1994). A psychologist at the University of Bergen in Bergen, Norway, Olweus is credited with developing the Olweus Bullying Prevention
Program (BPP), an intervention considered the best-researched and one of the most widely used to reduce bullying incidents in schools (Limber, 2004). The first evaluation of the Olweus’ BPP was conducted by Olweus in Norway and showed extraordinarily strong results. This intervention program is built around a limited set of key principles “derived chiefly from research on the development and modification of the problem behaviors concerned” (Olweus, 1994, p. 1185).

The evaluation involved 2500 students in grades 4-7. The major findings of this study showed reductions of 50% in bullying problems over a two-year period. The effects were greater after two years than one year (Olweus, 1993). There was no apparent displacement of bullying to off-school grounds and there was an overall reduction in anti-social behavior. There was clear support from the principal and the formation of a coordinating group to guide the initiative. While not all program features are deemed critical, there are a few key elements that Olweus believed were essential, namely a whole-school, multi-level and multi-year approach (Olweus, 1994). While no other research on anti-bullying programs has seen as dramatic results as those that Olweus achieved in Norway, features of the Olweus’ model seem to offer the most encouragement when incorporated into an intervention program.

The gradual accumulation of research on bullying prevention programs over the last two decades “has recently reached a size and level of sophistication to begin to allow for evaluative synthesis of the outcomes that have been identified” (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008). However, the research on this topic is still in its infancy. In 2004, Smith, Schneider, Smith and Ananiadou synthesized the evaluation
research on 14 whole-school anti-bullying programs in North America and Europe. The whole-school approach, similar to the approach created by Olweus, is based on the belief that bullying is a systemic problem and therefore, requires an intervention aimed at an entire school system or context (Cross, et al., 2011; Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Smith et al., (2004), looking at the whole-school approach, conclude that while this approach did lead to reductions in bullying in some cases, the results are too inconsistent to conclude that this approach is the best or only approach to addressing the problem. Several of the limitations that Smith et al., (2004) cite are self-reports and the fact that implementation was not adequately monitored to ensure fidelity. Harkening back to the extraordinary results that Olweus’ Norwegian evaluation yielded, Smith et al (2004) concede that it is possible that it comes down to program implementation. Overall, Smith et al., (2004) give a cautious recommendation for the use of the whole school approach based on the logical link between program theories and the origins of bullying.

To build on the contributions of Smith et al., (2004) meta-analyses conducted by Vreeman and Carroll (2007) and Merrell et al., (2008) looked across 26 and 16 bullying prevention programs respectively, in the United States and Europe. Both analyses look specifically at school-based interventions. However, they included multi-level, whole school approaches as well as single intervention approaches. The vast variation in these interventions and the multitude of methodologies used, make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions. Vreeman and Carroll (2007) suggest that a
whole school approach to addressing the bullying problem in schools appears more effective when compared to single stream interventions in the studies they examined based on the fact that 70% of the schools using this approach experienced a decrease in bullying. The single approach interventions did not fare as well.

Merrell et al (2008) found the results of their meta-analysis to be too weak to be considered meaningful. Looking across the studies in their analysis, there are such a wide range of programs and methodologies that direct comparison appears impossible. They cite two limitations of these intervention studies to be the research designs and the measurement methods. However, the overall findings of both meta-analyses suggest that there are some potentially meaningful and positive results to bullying prevention programs that warrant further investigation. Both meta-analyses suggest that various programs and interventions can lead to more positive and pro-social behavior, although there is no clear causal effect identified from any particular program in the studies (Merrell et al., 2008; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). What is most instructive about the work of Smith et al., (2004), Vreeman and Carroll (2007) and Merrell et al., (2008) is that their results encourage a closer look at site and program specific conditions.

Since public schools are comprehensive and highly complex systems, it is doubtful that any single intervention will be sufficient in addressing the bullying problem in schools (Cross, et al., 2011; Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003; Smith, et al., 2004; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). When looking at the results of specific bullying prevention programs implemented within schools, both in the United States and Europe, there appear to be certain programmatic features that are salient in
program success. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program appears to have established many of the important components for a successful whole school approach to addressing the problem. Studies conducted on four different programs, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Black, 2007; Olweus, 1994), the Friendly Schools Project (Cross, et al., 2011), the Steps to Respect Program (Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom, & Snell, 2009), and the PAR Comprehensive Behavior Management Model (Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003), all have some features in common that may allow for some conclusions to be drawn. The studies conducted on all four of these programs suggest that a whole school, multi-level and multi-year approach to addressing the bullying problem is most effective (Black, 2007; Cross, et al., 2011; Frey, et al., 2009; Olweus, 1994; Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003). These three program components appear to yield the most positive results when incorporated into school bullying prevention efforts.

Researchers such as Smith et al., (2004), Vreeman and Carroll (2007) and Merrell et al., (2008) seem to be in agreement that the studies on bullying prevention programs are inconsistent and do not allow for strong conclusions to be drawn about the effectiveness of a specific intervention type. The common limitations cited are the self-reports that are commonly used to measure changes in bullying and victimization and weak methodologies (Cross, et al., 2011; Frey, et al., 2009; Merrell, et al., 2008; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). There are, however, several commonalities among the studies discussed here that suggest that bullying prevention programs that incorporate a whole school, multi-level approach over a sustained period of time are more successful than single stream interventions or
interventions that are of short duration. As Smith et al., (2004) suggest "it is impossible to identify the ingredients of a successful implementation...[and] consistent methodological effort is needed to determine exactly which components or conditions are key to making the approach effective" (Smith et al, 2004, p. 558). These researchers sound the call for future research that takes a narrower focus on program implementation. Studies that look closely at site-specific practices and the individuals tasked with program implementation may shed light on how best to bring researched-based programs to life. This literature review did not identify any studies seeking to understand the way that street-level bureaucrats at the local school site come to interpret and make sense of anti-bullying policies and how the specific contextual factors of resources may affect program understanding and implementation.

**New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights**

Because the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (2010) is a recent policy initiative, there is limited research specifically studying the way in which this policy is implemented in New Jersey schools. The research on bullying prevention programs discussed above identifies specific programs that appear to yield positive results when implemented with fidelity. Since some of these specific research-based programs, including the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, are cited in the New Jersey Department of Education recommendations as possible options for schools to utilize, it was necessary to understand more about how the mandated ABR policy is actually being interpreted and implemented at the local level. Therefore, this study sought to better understand how street-level bureaucrats in two public middle
schools made sense of New Jersey’s ABR policy given that there are some research-based programs and specific programmatic features that appear to improve school climate and reduce incidents of bullying when implemented with fidelity.

Summary

Due to the amount of discretion available to school personnel as street-level bureaucrats and the potential power dynamic in play, it was important to better understand how educators interpreted policy mandated from outside in light of the resources available to them. These resources play a significant role in how policies are interpreted and understood by individuals. Faced with a lack of human, social and/or material resources, educators are often left to use their discretion, guided by personal values and beliefs, to make street-level decisions. Keeping in mind that discretion is an inevitable fact in the work of street-level bureaucrats, it was important to understand how these actors made sense of the ABR policy and what factors influenced their decision-making capacity. A deeper sense of how the specific contextual factors of resource availability and allocation supported or hindered individuals’ understandings of a policy will contribute to significant learning about how the implementation process ultimately unfolded within the local context.

New Jersey’s recent adoption of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights legislation offered a unique opportunity to study a potential phenomenon of power available to street-level bureaucrats and to better understand how local actors made sense of and ultimately implemented the ABR policy locally. Keeping in mind that
unintended consequences from poorly implemented behavior policy can have a significant negative impact on students, this was an important area of study. According to Dewey, “the deepest plane of the mental attitude of every one is fixed by the way in which problems of behavior are treated” (Dewey, 2012, p. 49). Looking through the lens of organizational theory, specifically the process of sense making, painted a clearer picture of the processes that unfolded in two middle school settings when educators, as street-level bureaucrats, were tasked with making sense of the ABR and ultimately, putting it into practice.

This study examined both intended and unintended consequences of the sense making process (see Figure 1) as it relates to New Jersey’s ABR policy in two public middle schools. As the actors closest to the change being initiated, school personnel may hold the key to understanding what is needed to successfully address bullying behavior at the local school level. Understanding how to close the gap between research-based bullying prevention activities and the practices that actually take hold in schools may lead to better outcomes for students.
FIGURE 1

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights

What are educators, as street-level bureaucrats, interpretations and understandings of NJ ABR policy?

How do the contextual factors of human, social and material resources affect the sense making process?

The Organizational Sense Making Process of Street-Level Bureaucrats

Anticipated Outcomes
- Research-based implementation
- Compliance
- Change
- Reduce Bullying Behavior

Actual Outcomes?

Anticipated Outcomes x Research-based implementation x Compliance x Change x Reduce Bullying Behavior
Chapter 3:

Methodology

Introduction

This research utilized a qualitative phenomenological case study methodology to examine how street-level bureaucrats in two middle schools interpreted and made sense of New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights policy. Since the purpose of this research was to understand and describe the sense making experiences of these individuals and to examine the phenomenon of power available to communities of street-level bureaucrats, a phenomenological case study approach was the most appropriate method (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Conducting a multiple site case study allowed an in-depth examination of the phenomenon within a real-life context (Creswell, 2013) of two different New Jersey middle school communities.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is meant to explore an issue from the perspective of the participants in an effort to “hear silenced voices” (p. 40). Experiences are captured from individuals’ unique perspectives and on their own terms in order to understand how they think about their lived situations (Patton, 2002; Hatch, 2002). Gathering these types of data required a proximal closeness that is unique to qualitative research. Talking directly with educators in two New Jersey middle schools provided an in-depth understanding of the sense making process they engaged in to develop an understanding of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. Allowing these individuals to tell their stories was an empowering
process that shed light on personal sense making experiences related to the ABR and the resources that supported them. A qualitative research methodology helped to explain why educators developed certain understandings and interpretations about the ABR based on their local context and, more specifically, the resources at their disposal.

Since New Jersey public school districts are required to comply with ABR policy mandates begs the question as to how well these mandates actually address the needs of each locale or allowed each locale to adequately address the issues specific to its site. According to Alfred Hess, “qualitative researchers can discuss whether the policy is being implemented in the fashion that was envisioned or whether it is already off-track and encountering unforeseen impediments” (Hess, 1992, p. 182). Hess encourages the use of qualitative research methods to surface problems that may be encountered during implementation. How middle school educators made sense of the ABR policy was an antecedent to understanding how the implementation process eventually unfolded locally.

The research paradigm that informed this particular qualitative study was closely aligned with a postpositivist worldview. Using the researcher as the data collection instrument, the goal was to look for patterns and descriptions that could be used to infuse meaning into the lived experiences of the participants (Hatch, 2002). Grounded theory, the “quintessential postpositivist research approach” (Hatch, 2002, p. 26), led to findings that were grounded in the data, which were carefully examined by moving back and forth from specifics to generalizations.
Phenomenological Approach

Since this study sought to better understand a potential source of power held by street-level bureaucrats in two middle schools, a phenomenological study was well suited to this investigation. This phenomenological approach illustrated how multiple individuals described the meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007) in making sense of the ABR. Specifically, this study correlated with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach used by van Manen (1990) by combining interpretive/hermeneutic and descriptive/phenomenological methods to examine the experiences of street-level bureaucrats as they grappled with interpreting and making sense of New Jersey’s ABR policy at their local site (Hatch, 2002). From themes that emerged from the data, participants’ lived experiences were fully described in a way that brought forth the ultimate essence of the phenomenon of power of a community of street-level bureaucrats.

Case Study Design

While Yin (2009) acknowledges that using the case study method in research is extremely challenging, it is the preferred method when attempting to answer “how” and “why” questions and to examine contemporary issues within a real-life context. The case study method is particularly relevant when the investigation involves a phenomenon located within a bounded system (Merriam, 1988) and includes the in-depth examination of multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2007). Defining specific boundaries, or unit of analysis, is “the key decision point” in choosing a case study design (Hatch, 2002, p. 30). Furthermore, case study research, according to Stake (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) can be a “disciplined force in public
policy setting and reflection on human experience” (p. 245). The significance of case study research in both policy and practice is its potential to extend thinking in a particular area (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

A multiple case study design was most appropriate for this research because it allowed for a better understanding of the “complex social phenomenon” (Yin, 2009, p. 4) of sense making as it related to the understanding of New Jersey’s ABR policy by street-level bureaucrats in two different contexts. Choosing two sites for this study allowed this research to potentially contribute to the knowledge base around the theory of sense making and its role in how behavior policy is understood and interpreted at the local school site level.

**Research Design**

**Site Selection**

The goal of this study was to better understand how middle school educators interpreted and made sense of New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights based on the resources at their disposal. It was also the intent of this study to examine the power available to communities of street-level bureaucrats as they collectively engaged in the sense making process. The middle school venue was chosen based on the statistics cited earlier that bullying is more prevalent in middle school.

To gather sufficient data, this study utilized a multiple-case study design. The initial process for site selection involved identifying school districts in similar District Factor Groups (DFG). The most recent 2000 DFG information was taken from the New Jersey Department of Education website. The rationale for selecting sites within the same DFG was to ideally study middle schools with comparable
demographics and resources. Because this researcher was not affiliated with a school district, a few methods were used in attempting to secure sites. Networking provided a few direct leads to middle school principals or Anti-Bullying Specialists, as well as a lead to The New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. Contact was made with all individuals identified through the networking process. However, the networking attempts did not yield any study sites. The primary form of site solicitation was an email, sent by the researcher, to either the middle school principal or the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator in a particular district (Appendix A). Sometimes both individuals were sent emails asking them to participate in this study depending on the availability of current and accurate information on the school web site.

Emails were initially sent out to schools in similar DFGs. As it became evident that securing sites was going to be the primary challenge of this study, the DFG criteria was abandoned. Out of 50 emails sent, 13 responses were received, and two sites were ultimately willing to participate in this research. This process unfolded over the course of six months. The end result was a convenience sample of two middle school sites from different District Factor Groups, FG and GH, but both with the willingness and enthusiasm to participate. The researcher provided an approval letter to be signed by an official in each district giving their consent to participate in this research (Appendix B). Once all documents were received, information was forwarded to IRB for final approval (Appendix E).
Description of Site 1: South Hills Middle School

South Hills Middle School was the first school to respond to the researcher’s request for study participation. This district, in the southern part of the state, was nestled within a township of only a twelve-mile radius. This rural, fringe school was classified in the District Factor Group GH, the sixth highest of the eight groupings and boasted only two schools in total, an elementary and a middle school. District enrollment is just under 1,000. The middle school accommodated slightly fewer than 450 students in grades 5-8 with a student-teacher ratio of 13. Student demographics included 187 White, 158 Black, 56 Hispanic, 32 Asian/Pacific Islander and 2 American Indian/Alaskan (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The middle school also housed self-contained special needs classrooms, as well as pre-K classrooms.

There were only three school administrators in the district and these positions included the Superintendent, the middle school principal and the elementary school principal. On the first visit to the school to meet the principal, the researcher was given a tour of the school by the principal and introduced to the Superintendent, who had an office at the middle school. Both the Superintendent and the principal were enthusiastic about participating in the research and provided the access needed. The researcher was required to appear at a School Board meeting and obtain Board approval prior to receiving the signed letter from the Superintendent.
Due to the small size of this district, the principal of South Hills was also the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator. The Guidance Counselor, who worked in both the middle and the elementary schools, served as the Anti-Bullying Specialist.

**Description of Site 2: Central Valley Middle School**

Central Valley was a middle school located in the central part of the state. This large, suburban district was classified in the District Factor Group FG, the fifth highest of eight groupings. There were a total of six schools in the district with an enrollment of almost 6,000 students. Central Valley was the sole middle school for this district serving 1,348 students in grades 6-8. The student-teacher ratio was just over 14. Demographically, the student population was relatively evenly distributed among Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Black and White (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

The large, multi-level school facility had a feel of a high school with its bustling hallways as classes were changing. There was a clear security procedure upon entering the building and visitors were required to present identification and have their picture taken. The initial meeting with the principal was very productive and responsive. As a recent graduate of a doctoral program himself, he was very willing to assist in this research. Upon hearing the specifics of this research, the principal agreed to speak with the Superintendent and obtain the signed approval letter.

At Central Valley, the Anti-Bullying Coordinator for the district was an administrator located at the School Board offices. The role of Anti-Bullying Specialist was filled by one of the Deans. Based on the size of the school, each grade level had a
Dean, who was primarily responsible for handling discipline issues, as well as a Guidance Counselor.

**Sampling**

Ultimately, this research utilized a combination of criterion, purposeful and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The provisions of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights itself provided the initial criteria for sample selection. Since the ABR specifically requires that each school district appoint an Anti-Bullying Coordinator and each school appoint an Anti-Bullying Specialist, these were individuals who were important to this research. As the appointed personnel responsible for appropriate ABR implementation, understanding how these individuals interpreted and made sense of this policy was paramount. The ABR also clearly delineates the role of the school principal, so this was an additional person who was key to this study. Information regarding the personnel in these three positions was available on each district’s web site. In the email request for participation in the study, as well as during the initial meeting with each principal, the researcher discussed the desire to interview him and to solicit the ABC and the ABS, based on the nature of their responsibilities related to the ABR.

To identify the additional interview participants, both purposeful and convenience sampling strategies were used. A purposeful sampling approach was initially used because it allowed this research to capture the stories of individuals who were able provide personal experience related to the phenomenon this study sought to address (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Educators from the disciplines of art and physical education were included as participants in an effort to capture data
from individuals who are in positions within the school where the potential to observe bullying incidents are highest. An individual who had served as Central Valley's first Anti-Bullying Specialist when the ABR was enacted was also a purposeful selection due to the depth of experience that he was able to contribute. Finally, convenience sampling was used to round out the interviews due to the challenge of recruiting additional study participants in some cases. In an effort to secure at least five individual interviews at each site, the researcher needed to accept study participants who were willing to be interviewed about the ABR and their understanding of it. There was a sense of reluctance or disinterest on the part of some educators to participate in this study.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

Participant recruitment began in April of 2014, once approval letters from both districts had been signed by the Superintendents and submitted to the Rutgers Institutional Review Board. Initially, this research had proposed using both focus groups and individual interviews in the data collection process. However, during initial discussions with both principals, it became clear that scheduling focus groups with classroom teachers would be extremely challenging, bordering on impossible, due to competing priorities and overloaded schedules. There was also the suggestion that classroom teachers may not be willing to collectively participate in a discussion about the ABR given the discomfort, frustration and confusion surrounding the policy and its implementation process. Therefore, this study used solely individual interviews, with five participants at each site. Individuals in the roles of principals, Anti-Bullying Coordinators and Anti-Bullying Specialists were
the first to be contacted. There was no need to send out a Participant Recruitment letter at either site. In both cases, the principals acted as the primary contact and point of information as the researcher recruited additional participants.

At South Hills, due to the small size of the district, the principal served in the duel role as the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator. This researcher had previously been introduced to this school’s Anti-Bullying Specialist who was willing to be interviewed. The researcher was given permission to contact her directly to make interview arrangements. The principal/ABC provided names of several classroom teachers and specialists who he felt would be willing to participate. From this list, the researcher was able to interview one classroom teacher and two special area teachers, art and physical education.

At Central Valley, the principal was clearly willing to be interviewed for the study. He also secured the participation of the current Anti-Bullying Specialist, as well as the former, and original ABS, who was, at the time of this research, an Assistant Principal. By way of email introduction, the principal introduced this researcher to the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator and informed him that the district had consented to allow this research to be conducted. This researcher sent an email solicitation to the ABC requesting an interview, but no response was ever received. Therefore, the data for this middle school does not include an interview with this district’s ABC. For the remaining two interviews at Central Valley, the principal hand-selected a guidance counselor and a classroom teacher to participate. By this process of ‘hand selection,’ there was a sense that the principal desired to direct the researcher towards certain individuals. The reasons for this were not
clear. It was possible that either the principal had a sense of which individuals would be willing to give their time to participate or that the principal intentionally directed the researcher towards individuals who, he believed, had a certain level of understanding of the ABR.

Prior to the interview, participants were emailed an explanation of the research and an informed consent form (Appendix C). On the day of the interview, the consent form was reviewed with the study participant and questions were answered. Once the consent forms were signed, the interview commenced.

**Data Collection**

This study was designed as a phenomenological case study. The intent was to study two New Jersey middle schools, as bounded systems, in an effort to shed light on the potential power available to educators as street-level bureaucrats as they sought to understand and make sense of New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. During the course of this study, from the site and participant selection phase to the data collection phase, there was tension between flexibility and structure of the study design (Hatch, 2002). It was necessary for this researcher to remain flexible with the approach to this research due to the fact that the mere mention of Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) or the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) often generated fear and discomfort. Much of this discomfort on the part of educators to enter into discussions about this topic stem from frustration that this was another mandated policy, not to mention one that could bring potential legal repercussions if not followed to the letter of the law.
Therefore, this research encountered some field challenges during the data collection phase. Although this researcher does not work for the Department of Education, she is employed by the State of New Jersey. This fact may have added to feelings of apprehension on the part of the participants. Creswell (2013) notes that there may be fear on the part of participants that information collected during the study will be linked back to them. While both principals at South Hills and Central Valley were willing to be interviewed and allowed the Anti-Bullying Specialist to be interviewed, not all teaching staff was as receptive. This conclusion was based on the fact that this researcher was guided toward certain teachers who were most likely to agree to be interviewed. As noted previously, the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator for Central Valley did not respond to the request for an interview and was not a study participant.

There was another area where the data collection process required flexibility with respect to the original study design. Creswell (2013) suggests that a case study, in addition to interviews, includes “extensive forms” (p. 149) of data. A phenomenological study, on the other hand, relies predominantly on in-depth interviews “to describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small group of individuals who have experienced it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 161). In-depth, individual interviews were the prime source of data for this study. While numerous documents were available on the State of New Jersey Department of Education website designed to assist in the understanding of HIB/ABR, there was far less documentation available at the local level assisting educators in making sense of the policy. The few documents and Power Points that both South Hills and Central
Valley created to foster educator understanding of the policy were willingly shared. However, most of the documentation available locally directly related to the reporting and documenting procedures for potential HIB cases in compliance with the law.

The individual interviews began in April 2014 and concluded in June 2014. A total of 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, five at each school. The interviews began with the principal, the Anti-Bullying Coordinator and the Anti-Bullying Specialists, as schedules permitted. Then, interviews were conducted with classroom teachers and specialists. All interviews took place at the respective schools in private rooms to ensure confidentiality and proceeded with minimal distractions. Participants chose a time that was convenient to them and did not interfere with other responsibilities.

Prior to the interview, each participant was sent an email outlining the purpose of the research and including a copy of the informed consent form to be reviewed. On the day of the interview, the consent form was reviewed with the participant to ensure understanding and signed and initialed where appropriate. Participants were advised that they could stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any questions.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D). Questions sought to reveal how educators understood and made sense the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights and the types of resources that were available to them in this process. There were also questions designed to capture the level of discretion that participants needed to use with
respect to carrying out elements of this policy. Before each interview concluded, participants were asked if there was anything additional that they wanted to share with the researcher about this topic. Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder.

Document collection was another way that data was collected for this study. On the State of New Jersey Department of Education website there was an Anti-Bullying link. Following this link brought up numerous additional links to anti-bullying related material. There was a *Resources* link that provided 22 additional links to information such as webinars, Power Point presentations and the actual ABR policy. There was an *Other Resources* link that led to 24 additional links providing information such as a compliance checklist, links to other relevant organizations, videos, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and other research based curricula. There was a *Reports* link that led to the Commissioner’s Annual Report, school violence statistics and links to Federal agencies. In this one location on the DOE website, a total of 57 material resources, of varying length, were accessed for further information on understanding HIB/ABR and prevention strategies.

Some documents were available on each district’s website, such as Board of Education policies. Other documents, such as Power Point presentations used with staff and students, were provided directly by the schools themselves. The ABR requires schools to post Board of Education policies pertaining to Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying on their website, as well as to identify the individuals in the positions of Anti-Bullying Coordinator and Anti-Bullying Specialist. Documents
listed on each school's website pertain directly to the HIB/ABR policy and issues of implementation and compliance. Some information posted on the websites referenced bullying prevention efforts, but with few details. Documents that were provided by the individual sites included Power Point presentations that were developed to support staff understanding and self-created worksheets to facilitate understanding of the policy and its requirements. These documents were valuable in the sense that they provided insight into the ways that each local site worked to interpret and understand the ABR and share that information with staff. They also served to corroborate information collected during the individual interviews about the material resources available to educators to help them make sense of the ABR policy.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is, according to Hatch (2002), a “systematic search for meaning” (p. 148). It involves organizing data in a way that allows patterns and themes to emerge that can ultimately be represented and communicated to others (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002). Since this study was designed as a phenomenological case study, the data analysis process used a combination of approaches. According to Yin (2009), “the analysis of case study evidence is one of the least developed and most difficult aspects of doing case studies” (p. 127). However, there were guidelines that were followed. The analysis attended to all of the evidence, examined rival interpretations and remained focused on the specific questions under investigation (Yin, 2009). van Manen’s (1990) use of “phenomenological reflection” was also a useful strategy to incorporate. The basic tenet of this approach
was to uncover essential meaning (van Manen, 1990). Ultimately, this approach gave way to themes that provided structure to the lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013).

Throughout the analysis phase, a constant comparative method, which is at the heart of all qualitative research, was used to help in the identification of similarities and differences between the cases (Barbour, 2008; Dey, 1993). The constant comparative method, a hallmark of the postpositivist paradigm, required the researcher to move back and forth between inductive and deductive thinking. Inductively, a close examination of specific data led to an identification of patterns that led to generalizations. As patterns were discovered, categories emerged. The data was then examined deductively to verify if the categories were supported by the data (Hatch, 2002).

The data analysis process was, to some extent, concurrent with the data collection process. Documents from the NJDOE website, as well as from the South Hills and Central Valley websites were reviewed prior to interviews taking place. After each interview was conducted, a data memo was written to identify any issues that needed to be considered in the analysis process (Harding, 2013). These memos were also a way to preserve validity by identifying any researcher biases, opinions, or perceptions about the interview or the participant.

After each audio-recorded interview was transcribed, a summary sheet was created. Reducing each interview to key points facilitated the identification of similarities and differences (Harding, 2013), which is at the heart of the constant comparative method. After creating each summary sheet, a brief methodological
memo was written explaining the researcher’s decision to include or exclude certain pieces of information. In this way, the discretion of the researcher was kept in check (Harding, 2013). Similarities and differences were identified initially within each interview, then within each site and then across the two sites. The use of data memos provided an overall sense of the data that had been collected and allowed the researcher to focus on the information most relevant to addressing the research questions.

Returning back to the full transcripts, each interview was read several times prior to beginning the coding process. Using Creswell’s (2013) approach of “lean coding,” six categories were developed based on a priori (Creswell, 2007) or pre-existing codes from the conceptual framework, as well as certain themes that began to emerge from the summary sheets. Initial codes included: awareness, resources, discretion, process, knowing stakeholders and identity. All transcripts were hand coded using different colored highlighters. Hand coding was the preferred method for this researcher in an effort to maintain control of and to increase familiarity with the data. The information pertaining to each of the six codes was separated out and organized across each interview. Once again, returning to the data, the six codes were expanded to just over 30 (Creswell, 2007), allowing the researcher to delve deeper into the meaning of each original code.

Each individual interview was looked at again in light of the expanded codes to examine the data at the smallest organizational unit. Then the staff and administrators at each school site were separated out to get a sense of the similarities and differences across professional roles. Next, each school site was
considered, as a whole entity, to better understand the local context. Finally, the two sites were compared and contrasted. By constantly moving in and out, from the smallest unit to each organizational whole, a clearer understanding of each site emerged in light of the six original codes. Again, the use of the constant comparative method (Barbour, 2008; Dey, 1993) allowed the data to be looked at from several different angles to ensure the best possible understanding.

**Validity and Reliability**

Stringent efforts were made to increase both the validity and the reliability of this study. To address issues of construct validity during the data collection phase, Yin (2009) suggests using multiple sources of evidence and allowing participants to review the data for accuracy. The process of data triangulation helped to lessen concerns about construct validity. Individual interviews were supported by document collection at both the State and local level. State and local level documentation was used to support and corroborate information gained through the interview process. After each interview was transcribed, it was sent to the participant for review and comment. This allowed each participant to clarify any points that may not have been clearly communicated during the actual interview.

One of the biggest challenges of using a case study design is selecting appropriate, bounded study sites and justifying the reasons for the sampling selection (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the participating sites were included based on their willingness to participate. Using only two middle schools raised the issue of lack of generalizability of findings to other sites. However, while case studies may not be generalizable across populations, they can potentially advance theoretical
propositions (Yin, 2009) or inform future studies seeking to examine a similar phenomenon in a localized setting, a concept Marshall and Rossman (2010) refer to as transferability. The findings of this research may inform a future study of a similar population in a comparable setting by utilizing second degree span in generalizing (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

To enhance reliability, this study utilized multiple approaches. Instead of “pretending to be objective,” the researcher focused on “reflexively applying [her] own subjectivities” in order to accurately understand what motivated the participants (Hatch, 2002, p. 9). Reflexivity helps researchers to be aware of the influence they have on the settings they are infiltrating, bracket biases and monitor emotional responses (Hatch, 2002). This approach was especially necessary due to the researcher’s past employment as a classroom teacher and current employment with the State. The researcher needed to effectively bracket her values, beliefs and experiences to allow the voices of participants to speak clearly and authentically (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). During the data collection phase, the researcher created a data memo, immediately after each interview, to surface any personal feelings that might interfere with clarity of the participant’s thoughts.

Second, during the analysis phase, methodological memos (Harding, 2013) were use to keep track of the researcher’s decisions to include or exclude information on the summary sheets that were created or to make note of the way that information was interpreted by the researcher (Hatch, 2002). This step created a trail of the decision-making process of the researcher so that analytical decisions could be justified or explained.
Study Limitations

The scope of this study was limited by the willingness of districts and their personnel to participate. The environment of fear and apprehension surrounding discussion about HIB or the ABR, made it challenging to find schools and individuals willing to speak about their understanding of the policy. The legal and professional consequences associated with failure to appropriately respond to potential bullying incidents had educators keeping very quiet.

In addition, the fact that this researcher was not currently affiliated with any school district, positioned her as an outsider, raising potential issues of trust. The researcher’s current State-level employment was also a potential barrier to the trust-building process. While the principals in both participating districts exhibited a willingness to participate, there was a sense of some initial hesitancy on the part of the other study participants, especially classroom teachers, to engage in a discussion about the ABR. Knowing that the researcher was employed by the State may have caused participants to be more controlled and measured in their responses.

Finally, studying only two middle schools in the State of New Jersey did not yield results that were generalizable to other school sites. However, the intention of this study was to go deep into the lives and experiences of street-level bureaucrats to understand how they made sense of mandated behavioral policy within a specific context and the potential power available to street-level bureaucrats in this process. Therefore, study findings may spark additional research into this subject.
Summary

This phenomenological case study was designed to go “deep” into two New Jersey middle schools in an effort to closely examine the specific contextual factors of human, social and material resources that influenced the way in which educators made sense of New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights policy. While the findings are not generalizable to other populations, the study has the potential to yield valuable information about the impact of local context on the sense making behavior of street-level bureaucrats.

As the State of New Jersey seeks ways to effectively address the bullying problem in schools, it was important to gain a better understanding of how educators interpreted and made sense of the ABR policy and what contextual factors acted as supports or barriers in this process. Gathering more specific information about how the ABR policy was interpreted and understood in two middle schools may call forth opportunities for improvements in the way in which the ABR is supported at all levels of the organization.

Bringing forth the voices of the educators in two middle schools via individual interviews allowed their lived experiences to be explored and shared. The data may lead to a better understanding of the resources needed to support deep and meaningful understanding of the ABR policy, as well as the way in which street-level bureaucrats utilize their discretionary power in the face of challenging and uncertain organizational environments.
Chapter 4:

Middle School Educators and the Organizational Sense-Making Process

This first data chapter discusses how educators at South Hills Middle School and Central Valley Middle School came to make sense of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (ABR, 2010). Since the goal of this study was to understand the sense making process engaged in by educators in two New Jersey middle schools, and what resources supported them in this endeavor, it was important to examine how the educators at each school were engaged in this process. First, there will be a brief review of the main elements of the ABR (2010). Next, there will be a summary of the organizational sense making process before this chapter turns to an examination of how this process unfolded at both South Hills Middle School and Central Valley Middle School.

The educators at South Hills will be considered first and then the educators at Central Valley to examine how they participated in the sense making process supported by the human, social and material resources at their disposal. Since this phenomenological case study involved two middle schools, South Hills, small and rural, and Central Valley, large and suburban, addressing each site within the same data chapter will allow for an easier comparison of the sense making process in these two different communities.
The Highlights of P.L. 2010, Chapter 122 (ABR)

When anyone is tasked with identifying a certain behavior in order to address or remediate it, there must be some concrete evidence to look for in order to know that the behavior is present. Both P.L. 2002, the original Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying law (HIB) and P.L. 2010, Chapter 122, the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) attempted to define bullying behavior for just this purpose, so that educators, parents and all interested parties could more readily recognize it. While the 2010 ABR did expand on the definition of harassment, intimidation and bullying originally laid out in the 2002 HIB law, it still left many scratching their heads and grappling with ambiguity.

The 2010 ABR broadens the definition of harassment, intimidation and bullying to include various forms of electronic communication, gestures, and written, verbal or physical acts. These incidents may be single events or a series of events “that [are] reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic” (P.L. 2010, Ch. 122, C. 18A: 37-13). The law provides some examples of what these characteristics may be by using the words “such as” before enumerating the list. At the conclusion of the list of these protected categories, however, hangs the phrase “or by any other distinguishing characteristics” which leaves this ambiguous ‘other’ category to be reckoned with by educators.

The definition includes behavior that occurs on or off school grounds or at a school-sponsored function and has the effect of disrupting the way the school operates or interferes with the rights of students. The language of the law recommends that a litmus test for determining bullying behavior is that “a
reasonable person” should know that the offending behavior would cause physical or emotional harm to the student or his or her property. Within this amended definition, the phrases “reasonably perceived,” “reasonable person” and “reasonable fear” conspire with the “other distinguishing characteristics” category to leave the door open to confusion and ultimately, subjective interpretation at the local level.

When the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, the entity created as a result of the March 26, 2012 amendment to the 2010 ABR, delivered its Interim Report on January 26, 2013, it addressed some of the challenges inherent in the bullying definition. The report states “focus group feedback indicated that the greatest concern with ABR implementation relates to confusion surrounding the HIB definition set forth in the legislation” (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2013, p. 14). Reportedly, the biggest challenge for educators was the “distinction between HIB, social conflict, and other behavior problems” and the fact that although “the concept of ‘imbalance of power’ is prevalent in the literature...[it is] not articulated in the legal definition of HIB in the ABR” (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2013, p. 14). The focus group information further revealed that more clarification was needed with respect to “other distinguishing characteristics,” “off school grounds” and single and multiple events. Some participants also indicated the word bullying might be being used incorrectly by staff, students or parents, possibly “due to definitional confusion or lack of programming and training” (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2013, p. 14). As a result of this report, the ‘imbalance of power’ concept did begin to find its way into the educators’ vocabulary as a prime factor needed to accurately identify bullying behavior.
In addition to outlining a concrete definition of bullying for proper and accurate identification of the behavior, the ABR also describes both a reactive component to immediately address the behavior and a proactive component to help eradicate it at the core. The reactive process described within the ABR involves the specific procedures for reporting, investigating, documenting and remediating potential bullying incidents. The details were elaborated in Chapter 2, Review of the Literature and they can also be viewed within the policy itself. It is this process that is being carefully monitored by the New Jersey Department of Education and is most vulnerable to litigation. Also contained within the ABR, however, is a proactive component meant to assist educators in addressing school climate issues and strengthening their communities in an effort to reduce bullying behavior at its foundational level. By requiring each school to create a School Safety Team, schools are mandated to build a proactive vehicle to not only monitor trends and patterns of bullying behavior, but to actively work to improve school climate.

After a brief review of the organizational sense making process, this chapter will look at South Hills and Central Valley, individually, to begin to understand how educators at each site interpreted and made sense of the ABR within the context of their daily life.

The Sense Making Process

This study used organizational sense making theory as a lens to understand how educators at two middle schools interpreted and made sense of New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. According to Karl Weick (2001), a leading organizational theorist, ambiguity is the basic problem of any organization.
Educators, grappling with understanding the definitions and mandates embedded in the ABR, faced just such ambiguity and were tasked with making sense out of the policy. Weick (1995) identifies seven properties of the cognitive sense making process that are important to reiterate here. Sense making is:

1. Grounded in the construction of identity
2. An ongoing process of evaluation
3. A retrospective process where individuals rely on past experiences
4. A social process that involves interaction with others
5. A process that is critically informed by the thoughts and actions of others in the environment
6. Based on cues that make a specific event plausible or *seem* right at the time
7. Possible when individuals can satisfactorily justify their conclusions

With this process in mind, a discussion of how educators at both South Hills and Central Valley came to make sense of the ABR will be presented. Each school will be examined independently to allow for comparison of the two sites. The chapter will begin with the educators at South Hills Middle School and then transition to the educators at Central Valley Middle School.

**Introducing the Educators at South Hills Middle School**

Five educators at South Hills Middle School participated in this study. What follows is a brief introduction of each educator to give an idea of their level of
experience in teaching and the amount of time they have been working at South Hills or in the district.

Steven  Steven was a former business professional who made a career change and entered the teaching profession. He served as Vice Principal of South Hills for nine years and had been in the role of Principal for one year. In this small, rural district, where many educators wore different hats, Steven was also the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator. At the conclusion of the interview, when asked about his reasons for agreeing to participate in this study, Steven responded “I got nothing to hide...I think you always have to continue to move on, grow.” He believes this open-minded attitude has engendered trust with his staff and the parents.

Martha  Martha had been a school psychologist for 12 years. She had been in this district for the last 8 years, splitting her time serving both the middle school and the district elementary school. As a result of her position as the school psychologist, Martha was appointed the Anti-Bullying Specialist for South Hills. In her own words, she “was very excited to be chosen as the HIB Specialist ‘cause I was part of the NJASP (New Jersey Association of School Psychologists) that helped put the recommendation for school psychologists to be the Specialist into the law.” Her enthusiasm was evidenced by the many projects and initiatives that she attempted to implement in keeping with the letter and spirit of the ABR.

Beth  Beth was a sixth grade social studies teacher with 13 years of experience. Her entire career had been spent teaching at South Hills. Beth assumed additional duties on the Student Council, as well as teaching Character Education during the end-of-the-day Advisory period. Not only did she and some of her family
members attend South Hills as students, both before and after the passage of the ABR, Beth acknowledged that some of them experienced being bullied during their time at the school. She shared insights of life at South Hills both pre and post-ABR.

_Sheila_ Sheila was the art teacher at South Hills, who had been in the profession for ten years. South Hills was a feeder school for the high school where Sheila previously taught. This was her first year at the middle school level after coming off of a three-year hiatus from teaching. Having just returned to the classroom, Sheila was honest about having no idea of what the acronym HIB stood for until this year.

_Josh_ Josh was one of the two physical education teachers at South Hills. He had been in the profession for 14 years and he had taught at South Hills for the past 11 years. Josh also coached soccer, basketball and baseball in the district, experience that offered a unique perspective on behaviors that may occur out of the school building or off school grounds. When considering the topic of bullying behavior, Josh often reflected on how he would want his daughter to be treated and what action he would want to see taken as a parent.

_South Hills Middle School ABR Administrators: Steven and Martha_

The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights requires three specific administrative roles be in place to facilitate implementation. At the district level is the Anti-Bullying Coordinator (ABC) and at each building is the Principal and an Anti-Bullying Specialist (ABS). At South Hills, Steven served as both the building principal and the ABC, while Martha, the school psychologist, served as the ABS. As gatekeepers of resources, the understandings and interpretations commanded by these individuals
were paramount to facilitating staff understanding (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1998, 1999, 2000). This chapter begins with the sense making process of these administrators and the resources available to them.

**Building Understanding**

Karl Weick (2001) describes sense making as a process that individuals engage in to simplify situations that they encounter in an effort to reduce chaos and increase manageability. Sense making theory posits that individuals use their existing knowledge base and experiences to interpret and make sense of events (Kolko, 2010; Spillane, 2004; Spillane, et al., 2002; Weick, 2001). To create order and structure and to reduce ambiguity, people filter informational cues through their personal experiences (Dewey, 2012; Weick, 1995).

Both Steven and Martha demonstrated a solid understanding of the official definition of bullying as it is written in the ABR, using key words and phrases, such as “one incident or a series of incidents,” “electronic,” “physical” or “verbal,” “imbalance of power” and “distinguishable characteristic.” Each one was also clear on the reporting and investigating process that was laid out in the ABR and the time frames that were required. Both Steven and Martha made mention of the potential consequence of litigation if the guidelines were not followed. Steven offered, “I think litigation is any district’s worst nightmare.” Motivated by fear, both Steven and Martha were well-versed in their responsibilities with respect to reporting, investigating and documenting.

However, they both had individual worldviews or experiences that added to or supplemented their understanding of the ABR and its process. Human resources,
which include knowledge, experience and beliefs, influenced the way the ABR policy was interpreted by each (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, et al., 2002; Spillane, 1999; Weick, 1979). When individuals are confronted with an enormous amount of information from the environment, including information from policy makers, inside and outside of the district, individuals frequently attend to the cues that are most familiar to them (Spillane, 2004).

Steven believed that it was important to consider “the relationship between two parties prior to the allegation or alleged incident.” The developmental challenges that middle school kids face needed to be considered, he believed, especially since the ABR was written as a reaction to a college-level incident. Martha’s involvement with the New Jersey Association of School Psychologists (NJASP) gave her insight into the policy components prior to its passage into law. From Martha’s professional experience, bullying had always been “self-defined. If a student feels bullied, that begins the investigation.” She acknowledged that there was a discrepancy in how the State presently defined bullying in the ABR and how she had initially interpreted it from the original 2002 HIB policy. Martha commented that the definition of bullying “was pretty amorphous at first. It was very, very broad.” She was aware that the State had worked to expand and clarify the definition from the original 2002 HIB law, eventually including the distinguishing characteristics and the power differential. Both administrators described an evolutionary quality to their understanding of the ABR policy, which aligns with Weick’s (2001) contention that sense making is both an ongoing and
retrospective process where individuals rely on what they know or have already learned in an effort to make sense of circumstances.

Although, information in his environment initially helped Steven “to know what components of the law you have to implement in your building and what has to take place,” he was clear that much of it “is baptism by fire.” While some of the trainings held outside of the district reviewed the definition of [bullying],” Steven said he had “to arrive at [his] own interpretation” and “put [his] past experiences together.” This approach allowed him to interpret the information on an individual level and construct meaning (Spillane, et al., 2002). Supplementing informational cues with past experiences and knowledge was an inevitable part of the sense making process that Steven engaged in.

Steven and Martha were noticeably measured when speaking about personal beliefs and past experiences that may have contributed to their understanding of bullying in general, and they were very careful to use the specific language of the law when asked to speak about their understanding. Due to the possibility of litigation engendered by the legislation, there was a sense that Steven and Martha wanted to downplay any infusion of personal knowledge, beliefs and worldviews into the process, as much as possible.

In terms of learning what her role would be as an ABS, Martha said that, although, she was given a list of what her duties would be, “some of the duties were not as clearly defined.” Eventually, a rubric was received from the State, which was very helpful. However, “the rubric...showed up at the second half of year two, which, you know, the beginning of year one would have been nice.” Because of Martha's
professional affiliation with NJASP and the organization’s involvement with the drafting of the ABR, she was intimately familiar with the history of the legislation and built upon her prior knowledge base until more resources were available. According to Cohen and Weiss (1993), research-based policy messages supplement, rather than replace educators’ prior knowledge and practice. In the absence of sufficient information and guidance, Martha reached back to rely on her own professional experience and knowledge.

**Adding to Understanding: Reporting, Investigating and Documenting**

Although, they admitted to having a working definition of bullying prior to the passage of the ABR, both Steven and Martha carefully read the policy and also attended trainings offered by the State to get up to speed on the specific ABR requirements and their roles. Steven considered the policy “a tough read” and it was within the process of “going back and looking at it again” and taking the policy with him to workshops, that he was able to begin to make sense of it. Weick (2001) suggests that sense making is an ongoing process that requires individuals to continuously evaluate messages and meanings. Steven stated that his understanding of the ABR had “kind of evolved” as situations presented themselves in real time. For Martha, “the Model Policies from the State and copies of the law [that] have been available and accessible” on the State and school district website were helpful in building on her original understanding, again supporting the retrospective and evaluative process that Weick (2001) proposes.

However, Steven and Martha had differing opinions on which additional materials were most helpful in supporting their understanding of the ABR. For
Martha, the plethora of materials available on the Department of Education website were a treasure-trove. While for Steven, due to time constraints, these resources were relegated to summer reading. Instead, he noted the value of the literature available through the State Bar Association. There is no disputing that there is an abundance of material on bullying prevention available on State sponsored websites. Regardless of which written materials were preferred, the ideas and concepts contained within them did not come alive in a vacuum. It is most often the combination of reading relevant material and engaging in substantive conversation that contributes to a deep and meaningful pedagogical shift (Spillane, 1999). A point of agreement for both Steven and Martha was the invaluable role of discussion with others in making sense of the ABR policy. The idea that sense making is a social process that relies on the thoughts and action of others is, again, in support of Weick’s (2001) sense making theory.

**Adding to Understanding: Improving School Climate**

When asked about their understanding of the mandated School Safety Team, it was evident that the majority of Steven and Martha’s time and energy had been directed toward making sense of how to accurately identify bullying incidents and correctly handle the investigation, given the potential legal consequences for failure to comply. According to the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force (2013), one of the core agenda items contained within the ABR is for a School Safety Team to attend to “systemic processes and practices in the school to address school climate issue such as HIB” (p. 22).
A School Safety Team did exist at South Hills and when they did meet, Martha reported, they discussed HIB incidents in the school, patterns of behavior and current efforts to enhance school climate. Both Steven and Martha indicated there was more work that needed to be done with the team and that the team had not always been compliant with the mandatory meeting requirements. The level of honesty here was interesting because the School Safety Team requirement is not as heavily monitored by the state as the reporting requirement. Fear of legal consequences loom large over the reporting piece of the legislation, but not over the school climate improvement piece. There was no indication that the School Safety Team, as a unit, attended any professional development directly addressing school climate issues. While material resources on the subject were available on the NJDOE website, it did not appear that school climate improvement received as much attention or discussion in the off-site professional development sessions.

Conversations, inside and outside of the district, centered on the mandated investigating and reporting procedures.

**Deepening Understanding: Opportunities for Conversation**

Weick (2001) suggests that, although individual sense making is part of the process, in and of itself, it is not sufficient to reduce and manage the equivocality in an organization. Sense making is a social process that requires participants to be actively engaged with each other in the communication process (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 2004; Weick, 2001). It is through these internal and external interactions that Steven and Martha both attempted to understand and make sense of the ABR policy message. The two pertinent conditions that enhance and support the
collective sense making process and ultimately result in greater fidelity of implementation is who is talking to who and the nature of these conversations (Coburn, 2001, 2005b; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1999).

Opportunities to communicate with others, internally and externally, were a critical component necessary for Steven and Martha to understand the ABR and its intricacies. Given the seriousness of the ABR mandate, Steven and Martha took advantage of the small school and district size that provided an opportunity for them to more easily dialogue internally with each other. “The communication’s excellent. We’re right down the hall from each other,” explained Martha. In this small school, Steven and Martha had ample opportunities and means with which to communicate with each other and both were clear that there needed to be a significant level of interaction between them regarding matters of potential bullying. Since both Steven and Martha mentioned the fear of litigation that the ABR had instilled in school personnel, it was not surprising that a high level of internal communication existed. Although these internal discussions are important, studies suggest that opportunities for more expansive dialogue are essential to achieve richer, deeper discussions about policy and practice (Coburn, 2005a; Cohen & Hill, 2000).

Training and engagement with professional communities from outside the district provided the foundational support for both Steven and Martha. Most of these initial trainings were provided by agencies such as the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, Rowan University, Rutgers University, the New Jersey Association of School Psychologists (NJASP), the Education Information Resource
Center (EIRC), Principal Roundtable Meetings and Athletic Director Meetings. When talking about what types of resources were most helpful to them, both Steven and Martha repeatedly cited dialogue with colleagues, stakeholders and individuals outside of the district. Spillane (1999) refers to ‘zones of enactment’ or expanded spaces for conversation, as being critical for understanding to deepen and for practice to actually change. It is within these spaces that conversations occur on a deeper, more meaningful level.

From Steven’s perspective “just going and hearing from someone else, whether they be an attorney, whatever it was. Just hearing information from them is beneficial, especially if you go with a colleague in district, so you can have dialogue outside of that.” What is interesting here was that Steven specifically mentioned an attorney’s perspective as providing valuable information, which, again, illustrated the fear that educators were living with as a result of the ABR. By contrast, Steven did not mention any experts who helped facilitate a better understanding of the origins of bullying behavior, offered specific research-based intervention strategies, or assisted in the professional development of the School Safety Team.

By virtue of having to complete the district self-assessment to file with the State Department of Education, Steven had another opportunity to communicate with various stakeholders. He saw this as a chance to evaluate where they were as a school and a district and to see what they needed to do next. The opportunity to have meaningful dialogue around a particular material resource is one of the components Spillane (1999) suggests is essential for success to occur in these expanded ‘zones of enactment.’
Martha concurred that the ability to interact with individuals outside of South Hills and the district “was a great advantage because I was able to see...what other people are doing.” In conversations with other schools and other districts, Martha gained insight into helpful statements and documentation that might strengthen and safeguard the process for South Hills. She also learned of additional proactive resources from other schools and “this sharing of information has been wonderful.” By virtue of Martha’s professional affiliation, she had access to outside experts who spoke about the proactive process, as well as the reactive process. This dialogue was a direct result of Martha’s NJASP membership and her role as a school psychologist. Not all educators in the ABS role would have had this opportunity.

Studies suggest that conversations with professionals positioned outside of the school offer a significant opportunity to deepen discussions of policy and practice (Coburn, 2005a; Cohen & Hill, 2000) and these conversations appear to have significantly contributed to how Steven and Martha ultimately came to understand the ABR and its mandates. However, there was deeper understanding about the investigating, reporting and documenting elements because these elements were more prominent in these outside discussions. While Steven and Martha may have enjoyed expanded zones of enactment, the nature of the conversations appeared to have been limited to the reporting and investigative components of the ABR. These deeper conversations included discussion of the legal ramifications of the law, with less emphasis placed on issues of improving school climate.
Steven and Martha, as the ABR administrators for South Hills, were tasked with making sense of the ABR policy for themselves first, in order to transmit pertinent information to staff. Beth, Sheila and Josh shared their experiences with making sense of the ABR in order to comply with the mandates.

**Understanding the ABR at South Hills: A Staff Perspective**

Across the board, Beth, Sheila and Josh all indicated that the awareness of bullying behavior had been heightened for everyone due to the fact that educators and school districts were now accountable if appropriate and timely action was not taken to ameliorate a situation. Beth said that she believed bullying “became such a buzzword” because of this accountability factor. Josh believed that “everybody’s aware of it [because] this is on you now, you know.” The depth of definitional understanding varied among the three, although each one was clear that bullying behavior is something that is harmful, physically or emotionally. The idea of “characteristics” was stated or implied by two educators and the power differential by one. Nevertheless, all were clear on the potential consequences for failure to report an incident and what role they played in the process.

**Building Understanding**

Josh and Beth shared that personal experiences or past beliefs about bullying framed their current understanding. Josh believed a lot of it is “common sense.” Over the years, in his estimation, the definition of bullying had not changed. It was the way educators handled situations that had changed. Beth’s personal experience of her nephew being a victim of bullying, under the guise of the current ABR, gave rise to an empathetic perspective that appeared to influence her current
understanding of the policy and her desire to see a more proactive approach to support the kids. Spillane (2004) suggests that the sense making process is a conserving process where individuals choose to maintain existing frames of references rather than alter them. In a school climate, with competing priorities, it is simpler and more energetically economical to preserve existing worldviews than work to establish new ones. When Beth compared her nephew’s experience to circumstances that she and other family members encountered at South Hills prior to the ABR, she suggested not much has changed and that there is “a disconnect” between the intent of the policy and the actual impact.

**Adding to Understanding: Identification and Reporting**

When the ABR policy first went into effect, Beth and Josh recalled that they were given the policy to read and there was some discussion at a staff meeting. During this initial in-service, the policy was distributed and the staff was shown a Power Point presentation and introduced to the HIB officers. Josh recounted,

> A lot of it was Power Point where the Power Point would be up and they’d hand you a packet of Power Point slides and they would kind of go through and, you know, this is the policy, these are the definitions and it kind of gets to the point where you just kind of zone out.

After the initial training, Beth recalled doing her own research to learn more about being proactive. The purpose of these professional development sessions was to meet the state mandated requirement for staff training and to make sure that staff knew what they needed to do to be in compliance with the law.
Martha, the Anti-Bullying Specialist willingly provided this researcher access to two Power Point presentations from 2010 and 2012 used in staff professional development. She was both the author and the trainer of these comprehensive presentations. The 2010 presentation contained abundant statistics and facts about bullying behavior and its impact on the bully, the victim and the bystander. It also cited the official ABR definition of harassment, intimidation and bullying with expanded definitional explanations added from other sources. Additional slides focused on an extensive range of potential interventions and strategies for minimizing and eradicating the behavior.

The 2012 presentation offered a review of some of the statistics and definitions, as well as information on reporting and intervention procedures. A significant portion of the presentation was dedicated to sharing a myriad of interventions that may work at the school level. Slides containing the messages of VIGILANCE and TEACHERS MUST REPORT in capital letters emphasized the important take-away message. Martha’s background as a school psychologist was evidenced in both presentations by virtue of the added explanations, definitions and intervention strategies. While the presentations were comprehensive and the teacher professional development requirements were met, what appeared to be lacking was any opportunity for staff to engage in meaningful dialogue about the information. Josh recalls being overwhelmed with information on the slides and thinking about other things. Staff’s ‘zones of enactment’ remained narrow, confined to a staff meeting, and therefore, limiting the ability for deep, meaningful conversations to occur.
Due to time constraints, much of the additional staff development around the ABR was given to staff concurrently with the education of the students. After the initial staff meeting, Beth recalls that there were a “couple of workshops later on that Steven did with our students and that’s kind of where we really saw the policy.”

A third Power Point presentation, used to educate the students, was shared as additional supporting documentation. Steven gave this 2011 presentation to the students during the October Week of Respect. In a simpler, more basic format, this presentation outlined the difference between bullying and conflict and simplified the reporting procedures. The official ABR definition of bullying was included, as well as slides on Pupil Expectations that appear in this district’s required Board of Education policy. One slide outlined potential consequences and remedial measures so that students were aware that confirmed bullying behavior had consequences. As new staff, such as Sheila, was added to the mix, information was primarily offered during a staff professional development day during the mandated Week of Respect activities in October and in conjunction with student training on the subject. Again, there was little opportunity for engagement and discussion with colleagues about these material resources.

The ABR mandates that staff and students receive training on the elements of the policy. There is both a reactive component that addresses incidents when bullying behavior is suspected to have occurred, and a proactive component designed to enhance school climate and to promote pro-social behavior as a community. Because of the culture of accountability, Beth, Sheila and Josh were clear on what action they personally needed to take in reaction to a potential
bullying situation. They knew they needed to report it to the principal or the ABS and there was paperwork to fill out. As Josh suggested, "It's almost like if there is a situation that occurs, you have to show that you're going through all these steps to meet policy." It was this formal reporting process, emphasized during professional development sessions, that was front and center in the minds of educators. With the ABR in effect, Josh summed it up, "As an educator, it's report anything and everything you see, you know. You're protecting the students, but you're also protecting yourself."

**Adding to Understanding: Improving School Climate**

Interestingly, these three educators were very clear on what they needed to do to be in compliance with the ABR in order to legally protect themselves. However, when asked to talk about the school's proactive efforts to reduce or prevent bullying behavior there was little understanding of the way the ABR policy itself attempts to address this. None of the educators seemed to be familiar with the component of the ABR policy that requires the creation of a School Safety Team in order to focus on improving school climate. However, they all spoke favorably of current character education efforts designed to improve pro-social behavior at South Hills.

There were significant efforts at inclusion at South Hills; the self-contained students interacted with the mainstream students; there was an Advisory period at the end of the day that focused on character education topics; there were assemblies to facilitate community building. However, there was no formal curriculum or coordinated process orchestrated by the School Safety Team and no evidence that
the School Safety Team had access to ongoing professional development on improving school climate. There did not appear to be any awareness on the part of these educators about the School Safety Team or its proactive function. When district leaders or administrators do not possess sufficient human resources in the form of knowledge, skills or expertise, it is impossible for them to translate a deeper pedagogical meaning to staff and this results in the spirit of the policy being missed (Spillane, 2004). The trainings that Steven and Martha attended appeared to primarily focus on the reporting, investigating and documenting aspects of the ABR; those components that were most vulnerable to litigation. Since district leaders and administrators are the gatekeepers of resource allocation (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1998; 1999; 2000) and the facilitators of the sense making process (Coburn, 2001), staff is beholden to the information and opportunities offered to these administrators.

Beth shared an insight that educators should be able to “naturally enforce” some of the things that are in policy. She suggested, “We can learn it all we want. We can try to initiate it here, but I think that's where the disconnect is happening. We’re, as a whole, just being reactive instead of really getting to the source of the problem and fixing it the right way.” From Sheila’s perspective, she wanted to know more about how to “make that gel and be like one, cohesive, nice little community.” She wondered, “What are some good activities that are proven to help not to have bullying to happen?” The creation of the School Safety Team was predicated on bringing research-based programs to the local school sites in an effort to enhance school climate, build community and work to reduce anti-social behaviors, such as
bullying. In an organic fashion, these educators appeared to be thirsting for this type of support, yet were unaware that the ABR provided a vehicle for it. Access to additional information and resources was denied them due to time constraints and competing priorities.

While staff received the required amount of training and they were “given” information in the form of a Power Point presentation, it was not evident that the understanding of the ABR went beyond a superficial one. The resources that these educators had access to in order to understand the ABR policy were primarily material in nature, such as the actual ABR policy, Power Point presentations at staff professional development meetings, student-centered activities during the October Week of Respect and occasional PTA-sponsored presentations throughout the course of the year. No additional funds to support ABR implementation originated from outside the district. Any additional monies for bullying prevention activities were provided by the PTA. The opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations about the ABR and bullying prevention efforts, however, was minimal. Time and competing priorities often conspired to prevent the opportunity for connection and conversation.

**Deepening Understanding: Opportunities for Conversation**

All three educators, Beth, Josh and Sheila, indicated a desire for a social component to this process to support their understanding and enhance their ability to effectively carry out the letter and the spirit of the policy. “There’s never enough time...we’re just stretched too thin,” offered Beth, whose feelings were echoed by both Josh and Sheila. Time to talk. Time to connect. Time to communicate. Time to
understand. All three educators indicated that the precious material resource of time was what prevented them from having the chance to talk, communicate and connect with both colleagues and kids in order to come to a better understanding of whatever behavioral situations they may be confronted with. In some cases, there may be a need to talk to a colleague to know what to write up and what not to write up in a potential bullying situation. Communication was often stifled, suggested Beth, especially with regard to the ABR, because “nobody wants to admit they don’t understand something...cause if you do...this will happen or that will happen.” Some educators appeared to exist in fear of consequences.

Then there were the challenges of different prep times. Josh shared that he might go seek out another teacher to discuss a student problem, but “as far as us going and talking to other staff, that’s probably about as far as it would go.” There were limited opportunities for staff to meet, talk and communicate about behavioral issues such as bullying. Sheila commented that “just having the time to be able to connect with somebody about a student is really important” even if it were via email. There was a clear desire for staff to have time to connect with other staff to talk about students and what may be going on with them behaviorally, as well as time to connect and understand the kids’ wants and needs from their perspective. Since sense making is largely a social process that involves active communication among participants (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 2004; Weick, 2001), it was evident at South Hills that there was a breakdown in an essential component of the process for staff. This breakdown did not appear to be due to educator apathy or disinterest, rather lack of time, not enough staff and competing priorities were the culprits.
Dewey (2012) makes a distinction between knowledge that is acquired and stored and wisdom that is knowledge that has the power to enhance the living experience. Without sufficient opportunity to engage in the collective sense making process, educators were denied access to this deeper form of knowledge that Dewey (2012) defines as wisdom, which could give educators the power to more effectively enhance the lives of students.

The second half of this chapter will be devoted to the educators at Central Valley Middle School to examine their experience with understanding the ABR. After a brief introduction of the staff participants, the sense making process of the administrators will be examined first before turning to the staff.

**Introducing the Educators at Central Valley Middle School**

*Harry*  Harry had been in the district since 2001 and was currently serving as Principal of Central Valley Middle School, a position he held since 2010. He taught at Central Valley for two years before becoming an Assistant Principal at the school. Harry then held an Administrative position in the Superintendent’s Office before serving as the high school principal for four years. He experienced, firsthand, the evolution of the anti-bullying efforts in New Jersey and in this district. When asked why he agreed to participate in this research, he shared that he was empathetic to the challenges of getting people “just to commit to some time” having recently completed his own doctoral dissertation. He added that he hoped to be able to “add to the richness” of the data in this study given that he had been around this policy since the beginning.
Dan  Dan had been working in the district and at Central Valley since 2002, the year that HIB originally went into effect. He was a math teacher until this year, when he assumed the role of Dean of Students, which was primarily a disciplinarian position. Along with this new title came the responsibilities of being the Anti-Bullying Specialist. Dan’s very recent history as a classroom teacher and his current role as the ABS, allowed him to share different perspectives on the challenges inherent in making sense of the ABR. Dan was the second person to hold the ABS position at Central Valley since the policy took effect.

Bruce  Bruce had been at Central Valley for 16 years. He was a history teacher for 13 years before becoming a Dean of Students, tasked with addressing discipline issues. It was while serving in his role as Dean that the ABR became law and Bruce was tapped to be the first ABS at the school. Bruce had also been the high school football coach for 16 years, which broadened his perspective with regard to bullying behavior. Bruce was an Assistant Principal at Central Valley at the time of this interview. Bruce shared the many challenges he faced as the first ABS at the school and how he worked to overcome them. His efforts led him to be called on by the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator to deliver workshops out-of-district for school bus drivers and transportation coordinators, as well as individuals being trained to become substitutes.

Rachel  Rachel was a guidance counselor who had been at Central Valley for ten years. She worked within the seventh-grade House Center, with a Dean and an Assistant Principal, at the time of the interview, but every year her grade-level responsibilities have changed. Although she was familiar with the original HIB
policy, she had no recollection of being trained on its components in 2002. Rachel’s positions as guidance counselor and head of the school’s Advisory Committee, offered a unique perspective on the proactive approaches that Central Valley had to addressing school climate issues.

Jeff Jeff was an eighth grade English/Language Arts teacher who had been at Central Valley for twelve years. He had coached middle school baseball for eleven years and girls’ basketball for twelve years. At the time of data collection, he was the high school girls’ varsity basketball coach. Jeff’s diverse perspectives, from teacher to coach, brought fresh insight into the discussion on bullying behavior. As a professional educator, Jeff was passionate about his job.

Central Valley Middle School ABR Administrators: Harry, Dan and Bruce

At Central Valley, Harry and Dan, as the Principal and the current Anti-Bullying Specialist respectively, were two of the administrators serving in ABR-defined roles. Bruce, although no longer serving in an official ABR-defined role, was the administrator who originally held the ABS title. Therefore, the sense making process of these three individuals’ will be considered together. The gentleman who currently held the title of Anti-Bullying Coordinator for the district did not respond to the request to participate in this study and so this perspective is absent from the data for Central Valley.

Building Understanding

When asked about what constitutes bullying behavior, all three men were adamant about the negative impact on the victim. There was clear deference to and
reliance on the language of the policy itself. Harry plainly stated, “I do refer to policy quite a bit.” Bruce identified one of the biggest challenges as “everyone has their own definition of bullying” and they needed to understand what the law says. With both parents and school staff, you could “get soup to nuts” when it came to how individuals perceived bullying behavior. Individual definitions should not be considered because “this is the definition. Period. Sometimes they don’t want to accept that. But, it’s the truth.” This “by-the-book” response appeared to be prompted by the fear of consequences for districts and educators who might appear non-compliant due to a lack of understanding of what they were looking for.

Dan and Bruce, both formally classroom teachers at Central Valley, admitted that they were not familiar with the specifics of what bullying was until they were actually in the role of ABS. Bruce shared, “I was kind of thrown into, we all were, thrown into the fire and we had to get to know it.” The frustration that school administrators faced was that they “were all on the clock for it without knowing anything about it.” Assuming the title of ABS came with significant responsibilities.

Harry, however, acknowledged, “common sense helped me to get to the place of what bullying is.” This common sense regarding how individuals should treat each other was coupled with his knowledge of how students, either high school or middle school, interacted with each other at their specific stage of development. Harry appeared to be very clear on his role in bringing the ABR policy to life at his school based on his professional identity as the principal and the responsibilities that encompassed. He talked about presenting bullying-related data to kids and giving them “alternatives, outlets and consequences.” He relayed to his staff that “it
doesn’t matter how you feel about it or how I feel about it or how you look or perceive the situation. The one thing that matters is how the child feels.” The tone Harry used while training staff was described as “serious” so that they all knew that the ABR needed to be taken seriously. According to Jeff, the Language Arts teacher, he recalled, Harry saying, “It’s on me,” alluding to the principal as the one who was ultimately responsible for proper implementation.

One of the two most important components of the sense making process, according to Weick (1995) is the construction of identity, or “who we think we are.” Both Harry and Bruce identified themselves as the ones who were primarily responsible for appropriate implementation of the ABR at Central Valley. This identity heavily influenced the way they attempted to make sense of the policy and the efforts they put forth in the process. Spillane, et al., (2002) suggests that individuals at the local level must interpret and construct meaning to infuse life into a particular policy message. Arriving at this meaning relies heavily on the use of human resources that include knowledge, experience and beliefs (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 1999; Spillane, et al., 2002; Weick, 1979). In a similar fashion to the administrators at South Hills, Central Valley administrators were very measured and careful when asked to share their understanding of the ABR. The focus remained on specific ABR language and the administrators’ identities as professional educators. Great care was taken to avoid infusing personal sentiments into the discussion. But it was clear that professional identities and the fact that, as Bruce said, “we dot our I’s and cross our T’s pretty well here and we always have”
were instrumental in guiding the administrators’ approach to understanding the ABR.

Dan’s professional identity shifted when his role changed from classroom teacher to an essential administrative role in the ABR implementation process. His frame of reference as to what the ABR meant to him changed, as well. Prior to becoming the ABS, Dan and the other teachers knew to just report possible HIB situations to the Specialist, and as a teacher, Dan was relieved by this. Because of all of the demands placed on the classroom teachers, Dan admitted, “I don’t think it’s a priority to most of the staff to fully understand the HIB policy. Their focus is, and warranted so, is much more elsewhere.”

As the ABS, however, Dan was very well versed in the reporting, investigating and documenting procedures because of his changed role. Previously, as a classroom teacher, he had little or no interest in pursuing an understanding of the ABR other than what he had to know. Now, from his new perspective, he shared, “I always want more time with the staff to do HIB, no question...I do think there should be more time allocated.” But he knew, too, that, “there’s a lot being asked” of the teachers. Dan’s shift in professional identity positioned him differently within the sense making process. Individuals, according to Spillane (2000) tend to gravitate toward informational cues that are more relevant and familiar to them.

**Adding to Understanding: Identifying, Reporting and Documenting**

Harry and Bruce were part of the original team of ABR administrators at Central Valley charged with coming to an understanding of the contents of the policy in order to assure compliance and to turnkey the information to staff. Both men
indicated that much of the onus for learning the intricacies of the policy fell on them. For Harry, it was about “just diving into the policy and diving into the program and knowing...our collective way around the definition of HIB.” He conducted many of the trainings for administrators at Central Valley and he “empowered” Bruce, the Specialist, at the time, to train the staff. By transferring the information down the line, Harry believed he became more proficient in understanding the policy and its nuances. The ability to breakdown and effectively “translate mandates into application” was a strength that Harry believed he contributed to this process. He was a proponent of the idea that “once you teach something, then you’ve finally mastered it.” With regard to the quantity of material resources available to him, including various media supports and staff, he communicated his satisfaction with both. More time, however, was something that would have allowed him to conduct more hands-on, interactive trainings with staff, rather than using a direct instructional approach supported primarily by Power Point presentations.

As the original Anti-Bullying Specialist for Central Valley, Bruce assumed the primary responsibility for understanding the complexities of the ABR so that he could effectively translate them to staff. The primary State-issued material resource that Bruce relied on to facilitate his understanding was his copy of the law. While he did peruse the additional materials on the DOE website, his own, independent search for resources proved more fruitful. He consulted the DOE site “to look for specific things and if I didn’t see it, then I went somewhere else to find it.” This persistence and determination on Bruce’s part was due to the fact that they “were on the clock” and needed to be compliant, as well as his “lack of confidence because
of my own background.” As a history teacher and a football coach, he found himself at a disadvantage in understanding the origins and implications of bullying behavior. But his professional identity as the Anti-Bullying Specialist, and his newly acquired understanding of the legal consequences inherent in the law, appeared to be the catalyst that propelled him to further his knowledge and understanding.

To further his understanding of bullying and its effects from a psychological perspective, Bruce consulted books and articles that he found on his own. In addition to working to come to a deeper understanding of the behavior itself, he parlayed this information into concrete exercises that were used to help staff identify the behavior. “I had to do a lot of it myself, I’m sorry to say,” Bruce lamented. While the ABR policy supplied a definition and a process, Bruce sought terminology that could help him educate staff and students.

We didn’t want to get caught. We didn’t want to get caught. And you know, when you deal with public employees, sometimes legislation makes people, it lights a fire and they jump. And other people, it’s just another regulation. Put it off until Monday. It’ll be there, you know what I mean? There’s a different approach in the public sector, you know. None of us were like that. We just, we didn’t want to get snagged. And still don’t.

His “own curiosity...and [his] neuroses” and his desire to be in compliance, drove him to seek out additional resources to enhance his understanding. He was also compelled to create a procedure checklist and a bullying-conflict scale to help staff and students better recognize bullying behavior and understand the reporting process. Bruce willingly shared these documents with this researcher as testament
to the efforts he put forth to facilitate his understanding, as well as that of staff and students.

Dan, as a second generation Anti-Bullying Specialist and a recent classroom teacher, provided a unique perspective. During the interview, he could not identify any training or other material resources that supported him in learning about the ABR once he assumed the role of the Anti-Bullying Specialist at Central Valley. His understanding of bullying did not come to him as a classroom teacher, rather, he admits, it came “when I was introduced to the role” of ABS. On assuming the Dean position and the Specialist role, Dan received his training directly from Bruce, who he considered “the district leader on interpreting the policy” and his “mentor for the process for the first two months.” Admittedly, Dan was extremely “awkward” and “definitely a little uncomfortable” that he was not offered any initial outside training on the role expectations of the ABS. Resources of time and money were not of concern to Dan, but lack of training and professional development was. In the absence of sufficient material resources, in the form of training and professional development to support his understanding, Dan relied heavily on the social resources available to him. Regardless of the numerous material resources available in various formats on State-sponsored web sites, it was the social resources that appeared to play the most significant role for all three of the Central Valley administrators in broadening and deepening their understanding of the ABR. According to Spillane (1999), material resources are best used in the facilitation of ongoing dialogue. Access to and engagement in these conversations are essential for understanding any reform and putting it into practice (Spillane, 1999).
Adding to Understanding: Improving School Climate

The emphasis placed on the proactive School Safety Team component of the ABR was minimal in comparison to the efforts exerted on the reactive reporting and investigating piece. Harry, Bruce and Dan were all aware of the requirement for the team as a vehicle for communicating information about the school’s bullying prevention efforts, and they acknowledged that the team held the two required meetings each year. However, Harry honestly stated, “They’re not a leadership body. It’s not that it’s not at the top of our priority list, but they’re also classroom teachers, you know. They’re also focused on student growth, which is the new HIB.” Once again, competing priorities forced a decision about how to best utilize resources of staff and time. The team was not described as a mechanism for discussing school climate improvement and there was no indication that any staff members on the School Safety Team were provided with specific opportunities for professional development regarding school climate improvement practices. Once again, competing priorities resulted in less time for educators to focus on any issue that was no longer the ‘topic of the day.’

Importantly, Central Valley had school climate initiatives in place prior to the 2010 ABR. Efforts were coordinated by the principal and the body known as the Advisory Committee, rather than a School Safety Team. So, while the School Safety Team at Central Valley might not have met all specified ABR requirements, there was, nevertheless, attention to character education and school climate initiatives in the building. Working within their unique context, Central Valley utilized an approach to addressing school climate issues that worked for their environment. No
professional development opportunities were made available to members of the Advisory Committee either. According to Rachel, “If you seek it out, it’s not usually something they [the district] would say no to. But usually, with our professional development now, like, everything’s mandated, you know. We don’t have a lot of freedom with what we choose to do anymore.” The district mandated all professional development for educators. Providing additional opportunities for either the School Safety Team or Central Valley’s Advisory Committee to learn about school climate improvement was not on the radar.

**Deepening Understanding: Opportunities for Conversation**

Bruce, as the original ABS at Central Valley, assumed the majority of the responsibility for making sense of the policy in order to translate the information to staff. To this end, he was the one who had the access to workshops, presentations and conversations both within and outside of the district. Neither Harry nor Dan spoke specifically about participating in any conversations outside of the district. Any discussions that they had, pertaining to the ABR, occurred locally, confined to the school or the district level. Although these localized conversations can be valuable, research suggests that conversations with non-system actors or professionals positioned outside the school offer the best chance for deep, rich discussions about policy and practice (Coburn, 2005a; Cohen & Hill, 2000). Since Bruce was the Central Valley administrator with access to these opportunities, this section relies heavily on his experience with social resources.

Bruce initially attended some seminars offered through the State. These all-day regional meetings were a place where district educators arrived, policy in hand,
and had the chance to discuss the ABR and its particulars, thereby infusing life into this material resource. Specifically, Bruce remembered one gentleman from the State he had seen at a couple seminars who “spoke and that got me started.” Often, it is these connections with non-system actors that are the most effective means for bringing messages to the school and classroom in substantive ways (Coburn, 2005a). Bruce’s district was fortunate enough to be chosen to participate in additional outside professional development programs to facilitate understanding of the ABR.

Unequivocally, Bruce stated that “discussions with people in other buildings and other districts” were the most helpful tools supporting his understanding of the ABR policy. Bruce referenced a series of workshops offered by the Rutgers Bullying Prevention Institute (BPI) in which twelve districts from across the State were represented, each bringing five individuals to the table. The interactive, project-based sessions not only deepened understanding, they provided a forum for discussion of real-world situations that educators were encountering back in their respective schools and districts. Bruce vividly recalled, “We were all craving reassurance that we were doing the right thing.” He acknowledged leaving these sessions feeling, “We were well ahead...of a lot of districts” and this appeared to be primarily due to the individual initiative Bruce took to fill in his own personal knowledge gap.

However, even with access to this outside support, Bruce felt that he was not provided with enough “concrete answers.” Without the answers that he was seeking from either the Department of Education or Rutgers BPI, “It made the law seem like
a knee jerk reaction that was just thrown out there to look good.” Although, he honestly believed that the law had done some good, “It’s the lack of nuts and bolts” provided to assist in understanding and carrying out the process that was frustrating. While research shows that expansive ‘zones of enactment’ are critical in facilitating rich discussions and engendering change, it is not just the expanse that is needed, but also the quality that is essential (Spillane, 1999).

For Bruce, “a lot of conversations, not just at the BPI, but with my principal (Harry) and some of the Specialists in the other buildings in the district” were essential in bolstering his understanding and confidence. The first year of the ABR, all of the Specialists in the district met four or five times, together with the Anti-Bullying Coordinator, to “kind of hash things out.” These ongoing conversations provided much needed support and encouragement, as well as a forum in which ideas could be shared.

While Harry, as principal, delegated the responsibility for participating in out-of-district ABR workshops to Bruce, Harry actively participated in internal district discussions that helped to deepen his understanding. Bruce not only translated information to Harry, Bruce was the primary source of training and information for Dan when the ABS torch was passed along. As Dan worked to learn the responsibilities of the ABS, he engaged in many conversations with Bruce, as well as the Anti-Bullying Coordinator, whose perspective is not represented in this data.

According to Dan, maintaining an active and open dialogue with the other specialists in the district allowed him to understand his role and to make sense of
the requirements of the policy. Dan commented, “I feel very comfortable with what I’m doing, you know, I’m adhering to the law. I’m adhering to the policies.” He saw his role as being essential for making sure that the investigation and documentation components were in place. Internal conversations were critical and essential in allowing Dan to arrive at this understanding, although it appeared to be more of a surface understanding that Dan acquired. The lack of access to additional training and outside perspectives may have prevented Dan from establishing a deeper, more meaningful understanding. Dan viewed this knowledge gap as a disadvantage as he took on the role of ABS. He cited the fact that he was certified to be a math teacher and an administrator, but he questioned why there was no formal professional development or certification to qualify him to hold the position of ABS.

Having examined the ABR administrators’ process of sense making, the discussion will now turn to two staff members at Central Valley. Since administrators are the gatekeepers of many of the essential resources needed for the sense making process, the story that staff told about their experiences added depth to the Central Valley experience.

**Understanding the ABR at Central Valley: A Staff Perspective**

Rachel, a seventh-grade guidance counselor and head of the Advisory Committee, and Jeff, an eighth-grade Language Arts teacher and varsity coach, shared their experiences with coming to understand the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights at Central Valley. Both educators acknowledged that, although the 2002 HIB law had previously been passed, there was minimal discussion about bullying behavior and no formal process in place to address emergent situations, at that time. It was not
until the passage of the 2010 ABR, with its stiff mandates, that conversation and decisive action began to take place at the school.

Building Understanding

Rachel and Jeff both acknowledged having a prior understanding of bullying behavior. Rachel’s frame of reference was her education and experience as a guidance counselor. With ten years of professional experience behind her, she felt she had “a pretty good handle” on the understanding of how bullying was defined and the ABR procedures. Before the researcher was able to delve into the semi-structured questions, Rachel made it a point to mention the process that educators must adhere to in reporting alleged cases of child abuse and neglect. Teachers, as mandated reporters, are required to report suspected cases of child maltreatment to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P, formerly known as DYFS, the Division of Youth and Family Services). Drawing on her knowledge of this mandated reporting-process, Rachel was able to easily connect the similarities in ABR procedures to facilitate her own understanding. She also tried to use this comparison in the educating of staff in the ABR process.

Jeff mentioned that his school-age years were significant in informing his understanding of what bullying behavior looked like. With more than twelve years of education experience, Jeff viewed himself as a consummate professional and believed that his understanding of bullying was inherent in his role as an educator to not only teach, but to advocate for the “safety of the children.” In his view, this was just a “normal, everyday routine for teachers.” Protecting and “sticking up” for kids was what they should be doing. He further commented that his “integrity as a
teacher is on the line” indicating his strong identification with his chosen profession. Rachel and Jeff evidenced Weick’s (1995) idea of the role of the “who we think we are” aspect of the sense making process as being a foundational component. Again, as seen with the administrators, it was the sense of professional identity, as opposed to personal identity that shone through.

Even though they appeared to posses a prior working knowledge of how bullying was defined, both Rachel and Jeff said that the ABR provided clarity and consistency in the form of a common language and process. Terms like “power differential,” “upstander” and “bystander” became part of the language at Central Valley that defined bullying behavior and allowed everyone to be on the same page. Training and discussions helped to clearly identify the differences between normal adolescent conflict and bullying behavior that has a harmful, negative impact on an individual. According to Jeff, “When you feel like other, like everyone is on the same page and there’s clarity as to what’s expected, then it just makes it a lot easier because it just becomes part of your routine.” Various resources were utilized in an effort to give staff access to this new language and process and to aid in the routinizing of the new protocols. Staff was given information that helped them to integrate the information into their existing schemas (Spillane, et al., 2002) in a way that simplified the ABR process for them. The procedure checklist and bullying-conflict scale, created by Bruce, were helpful in this simplification process for staff.

**Adding to Understanding: Identifying, Reporting and Documenting**

Definitional clarity about bullying and the required process for handling suspected incidents came as a result of the professional development that Rachel,
Jeff and the rest of the staff received to prepare them to carry out the mandates of the ABR. Immediately, at the beginning of the 2011 school year, staff was made aware of what the ABR meant for them. Rachel and Jeff spoke about the “serious” tone that Harry, the Principal, set from the beginning. Jeff remembered learning that any missteps in carrying out the mandates of the law could be traced back to the administration and to this end, Harry told his staff, “It’s on me.” Rachel believed that “it’s how it’s presented to the staff. And I think it was presented in a way where everybody took it very seriously.” Harry and Bruce, as the gatekeepers of resource allocation (Coburn & Russell, 2008, Spillane, 1998, 1999, 2000) and the facilitators of the sense making process (Coburn, 2001) presented a clear and simplistic picture of the ABR processes and procedures for staff.

Along with the serious tone that accompanied the initial introduction of the ABR to staff at Central Valley came information and resources to help staff make sense of the reporting components of the policy. Staff was given the policy to read; there was a Power Point presentation; and Harry provided background information by explaining the cases that led to this law. Rachel recalled additional forms that educators were given to facilitate the reporting and documenting process, forms that were created by Bruce. There was clear effort on the part of Harry and Bruce to breakdown and simplify the information for staff. Discussion included the identification of bullying and, as Jeff recalled, “The one thing that’s really kind of been shared with the teachers is that there’s a difference between conflict and bullying.” Armed with clear definitions and reporting procedures, educators were left with the message that compliance was essential. “You must do it. And you just
have to follow along,” said Jeff. By overtly conveying their expectations to staff, Harry and Bruce orchestrated and managed staff understandings, which is an integral part of what administrators do in the sense making process (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1998).

It appeared that formal staff-only professional development discussing the ABR specifically was confined to the beginning of each school year. However, there may have been brief updates or mentions at a faculty meeting throughout the course of the year, as needed. The training of staff was focused mainly on the reporting, investigating and documenting procedures. Every year, staff was required to read the policy, answer questions and sign-off that this was completed so that the Board office could track compliance. According to Harry,

I am going over certain protocols to follow in certain situations and it’s not done shotgun-style, but it’s in very compact sessions. I only, I have a tricky collective bargaining agreement with these teachers, so I don’t have all the latitude to do everything that I would want from a professional development standpoint. So, you kind of have to pick and choose and sometimes I chip away time from HIB to give to math and language arts articulation.

With no money available to fund additional professional development on bullying prevention activities or to pay teachers for participation, Harry was faced with making tough choices.

Dan, the current ABS, having been out of the classroom less than a year, shed some additional light on the challenges that teachers face and the precious commodity of time. Dan recollected,
I remember, last year as a math teacher, I was getting pulled so much; it was too much for me to process. It was a very demanding year last year with the instigation of SGOS; the new evaluations; the fact that we’re assisting with the Common Core for math; the fact that we went to the PARCC assessment.

There are so many different changes. The tenure reform. Competing priorities, work overload and lack of time were reasons that staff was given the directive to just report any potential bullying incidents to the HIB personnel. While district and school leaders do have the opportunity to shape the frequency and depth of conversations that take place (Coburn & Russell, 2008, Spillane, 1998), at Central Valley, the opportunities were severely limited.

Any additional staff development regarding recognizing and reporting bullying behavior or improving school climate to reduce incidents was handled concurrently with educating students in these areas. Lack of time and competing priorities appeared to be the primary reasons for this approach to staff professional development. Educators received the mandated training in the beginning of the year and had access to all of the State and district electronic resources on bullying. But through assemblies for the kids “is where we’ve pretty much come to know, the professional development that’s been given every year,” said Jeff. Since the district mandated professional development, staff-only professional development regarding bullying was limited to the mandated trainings and the online resources.

However, Central Valley had character education and positive behavior supports in place for the students, which addressed the school climate component of the ABR. While these initiatives were established prior to the 2010 ABR, there
appeared to be little understanding or recognition by staff that they met an additional mandated component of the policy. It was through these character education programs, heavily influenced by the Advisory Committee that Rachel was in charge of, that teachers received additional “professional development” on bullying topics, while simultaneously providing the mandated education for students.

**Adding to Understanding: Improving School Climate**

Neither Rachel nor Jeff, in speaking about the mandates of the ABR, made any specific mention of the requirement of a School Safety Team. The purpose of this Team was not only to serve as a vehicle for communicating with stakeholders about ABR compliance and sharing bullying-related statistics, which Dan the Anti-Bullying Specialist alluded to, the Team was also tasked with focusing on improving the school climate. Although Central Valley did have a School Safety Team, led by Dan, the ABS, Rachel and Jeff did not appear to be familiar with its function. However, they both spoke extensively about the character education efforts at Central Valley because it was something that was in place prior to the ABR and continued to be an integral part of the school operations.

The Advisory Committee that Rachel headed and the monthly Advisory Periods fulfilled some of the requirements, with regard to positive school climate, that the School Safety Team was designed to handle. The assemblies and Advisory Periods at Central Valley appeared to meet the ABR mandate regarding the improvement of school climate. Concurrently, they served as a vehicle for staff
professional development, and so deserve to be considered in this discussion about resources supporting staff understanding.

Prior to the 2010 passage of the ABR, Central Valley received a grant from Rutgers, the Inclusive School Climate Initiative. Central Valley created an Advisory Committee and instituted Advisory Periods into the curriculum. The grant money allowed the school to purchase “books on disabilities and improving our awareness of disabilities in the building through literature,” explained Rachel. Teachers would do books talks with the kids and “incorporate that into their classrooms.”

When the ABR took effect and Harry took the reins as principal, Advisory Period became a more structured process. Small teacher-led groups conducted character education lessons with students once a month. Usually, these discussions followed some type of assembly or outside presentation to spark discussion. This program was in place when the ABR was passed which allowed for some lessons to be seamlessly focused on bullying prevention efforts. Jeff recounted a recent such program and the Advisory lesson that followed.

The assembly on Tuesday...was a laser presentation...which focused on bullying. The kids were just made aware of the four categories of bullying, you know, cyber bullying, verbal, psychological and physical and I guess they gave them scenarios and situations and kind of kept it, you know, enjoyable, so that it's a visual presentation and it's not, you know Power Point. It's an interactive thing and then today was just a follow-up about that and just kind of keeping it in their minds.
This laser show was just one of the many examples Rachel and Jeff provided of outside presenters coming to Central Valley to discuss either character education topics in general, or bullying prevention efforts specifically.

The Inclusive School Climate Initiative grant expired over a year ago and there was no longer an infusion of funds allocated to the Advisory program. However, “we just do it without the grant now. Like, we just continued it post-grant,” said Rachel. With the infrastructure already in place, Central Valley chose to continue their Advisory Program as a vehicle to continue the work of improving school climate.

The Advisory process appeared to serve the duel function of educating students, while at the same time providing some additional staff training, especially with respect to bullying prevention. With limited time and money, two key resources, educators were relegated to learning as they teach. This is an interesting approach based on the principal’s belief that once he taught something, he mastered it. Jeff was honest about the fact the he did not actually attend the laser presentation assembly, although he did conduct his follow-up Advisory lesson with the students. He explained that he did not attend because “they rotate the schedule so that not everybody’s interfered with.” Lack of time and competing priorities at Central Valley appeared to dictate what opportunities teachers had to participate in these educational opportunities. District leaders essentially shaped the sense making experience for their staff by creating the conditions that allowed for critical examination of worldviews and practices (Coburn, 2001). When the district mandated the professional development opportunities for all educators, they
essentially determined the depth of the sense making process. Sense making is either supported or hindered by the purposeful dissemination of the vital resources of human, social and material capital that facilitate the process.

**Deepening Understanding: Opportunities for Conversation**

Rachel and Jeff, by virtue of their positions at Central Valley, had different opportunities to discuss behavior-related issues, such as bullying with colleagues. Whether it was a discussion on recognizing, reporting or documenting a potential bullying situation or a conversation regarding the best way to support student social development, lack of time, competing priorities and the organizational structure of the school often posed significant roadblocks. Neither Rachel nor Jeff reported having any opportunities outside of Central Valley to engage in further learning or discussion about bullying behavior or any issues related to understanding the ABR mandates.

Internally, Rachel relied heavily on her House Center team comprised of a Dean, an Assistant Principal and herself, as the Guidance Counselor. Regardless of what was happening with respect to potential bullying situations, Rachel was adamant that she relied on conversations with her colleagues in the House Center because “maybe [they have] prior knowledge of the students. But you always bounce it off someone else. I just, I always talk to somebody else about that.” Fortunately, Rachel had this community within a community where she dialogued with others to help her to come to a better understanding of situations.

Jeff, however, presented a different view as a classroom teacher. While the mandatory staff trainings at the beginning of each year provided a limited
opportunity for discussion of bullying related topics and further understanding of the ABR, this was the only formal setting that teachers had for these conversations. Although, Harry, the principal, offered the fact teachers have a 30-minute meeting time everyday with colleagues, he elaborated, “Most of those meetings are subject-area based, but some of them are more general and so they have access to each other all day long.” Jeff, however, suggested that most teachers are “pretty independent” and due to the organizational structure of the school, it was harder than it used to be to have conversations with colleagues.

It’s not as easy as it was in the past when middle school models followed a team concept, which makes understanding kids a little bit easier and understanding a situation and what kids are going through. But there’s less time and opportunity to do that now [because of the fact] we had to cut teachers.

From Jeff’s perspective, staff cuts have resulted in a change in the overall organizational structure of the school which has led to less time and opportunity for teachers to engage in deep, meaningful conversations about students, conversations which could potentially help to better understand and address student issues. When it comes to making substantive changes in thinking and practice, the wider an educator’s ‘zone of enactment’ the more likely it is that a real pedagogical shift will take place. When these zones reach beyond the walls of the classroom and the school building and include outside experts, there is greater probability that there will be a shift in thinking that will result in a change in teaching behavior (Spillane, 1999).
Summary

Any time individuals, educators or otherwise, encounter a new situation, they bring existing knowledge, experience and worldviews to bear on it. These human resources have the potential to inform the way in which situations are interpreted. However, material and social resources play a significant role in determining whether or not a worldview is altered in any meaningful way.

Each of the educators at South Hills and Central Valley brought a set of experiences and worldviews into the process of making sense of the ABR. However, it was the availability or lack of availability of social resources and certain material resources that appears to have determined the depth of the sense making process. Given that sense making, according to Weick (1995), is a social process that is evolutionary in nature, this outcome would be expected.

The educators at South Hills and Central Valley who participated in conversations, internally or externally, cited these opportunities as invaluable in helping them to understand the ABR. Educators who lacked opportunity for conversations with others, usually due to lack of time and competing priorities, acquired a less substantive understanding of the ABR. Organizational structure of the school also played a role, especially for classroom teachers, in limiting opportunities to enhance understanding. South Hills was a small school where teachers did not have common prep times and Central Valley was a large school whose high school-like, non-teaming environment did not easily allow teachers to interact.
Abundant material resources in the form of documents, Power Points and Internet links to research-based bullying prevention programs were available to educators on various web sites. But the substance contained within these material resources appeared to be most effectively activated through deep and meaningful conversations (Spillane, 1999). Having quality conversations requires time; a luxury neither South Hills nor Central Valley ever seemed to have enough of. Acquiring a deep understanding of the ABR appeared to be directly proportional to the amount of time a particular individual had to engage in conversation about it (Dewey, 2012; Coburn, 2005a; Spillane, 1999). Additionally, the most impactful conversations occurred outside of the local site with non-system actors (Coburn, 2005a; Cohen & Hill, 2000).

Another factor that inhibited the sense making process was the litigious nature of the ABR. Educators at both South Hills and Central Valley made it a priority to understand the mandated components of the ABR because there were clear consequences for non-compliance. A mandated component of the ABR, such as the School Safety Team, did not pose an immediate legal threat for non-compliance, and therefore, it did not receive as much attention. However, this is not to say that each school did not make efforts to improve school climate. Each school, using the resources at its disposal, diligently worked within the structural confines of its unique context toward school climate improvement. According to various sources, educational reform efforts seem to hinge on the context in which they occur (Brooks, 2006; Bryk & Driscoll, 1998; Spillane, 2002).
Since educators are a class of street-level bureaucrats, the next data chapter will examine how discretionary practices were used in the process of making sense of the ABR. With limited resources at their disposal, educators were tasked with building an understanding of the ABR in a way that would allow them to adequately implement its mandates.
Chapter 5:

Educators as Street-Level Bureaucrats: The Smallest Organizational Unit

Introduction

Conventional policy implementation models suggest that individual actors (Spillane, 2004) and the structure and organization of the system (Fowler, 2009) are primarily responsible for the challenges that many new policies encounter during the implementation stage. Therefore, the context within which these reforms occur is an important variable to be considered (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 2000, Spillane, 1998). It is within the local context that human, social and material resources are activated in the sense making process (Spillane, 2004). Since organizational sense making is largely a social process (Spillane, 2004) where individuals act in concert, pooling resources, (Bandura, 2006), it is essential to examine the individual as the smallest organizational unit. According to McLaughlin (1987), “change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit.” Therefore, it is the individual, or street-level bureaucrat (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977), who has the capacity, and potential power, to interpret policy and affect the implementation process.

According to Lipsky (2010), street-level bureaucrats often work in difficult circumstances and operate in systems with inadequate resources, forcing them to adopt coping behaviors that allow them to bridge the gap between a mandated policy and the realities of doing their job. Often, street-level bureaucrats are required to make decisions and adjustments in order to cope with competing demands and unsupportive environments (Lipsky, 2010). This need to improvise is
often exacerbated by the structure of the work environment and both conditions contribute to the need to utilize discretionary practices. Street-level bureaucrats are ultimately attempting to make the best decisions possible under the circumstances they encounter. These decisions are often “satisfactory rather than optimal” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 82). However, they allow street-level bureaucrats to operate effectively within the structural confines of the organization.

Through what can be seen as a sense making process, street-level bureaucrats attempt to manage the ambiguous nature of their jobs. The micro-level actions of these individuals have potentially large consequences (Lipsky, 2010; McLaughlin, 1987; Weick, 2001). As the smallest organizational unit, street-level bureaucrats utilize discretion and have a significant role in determining organizational behavior. It is within this space of decision-making and action, where a potential phenomenon of power exists, where educators have the capacity to bring positive change to the local school site via implementation of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights.

It is important to note that the focus groups conducted by the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force revealed a specific concern among educators about “the lack of discretion” available to them “to make a preliminary determination whether a case should be fully investigated as potential HIB” (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2013, p. 17). Initially, educators suggested that they were “uncomfortable exercising discretion in applying the reasonable person standard to investigations” (NJABTF, 2013, p. 17). There was a clear indication that concerns about legal ramifications were making the process cumbersome and overwhelming. With this
feedback in mind, the Task Force’s 2014 Annual Report acknowledged, “the use of the word ‘shall’ in the statutory provision...means the building principal has no discretion and must refer every matter to the ABS for investigation” (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 2014, p. 20). It was, therefore, the Task Force’s recommendation to amend the administrative code and change the language to establish minimum criteria for investigation that would give measured discretionary power to the principal.

This chapter will examine the way in which the educators at South Hills Middle School and Central Valley Middle School operated as street-level bureaucrats within their unique organizational structures and utilized discretion to make sense of and implement the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. First, the discretionary behaviors and practices of the South Hills educators will be considered before turning to a discussion of the Central Valley educators.

**Discretion at South Hills Middle School**

Faced with scare resources, minimal training and lack of directional clarity for implementing the elements of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, the educators at South Hills Middle School were tasked with finding the best possible means to carry out policy dictates. Their approach was in line with previous research suggesting that these are challenges most often encountered by street-level bureaucrats as they attempt to do their jobs (Kelly, 1994; Riccucci, 2005; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Since discretion is, by definition, a personal decision, the experience of each South Hills participant will be considered separately. By examining the individual
discretionary practices, similarities and differences in the decision-making process of the smallest organizational unit were more easily identified.

**South Hills Administrators: Use of Discretion**

When asked direct questions, Steven and Martha were both exceptionally clear on their roles within the confines of the ABR and in their use of discretion. During the interview, questions on this topic were answered carefully and cautiously without much elaboration, an indication that it was important to tread lightly in this area due to the litigious potential of the policy.

*Steven*  While no direct questions were asked about the use of discretion until well into the interview, imbedded within Steven’s answers to preliminary questions were indications of the need to utilize it. For example, as he spoke about how he defined the imbalance of power aspect of bullying, Steven alluded to the fact, “You have to take into account the relationship between both parties prior to the allegation or the alleged incident.” This response indicated a practice of bringing prior knowledge to bear on current situations in an effort to make the best decision possible in the present. Steven also mentioned the fact that parents often want “to protect their own kid” and “they think their child can do no wrong.” When parents are misinformed about terminology or use it inappropriately, according to Steven, there may be a need to take those misperceptions into consideration when making a decision to proceed with an investigation. Both conditions suggest an innate need to use discretion to manage the task of identifying potential HIB situations.

Information on the use of discretion also emerged through interview questions designed to understand the specific procedural elements of ABR
implementation at South Hills. Steven described the chain of events after he received a report of potential bullying, "I make that determination as to whether it’s going to, if it fits under the category or not, whether it’s going to be investigated by the ABS or whether it’s something I would handle as just disciplinary." Reaching back for any knowledge of past history regarding the parties involved, speaking to parents and considering the “distinguishable characteristics,” all played into the decision whether to move forward with an HIB investigation or not. However, Steven added that there were times when he sought the counsel of the Superintendent or the other building principal “just to get a second opinion.”

Direct questions about the use of discretion were not asked until well into the interview, after significant rapport had been developed and Steven himself had inadvertently introduced the topic into the conversation. Based on prior comments Steven himself had made, questions about discretionary practices became follow-up questions that were seamlessly woven into the fabric of the conversation, allowing for a more open dialogue. “I think a lot of it is administrator discretion and what I mean by that is you have to take into account the parties that are involved. And knowing the history of it, too,” Steven elaborated. When asked about his level of comfort in utilizing discretion, Steven admitted, “I feel comfortable because I feel like I’ve been here long enough that I know a lot of the families.” Strong ties and an atmosphere of trust allowed Steven to comfortably make decisions and use his discretion.

Without any prompting, Steven quickly followed up his previous response with, “Of course, I think any district’s worst nightmare is litigation. So, that’s why I
don’t make that decision in a bubble.” He further described the interventions that South Hills had in place to make sure that the best possible decisions were made. Some of these interventions included talking to other administrators and teachers and cameras and seating charts on busses. Once again, the fear of litigation entered into the discussion along with the need to be able to substantiate, with evidence, whatever decisions were ultimately made. The final thought Steven offered was “you just try to come up with the best case, the best solution to the problem you may have.” Steven’s perspective illustrated the common paradox faced by educators as street-level bureaucrats that, although their work is often highly prescriptive, they are often forced to improvise through the use of discretion, as they work with the individuals they serve (Lipsky, 2010, p. xii). While these decisions are often “satisfactory rather than optimal” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 82), educators are attempting to make the best decisions possible under the circumstances they encounter and the structure of their unique organization.

However, these decisions appeared to align closely with the objectives of the ABR, which parallels Lipsky’s (2010) contention that not every discretionary decision opposes organizational goals. In this case, the goals of the ABR focus on the emotional and physical safety of students, as well as improving school climate. Steven expressed his objective of trying to make the best decisions possible as the opportunity to “try to give [the students] the tools to make better choices.” The overarching ABR policy goal, as well as Steven’s goal as the principal of South Hills and the Anti-Bullying Coordinator for the district, ultimately intersected over what was in the best interest of the students.
Martha  Martha’s approach to discussing the use of discretion was slightly different than Steven’s. Building on her professional training and experience as a school psychologist, Martha laid a solid foundation for explaining any decision points that she encountered in her role as ABS at South Hills. As she discussed her understanding of the ABR process, she maintained a clear alignment with the policy dictates with respect to handling investigations in her capacity as the Anti-Bullying Specialist. In this small school, the physical proximity of Martha and Steven made it easier to directly communicate about HIB matters. According to Martha,

[Steven] makes the decision about whether it’s an HIB or whether it’s a disciplinary and how to proceed based on the nature of the email and the nature of the code. And so he’ll say, ‘I have one on my desk. I’m just going to come to you in the next 24 hours. I would like to interview these two kids first and then...I’ll turn everything over to you.’ And then the folder comes to me.

When directly asked about her need to use discretion in making an investigation-related decision, she adamantly replied, “No. No. That is not part of my role.” Martha was definitive that the decision to investigate was Steven’s responsibility. However, she added, “There’s some gray area, he always, he, he always discusses it with me and we, as a team, decide to go forward.” As a final thought on the subject, Martha said, “We always err on the side of investigation.” The responses that Martha offered to questions about discretion were the shortest that she provided and in direct contrast to her elaboration on school climate improvement issues. It is within this realm that Martha demonstrated an increased willingness and comfort to discuss
her discretionary practices. It is important to keep in mind that the school climate improvement aspects of the HIB policy are not under the same level of scrutiny as the investigative aspects, nor do they have any history of litigation associated with them.

In the context of the ABR, it was necessary to examine the discretionary behaviors of street-level bureaucrats as they sought to implement school climate change, as well as the investigative components. Martha, in her role as school psychologist and the Anti-Bullying Specialist at South Hills, exerted the preponderance of her discretionary capacity in the direction of school climate improvement and she was not nearly as reserved or measured when discussing this topic. Martha provided an additional dimension to the way in which street-level bureaucrats frequently work in systems with inadequate resources and unclear objectives and, therefore, are faced with making certain organizational decisions (Lipsky, 2010).

From her positions as the school psychologist and the ABS, Martha enjoyed some freedom of creative expression in working to improve school climate. This freedom from excessive oversight and fear of litigation, allowed her to develop and implement locally appropriate strategies that worked within the context of South Hills. Martha utilized her discretion toward school climate improvement in various ways: creating a No Hate Club, which actively raised funds to support school-wide bullying prevention efforts; rewarding pro-social behaviors in the cafeteria, a traditional bullying ‘hotspot’; and engaging students in the creation of Public Service Announcements (PSAs) to share prevention strategies and bring awareness to
positive behaviors. There was also a faculty-led Advisory Period focused on character education, which occurred at the end of the school day. Due to the fact that no additional money was available to South Hills for these initiatives, Martha solicited the support of the PTA, who generously included these efforts in their budget. “The PTA has been very generous. I had to come up with my own funding for things, so I’m pleased that I have that relationship in this little, tiny district,” Martha commented.

Martha readily acknowledged, “I could probably do more with the School Safety Team, but we’re such a small school, we don’t fulfill all the, we don’t have as much to do as if we were a larger school.” However, the work towards school climate improvement is clearly evidenced at South Hills in a manner that worked for this local context. Building on the intimate relationships in this small district, Martha developed creative and appropriate strategies for the situation. Martha referred to the School Safety Team as “my own self-created resource,” alluding to the fact that the onus of school climate improvement was laid squarely at the feet of South Hills with little support from policymakers. Although, from her professional perspective, Martha supported the ABR and she understood the need to “step up to the plate,” she added,

Not for quite as much paperwork. Not for quite as many man-hours. We hadn’t anticipated that this would be unpaid and in addition to our already very, very, very full days. But, you know, you do go the extra mile.

What was so poignant about Martha’s description of her school climate improvement activities was that the discussion was absent of any fear of reprisal
from a potential misstep in execution. Freedom from fear allowed her to use her discretion, informed by her professional training, to develop school climate initiatives that worked best for South Hills.

As a street-level bureaucrat, Martha's actions were in step with Weatherly and Lipsky's (1977) contention that faced with a lack of appropriate resources, street-level bureaucrats use discretion “to routinize, ration resources, control uncertainties and define tasks to derive satisfactory solutions to new demands” (p. 194). However, Martha’s actions were also indicative of the ‘civic entrepreneur’ concept that suggests that street-level bureaucrats work to fill the gap left by the breakdown in the organizational structure (Durose, 2011). Filling this gap requires innovation and creativity on the part of the street-level bureaucrat. Importantly, Lipsky (2010) also suggests that not every discretionary decision is contrary to organizational goals. In Martha’s case, it appeared that her actions closely aligned with the spirit of the ABR with respect to improving school climate.

By virtue of their roles in carrying out the ABR mandates, Steven and Martha were both in official positions where using discretion was deemed necessary. Discussion will now turn to the classroom teachers to examine the way in which discretionary practices played a role in their approach to ABR implementation.

**South Hills Staff: Use of Discretion**

*Beth* From early on in the interview, while relating her definition of bullying, Beth reached back to her personal experience to express her understanding of the ABR. Lacking sufficient information about bullying from professional development, Beth took action. She recalled, “We were pretty much
told you have to tell the students what it is. So, I went online to try to find as much as I could.” This additional information was used to supplement her personal experience of her nephew and brother being bullied at South Hills. Woven through her understanding were ideas such as lack of self-esteem, lack of assertiveness, as well as fear, ideas she used to describe the experiences of a victim. Attempts at sense making were evident as Beth used her existing knowledge base and experiences in an effort to interpret and understand conditions in her world (Dewey, 2012; Kolko, 2010; Spillane, 2004; Spillane, et al., 2002; Weick, 2001).

Since the decisions made by street-level bureaucrats often align very closely with organizational goals, Lipsky (2010) suggests that it is not just these decisions that need to be examined, but the mental and organizational process that lead up to them and determine how these individuals cope with the ambiguities of their jobs. The sense making process that Beth engaged in helped her to interpret the demands of the ABR and to integrate new information into her existing schema (Spillane, et al., 2002). This process then informed her discretionary practices because it allowed her to simplify tasks and perceptions (Lipsky, 2010).

Beth made it clear that she always talked to colleagues and considered the background of a student when faced with deciding to report a situation. “But if I ever think, all right, this is bullying, then that’s it. Like, if I even have the feeling of that, I expect it to be, you know, looked at,” she offered. Her use of the word ‘expect’ demonstrated the seriousness with which Beth approached potential bullying situations and this response was very likely based on her personal experience. For Beth, the challenge was taking into account a student’s history because often there
was a relevant back-story. “But in those cases,” Beth continued, “I always, I always put in because I can’t (hesitated), I don’t, I don’t want (hesitated) to be the one who never raised a red flag.” Beth positioned herself as an advocate and a voice for students in times when they may not have their own voice. She never mentioned fear of legal consequences as the driving force behind her actions.

Not only did Beth adhere to the ABR process, she appeared to support the fact that the policy brought legitimacy to an important vehicle for protecting students in school. Beth reported being very comfortable utilizing her discretion because she believed that the policy “makes sense” and was in line with educators’ job responsibilities. With respect to the reporting elements of the policy, Beth admitted, “I think seeing and experiencing everything that I’ve gone through, the policy isn’t that hard to understand and enforce.” Her personal experiences allowed her to easily align with the policy mandates, and therefore, her discretionary practices were in step with organizational goals. Her self-identification as an advocate was stronger than her concern of legal ramifications, although both led to the same outcome.

Beth also demonstrated a strong alignment with organizational goals related to the need for school climate improvement. At several points in the conversation, Beth referred to a perceived ‘disconnect’ between the desire to help bullies and victims and the reality of what was happening at the school. Beth acknowledged, “There is a lot more talking to the students, trying to find the root of what it is. But I don’t think there’s enough resources as a whole to able to completely address it.” Lack of resources in the form of time and staff were specifically mentioned.
However, she commended the attempts to bring character education to the students to help them learn how to deal with certain situations and “[build] up the self-esteem of students.” Advisory Period was mentioned as one way in which character education lessons were brought to the students and Beth reinforced these lessons by weaving them into her social studies classes, another way in which her discretion was exercised.

As a Student Council member, Beth spoke enthusiastically about the activities developed to foster inclusion at the school. Her discretionary practices in this realm appeared to be significantly informed by the past experiences of family members being bullied.

We have our students who are severely autistic. They’re in a resource room. They don’t really leave the room except to do specials. And the student council, combined with that classroom, is having a coffee sale where they’re going around on carts and they’re selling coffee [to the teachers]. Soon they’re going to be selling pretzels to the students, you know, to include them... Help them. Same thing you would want somebody to help you.

From her professional position and in light of her personal experiences, Beth utilized her discretion in ways that she believed would best benefit students in need. While she was adamant about the fact that there is more work to be done, not only was she willing to be proactive, she acknowledged, “The school is starting to do some really good things. We’re getting there.”

Sheila As a new staff member at South Hills, in her first year at the school, Sheila did not have a great deal of familiarity with HIB in general. However, she was
provided with enough training to be aware of the ABR process and her role as an educator. Sheila’s initial response to broaching the subject of using discretion in HIB matters was, “That gets tricky.” As a former high school teacher, Sheila cited the change in grade level, combined with the need to correctly apply the ‘categories’ component of the policy as her biggest challenges. “I think it’s really hard because I think that some people are more tolerant of it,” she added, referring to how individuals respond to potential bullying situations. To clarify and define her position, Shelia reached back and referred to her relationship with her friends growing up, “We would rag on each other... It’s what you let go and what’s appropriate and what should happen in a classroom,” she concluded.

Her approach to handling ambiguity was to “just think about whether it’s school-appropriate or not or whether it’s something you would say to someone who was an adult.” In a questioning tone, Sheila offered the possibility that if a student was not comfortable speaking to an adult in a particular way, “then they shouldn’t say it, I think?” Sheila demonstrated her own individual process of relying on information and ideas that were familiar to her to help her manage and process new information (Spillane, 2004). In this way, Sheila attempted to simplify her perception of the policy to reduce ambiguity and manage the process (Lipsky, 2010).

Sheila indicated that she felt reasonably comfortable using her discretion because, “I know that I’ll report it to Steven and if he sees that my discretion was something that was, you know, like you’re overreacting here, then that’s fine, too. I have no problem with that. I would rather be overreacting than under reacting.”
When confronted with a potential bullying situation, Shelia described how she used classroom management techniques and then she reported it to Steven. After writing up the situation, “he handles it.” Sheila was comfortable reporting situations and relying on Steven to make any HIB-related decisions.

Sheila displayed an increased level of comfort, however, when discussing the use of discretion in proactive ways to enhance school climate in her classroom. During Advisory Period, Sheila noted the freedom “every teacher [has to do] something different.” Sheila personally took advantage of that latitude by designing group projects for students that allowed them to interact with peers who “they may not be as close with.” Shelia suggested “just trying to get the kids to work together in new groups and seeing that they, you know, don’t have to do an individual thing and breaking them out of, I think when bullying happens is when they’re in their comfort zone.” During the October Week of Respect, traditionally the predominant time of year when bullying prevention took center stage at South Hills, Sheila integrated You Tube videos and Ted talks into her programming. Ted videos “really resonate” with this age group. With freedom from reprisals, Sheila was able to find innovative and creative ways to reach students and work to improve her classroom climate.

However, even with this freedom to utilize her discretion, Sheila reflected on the uncertainties that she had about best practices regarding bullying prevention activities. Since South Hills did not use any formal curriculum directed toward bullying prevention, Sheila admitted struggling “to figure out ways I can bring that into just everything that we’re doing in the classroom, from their art projects, you know, to the Advisory Period to just any, you know, structured time I have with
them.” Sheila commented that she, and perhaps most teachers wanted “practical ways that it’s implemented in the classroom, as opposed to understanding the whole of the law.” Specific activities, practical approaches and “actual steps I could take, you know, in a classroom, beyond, you know, putting up a poster that says ‘Be Nice’. What are some...activities that are proven to help not have bullying happen?”

While her commitment and dedication was obvious, Sheila appeared to be searching for answers to how to bring topics such as peer mediation, communication and community building into the classroom. “What, how, how does all that happen? What does it look like?” were questions left hanging in the air at the conclusion of the interview. Sheila appeared to display a desire for both making the abstract more concrete and the ‘wisdom’ that Dewey (2012) suggests is “knowledge operating in the direction of powers to the better living of life” (p. 47). The information that Sheila had received so far had remained wholly abstract and had not bore the fruit of wisdom that is a result of the careful and purposeful cultivation of the reflective thinking process (Dewey, 2012).

Josh As a physical education teacher and a coach in the district, Josh contributed a unique perspective both in the classroom and the locker room. From the beginning of the interview, as he shared his understanding of the ABR process, Josh made it clear that if he witnessed any questionable actions or behaviors, “I would report that to somebody. I would, you know, this is something that happened and I would kind of let, you know, my principal or guidance counselor determine then whether that was really an issue or not.” However, as the interview progressed,
Josh related actual situations he had encountered in which the use of discretion presented him with a decision point.

The use of discretion can be “pretty uncomfortable. It’s difficult.” Josh described how he explained to students, when confronted with a potential HIB situation, “It’s my job. I have to let somebody know about this.” The need to protect himself was paramount in his mind because, “It’s that gray area where you’re afraid that, well, if I don’t report it and then something happens, then that’s going to come back to me.” The fear of being liable for not reporting a situation was clearly in the forefront of Josh’s mind.

However, Josh also reached back to his own childhood experiences to inform his ability to identify a potential bullying situation. From his perspective, a lot of it was “common sense.” He believed that “as an educator you kind of understand situations and what’s happening.” In order to come to this understanding of certain situations, Josh referenced the fact that he worked with South Hills students for multiple years and that helped him to take personalities and histories into consideration. It was necessary “to take all of that stuff that you understand about that student and kind of put it into that situation and decide, ‘Is this something serious?’” Josh’s description of his thought process indicated that there was an inevitable use of discretion in his need to reduce ambiguity and manage the dictates of his job.

Ideally, Josh acknowledged that, as an educator and under the auspices of the ABR, “You’re really supposed to handle every student them same way.” However, there are some students who need to be looked out for if they do not fit in socially.
“If that were my daughter, I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t want her going through that every
day,” he commented. Although treating all students the same is not a realistic or
ideal approach to handling behavioral situations, the mandates of the ABR are not
forgiving.

Ultimately, Josh described the identifying and reporting dilemma as placing
him in “a tough spot.” But he recalled that “when [the ABR] first came out, we were
told, you don’t decide how serious it is. You report it.” Even in locker room
situations, where comments and jokes often run rampant, Josh recalled that even
though he talked to students and addressed inappropriate behavior in the moment,
he still advised his principal of the incident. With potential legal consequences at
stake, Josh continued to adhere to this mandate, even if his professional instincts
suggested that another approach might better remediate the situation. The use of
discretion, as a professional educator, was carefully considered and tempered under
the specific circumstances of the ABR.

When Josh was able to safely use discretion to remediate a situation and take
advantage of a teachable moment, he did so. He recounted how he attempted to
teach students tolerance and acceptance of various skill levels by weaving them into
his physical education classes. In physical education,

We try to make an even playing ground for the whole entire class...some
students in middle school don’t know how to handle that very well because
they’re so competitive...that’s where you can see some intimidation taking
part, where they’ll say things to another student.
In a situation such as this, Josh referred to how he wanted his daughter to be treated to inform his actions. He commented, “I would want something to be done about it.” Using this frame of reference, Josh took the opportunity to address situations in his class while simultaneously facilitating a learning opportunity for students. In this way, Josh utilized his discretion in a professional manner to educate students on a social-emotional level. Not all staff took advantage of opportunities such as this. According to Josh, some staff were comfortable just reporting situations and letting them go, while others chose to remediate, as well as report.

Josh indicated that he was interested in having more tools to better identify and address potential bullying situations. More knowledge could potentially give him the opportunity to utilize his discretionary ability more effectively and appropriately.

It’s funny cause they talk about it in, for us in our classrooms, differentiated learning and to use all these role-playing and skits and stuff like that. To see something like that, like an actual situation that is happening with Student A and Student B. Cause it’s stuff that I would do in my Character Ed in my Advisory Group...As a teacher, that would be interesting to see, how a teacher should deal with that situation. You know, here we are teaching kids how to deal with the situation, but nobody’s teaching us as teachers how to deal with the situation.

As a professional educator, Josh had a desire to have more tools so he knew what to look for in certain situations. If he had a better understanding of how to diffuse a situation, he might be able to “stop it and address if before it gets to that point
where something might happen.” Josh voiced his interest in having “an in-service
where students could explain to us what they want us to do” in potential bullying
situations. Minimal professional development for staff gave rise to a wide range of
educator responses at South Hills because “every teacher handles it in a different
way.” More information and direction for staff could potentially reduce some of the
ambiguity educators faced and allow for a more streamlined and effective approach
to bullying intervention and prevention strategies.

This discussion now turns to the educators at Central Valley Middle School to
examine the way in which these street-level bureaucrats utilized their discretion
related to ABR implementation. First, Harry, Dan and Bruce as the ABR
administrators will be considered and then the discussion will turn to Rachel and
Jeff, the staff participants at this site.

**Discretion at Central Valley Middle School**

The discussion of discretion was a subject that was approached with caution
during the interviews with Central Valley participants, as well as those at South
Hills. Initial interview questions about the ABR process allowed the participants to
lead the conversation into that territory themselves before a direct line of
questioning was used. Discretionary practices were woven throughout the fabric of
the work at both the administrative and staff levels at Central Valley and in step
with Lipsky’s (2010) contention that street-level bureaucrats work to bridge the gap
between mandated policies and what they need to do their job. To gain a closer
perspective on how the use of discretion manifested itself at Central Valley, with
respect to the ABR, this chapter will now look in-depth at each individual study participant at this site.

**Central Valley Administrators: The Use of Discretion**

The use of discretion by Central Valley administrators was seen as both a necessary and accepted part of their jobs. However, the comfort level with this responsibility appeared to be in direct proportion to the individual’s depth of knowledge and understanding of the ABR policy. The Central Valley administrators had also adopted a method of, what they coined, ‘triage’ to help them more efficiently and effectively manage the mandates of the ABR.

*Harry*  Within the beginning minutes of the interview, as he described the way in which he came to an understanding of bullying, Harry, the principal, shared that the 2010 ABR had provided a means to help educators more effectively identify bullying behavior. It was during this response that Harry acknowledged, “We’ve been able to triage a lot better at the classroom level; triage a lot better at the specialist level and at my level,” as a result of the ABR. This was the first time that the word ‘triage’ was used during the Central Valley interviews. But it would not be the last and so it requires some elaboration.

It is interesting that the practice of ‘triage’ was used to describe how educators at Central Valley attempted to manage the requirements of the ABR. ‘Triage,’ according to Merriam-Webster, is a medical term for the process of deciding which patients should be treated first based on how sick or seriously injured they are. The term is further defined, in a non-medical sense, as the assignment of priority order to projects based on where funds and other resources
can be best used, are most needed or are most likely to achieve success (Merriam-Webster, 2015). With this definition in mind, it is an interesting word choice to frame a discussion of street-level bureaucrats’ use of discretion. The ‘triage’ concept eerily resonates with Lipsky’s (2010) suggestion that the use of discretion by street-level bureaucrats is an attempt to make the best decisions possible under the circumstances they encounter. Triage is a particularly apt term to describe the process that Central Valley educators engaged in.

Harry elaborated that the triage process was something that evolved at Central Valley as a coping mechanism. Making decisions and adjustments within the local context in order to cope with uncertain and unsupportive environments is the foundational definition of how street-level bureaucrats operate (Lipsky, 2010). The first year of the ABR, “everything got referred. I mean everything” because “educators at the implementation level, the classroom level, were petrified.” As a result of developing a triage process, whereby “we can identify more clearly if it’s truly a conflict...or bullying,” Central Valley was able to significantly reduce the number of cases referred for investigation.

Through the training that Harry and Bruce, the original ABS, conducted, staff was provided with clear and specific instructions on how to apply the State standards to potential bullying situations. Harry emphasized the fact that if a “child feels a specific way, that needs to be referred.” The driving force in the referral of these issues was how the child felt and this “needs to drive their decision.” As principal, Harry appeared to be confident in, not only his ability to train staff, but in
the staff’s ability to make the best decisions possible, ultimately empowering them to utilize their discretion.

Harry and Bruce tweaked State-level training materials to fit the middle school model, but remained true to the “standard New Jersey Department of Education-type presentation.” During training, Harry relayed to staff the need for them “to use their judgment...their best judgment.” Whenever they were unsure, they were encouraged to refer the situation. But Harry had sufficient confidence in his staff to allow them to “deal with it at their level” based on their knowledge of what was in the policy and the training they were provided. The confidence that Harry demonstrated appeared to be a direct result of the time and effort that he put in to his own understanding of the policy, as well as his ability to transfer the information to others. The staff’s use of discretion was viewed as, not only a necessary endeavor, but one that was carefully supported and strengthened by this administrator’s use of available resources.

There was, however, concern over the lack of time that was available to conduct more interactive training with staff. According to Harry, “Time is a big killer.” He acknowledged that his “presentations have been less interactive and less lively than I would like.” He expressed the desire to be able to have staff participate in skits and other more engaging activities. Lack of time and a “tricky collective bargaining agreement” have forced Harry to deliver training in “compact sessions.” Sometimes, he admitted, because he had to “pick and choose,” he had to “chip away time from HIB to give it to math and language arts articulation.” According to Dewey, (2012), “time is required in order to digest impressions and translate them
into substantial ideas” (p. 34). An absence of “time and leisure” can lead to “snapshot and superficial judgments” and is in opposition to a quality approach to the training of the mind (Dewey, 2012, p. 34).

When Harry was asked direct questions about his personal use of discretion in HIB matters, responses were short and to the point. With the potential for litigation always a concern, Harry carefully chose his words and his responses. He was clear, “I make decisions based on evidence.” With sufficient evidence, investigations moved forward. Harry’s knowledge of the policy, and the work that he invested in understanding his role as principal, appeared to have bolstered his confidence. However his comfort level with the use of his discretion was also attributed, in part, to technology. He shared that not many verbal bullying situations presented themselves “because the kids are all on Instagram and Facebook and Snapchat.” Social media allowed for quicker interventions and decision-making due to the visual evidence that was produced via these outlets. “Because the data’s all in front of us,” in many instances interviews were unnecessary. As the principal, tasked with making the determination if a situation rose to the level of HIB and required an investigation, Harry was very methodical and systematic in his reliance on policy definitions and solid evidence.

There were other ways, outside of the investigative context of the ABR, that Harry used discretionary practices. Harry described how the policy allowed Central Valley to improve its efforts and “be much more specific relative to the data.” Data was used with the students themselves, in an “intentional” way by providing them with “alternatives, outlets, consequences relative to their behavior.” Harry appeared
to work with the specific HIB data generated at Central Valley and within the specific localized context, to inform bullying prevention efforts. Citing the ethnic diversity of Central Valley as “our flagship,” Harry described the mandates of the ABR as an opportunity to “celebrate that” and “dovetail into the HIB discussions and our efforts to, to combat bullying.” In an empowering fashion, Harry explained how he was able to share with students what the data revealed about their group and inform the way in which they had progressed. In an effort to avoid working from “an ivory tower,” Harry described how educators at Central Valley strove to, not only help students to understand the law, but also to understand themselves and each other. It was important that he showed them, “This is not my data. This is our data and we all kind of have to own it.” The idea of ‘civic entrepreneurship’ is evident here as Harry used innovation and creativity to bring meaning and purpose to the ABR policy for his students.

Other efforts at the use of discretionary innovation to further the spirit of the ABR included Advisory Period, which originally began as an effort at disabilities awareness. At the time of this interview, Advisory Period was used to “tie HIB and respect” into the school climate improvement initiative. Harkening back to the lack of time, Harry indicated that it was this challenge, more so than the absence of additional monies, which hindered additional climate improvement work. With additional time and supervision, Harry envisioned the ability to create a “confessional room” for the production of video artifacts for the support of the bullying victim. There appeared to be no shortage of creative ideas “that really don’t cost too much.” Lack of time operated as a barrier that prevented educators from
exercising innovative and creative powers in ways that could potentially enhance student well being and achievement, while simultaneously remaining true to the spirit of the ABR.

*Bruce* The conversation with Bruce, the original ABS at Central Valley, began with his description of being “thrown into the fire and we had to get to know [the policy].” Discouragement prevailed because “we were all on the clock for it without knowing anything about it...it was effective before we had the knowledge.” Under these circumstances “that made those first cases tricky” and precipitated the need to find a way to manage the mandate. Early on in the interview, Bruce twice mentioned a gentleman at the State-level who “spoke and that got me started.” But Bruce did not elaborate on this comment until well into the discussion. Eventually, Bruce talked about the way in which Central Valley had been able to effectively “cut down on frivolous cases and some of the hysteria.” After describing the “first month and a half of school that first year” as “just awful,” he offered an explanation as to how a degree of manageability was achieved.

At one point, early in that first year, Central Valley led the county in the number of referrals. The thinking was “it’s because people were, you know, CYA.” It was at this point in the interview that Bruce shared the one word that offered relief. Reliable. The gentleman at the State “didn’t come out and say this,” but the take away was, “there’s your window to triage.” In section C. 18A: 37-16b of P.L. 2010, Chapter 122, the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, it states,

> A member of a board of education, school employee, contracted service provider, student or volunteer who has witnessed, or has reliable
information that a student has been subjected to harassment, intimidation or bullying shall report the incident to the appropriate school official designated by the school district’s policy, or to any school administrator or safe schools resource officer, who shall immediately initiate the school district’s procedures concerning school bullying (p. 10).

This one-word window allowed Bruce and the other ABR administrators to take into account normal middle school behavior, as well as the source of the reporting. Once ‘reliable’ information was received, then an investigation needed to move forward.

“We found a way to kind of use that to our advantage to kind of find out what’s going on before we roll with the paperwork, you know. It’s a little tricky, but there’s a way to do it,” Bruce admitted.

To illustrate the way in which this triage process worked, leaning on the word ‘reliable’, Bruce first provided an educator example.

I had someone who wrote up one kid for bullying, a girl for bullying a boy.

Then she wrote up the boy for bullying the girl. Same two kids. Wrote me two cases in one day. And I’m like, see, this is conflict. That’s not bullying. If he’s saying stuff back to her (laughter), he’s not being bullied. He’s retaliating.

Victims don’t retaliate in bullying. That’s what makes it bullying.

This ability to “sniff a little bit” and “snoop around” before triggering an investigation provided an outlet to manage the ABR requirements. However, Bruce was clear that “if we snoop around and we start to see where there’s smoke there’s fire, then we move.” Bruce provided another example from the student perspective.
They come in with their phones all the time. ’Look what so and so is saying.’
Then I look and all I see are their comments. Where are your comments? And
then they start dancing, you know, because what they’ve done is deleted their
own statements to make it look one-sided and I don’t buy that. I don’t buy
that.

Bruce acknowledged the importance of treading lightly “because you could read the
law one way and say, the minute someone utters that word, you’ve got to jump.” But
the gentleman from the State provided an extremely important one-word window
that allowed Central Valley to create a triage process, without which, Bruce
suggested, “I never would have left my office for two straight years.” As a street-
level bureaucrat, attempting to make sense of the ABR, Bruce identified a way to
manage the ambiguities within the ABR and transform them into understandable
and predictable messages for him and the staff (Lipsky, 2010; Weick, 2001).

Real-world experience and taking the initiative to understand and make
sense of the ABR are what gave Bruce the confidence to use discretion to triage
situations. While his “gut feeling” was often a driving force in his decision-making,
his thought process appeared to be enhanced by the efforts he made to bring
concrete meaning to an abstract concept. The self-created forms, checklists, scales
and equations referenced in the preceding chapter, combined with the reading and
research Bruce engaged in helped with “his lack of background in the field” and
allowed him to “justify the decision[s]” he made. The thinking of both Lipsky (2010)
and Weick (1995) intersect in this area of justification where individuals attempt to
make the best or most plausible decisions based on the circumstances.
Bruce also engaged in a thought process that struck a balance between the use of abstract and concrete thinking. According to Dewey (2012), a person who successfully achieves this balance “is of a higher order than he who possesses only one,” (p. 131). Although every individual has the capability for both abstract and concrete thought, Bruce took the time and initiative to meld them together. Dewey (2012) believes it is possible for individuals to “be more effective and happier if both powers are developed in easy and close interaction with each other,” (p. 133). While there was often an insufficient amount of time allocated for staff to engage in this balanced interaction, Bruce effectively filtered his increased knowledge to them through the training and professional development that he provided.

Since the State did not provide any formal triage process within the legislation, Central Valley administrators were forced to develop their own methods. Bruce suggested, “There should be a little bit more trust placed on the professionals in the school, to again, triage. Give them an official window to examine a case and then move forward.” Bruce admitted that most likely, given this latitude, some “schools would sweep [situations] under the rug.” However, based on interactions he had with colleagues in other districts, he offered, “I guarantee you, that’s going on anyway.” A friend in a wealthy district confided in him, “Every parent’s got their attorney on speed dial.” At Central Valley, the fear of “being on the hook for something” caused Bruce to dedicate tremendous time and effort to the sense making process, which yielded a plausible and acceptable triage process.

The lack of trust in the professional decision-making abilities of educators was “very frustrating, you know. It’s more work for you. You put the kids through it.
You put the parents through it unnecessarily.” The “lack of nuts and bolts” and the absence of “concrete answers” offered during DOE sessions and at the Rutgers Bullying Prevention Institute added to the frustration.

We didn’t write the law, you know. How about someone give us some answers? So it made the law seem like a knee jerk reaction that was just thrown out there to look good. It cheapened it, in my opinion. Not that it hasn’t done some good. It has. But, you know, it could be tighter. It could be tighter.

Without adequate resources and supports to aid in the sense making process, Bruce and the Central Valley administrators creatively developed a triage process to help them manage and routinize their work and operate with the structural confines of their organization. In line with previous research in this area, Bruce, as a street-level bureaucrat, sought a way to implement the ABR policy working with scarce resources, little training and lack of clear direction (Kelly, 1994; Riccucci, 2005; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

Clearly, as the first ABS at Central Valley, Bruce’s efforts were dedicated to adequately understanding and implementing the reporting and investigating components of the ABR in an effort to avoid legal backlash. Little time was available for him, in the early days of the law, to consider proactive initiatives. However, he did describe several ways in which Central Valley had creatively attended to this aspect of the ABR and utilized local and national resources in the years since the passage of the law.
Central Valley participated with the national non-profit, Rachel’s Challenge, a foundation dedicated to honoring the memory of Rachel Scott, the first victim of the Columbine tragedy. Rachel’s Challenge is an organization focused on enhancing the safety and connections in school environments to maximize the learning of the entire community. Central Valley also tapped locally available resources such as Eric Le Grande, the Rutgers football player turned motivational speaker, who was paralyzed during a game. Homegrown talent from within Central Valley also contributed to the improvement of school climate. Bruce mentioned a particular Student Assistance Counselor who “is a phenomenal musician and he brought in some friends [and they] weaved kind of a message throughout the program about bullying and things like that.” The spirit of ‘civic entrepreneurship’ (Durose, 2011) was alive and well at Central Valley, as educators worked within their unique organizational structure to align with the ABR mandates.

Dan Dan, the second educator to assume the ABS role at Central Valley, presented a unique perspective on the use of discretion because he was less than a year removed from his role as a classroom teacher. He brought to light the fact that his training, upon assuming the ABS title, was provided primarily by Bruce and other district personnel. “I don't get much professional development for me,” he commented. He expressed concern that “the law is very complex with the wording and all, very legal jargon” and it would have been helpful if he had been directed to an outside resource that could have “simplified it.” He questioned why there was no certification process for becoming an ABS as there was in other areas of education. “Every job usually has some sort of certification, some kind of test you take,” he
noted. “I am definitely certified to teach math. I am certified to be an administrator,” he offered. But in the absence of a sufficient level of preparation, Dan admitted that he was “very uncomfortable” being the determining factor of whether a situation rose to the level of HIB. He indicated that having some sort of basic coursework to complete “would have eased my comfort level initially.”

Dan struggled with being put in the position of determining “how someone could feel.” “It’s very difficult cause at times you’re not sure,” he added. In those cases, “where you have to decide what affect this [had] on the person...it’s a very unfair task.” However, supported by Bruce and the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator, Dan said he eventually got to the place where he felt,

Very comfortable with what I’m doing, you know, I’m adhering to the law. I’m adhering to the policies. So I mean pretty much a lot of it is just checks and balances. Make sure you’re doing your job as an HIB Specialist. That’s what I think a lot of this documentation is for. Just make sure you’re doing your job.

Dan’s primary understanding of his role, and therefore the driving force behind his use of discretion, appeared to be procedurally focused.

Dan, however, was not left to make decisions on his own. He cited the fact that Harry, the principal, was “ultimately responsible for what goes on here, but I give my input.” Dan admitted that he “would have been scared. Beyond scared,” if he had not been supported by Bruce who was his “mentor for the process for the first two months.” Over time, Dan learned that when he focused on “what is best for the kids...[he feels] comfortable with [his] decision.”
There is a marked difference in the depth of understanding that Bruce and Dan have about the ABR. While both expressed the primary need to be in step with the policy, Dan’s level of understanding appeared to be stalled at a surface level. According to Dewey (2012), “the depth to which a sense of the problem, of the difficulty, sinks determines the quality of thinking that follows,” (p. 34). Dan lacked a degree of depth sufficient to lead to any kind of pedagogical shift. This contrast appeared to be a direct result of the differing amounts of professional development opportunities afforded to him and Bruce. Ultimately, Dan viewed the overall emphasis at Central Valley as being focused on the reactive components of the ABR, “making sure credible information is provided that there might be an HIB matter.” Dan spoke briefly about some of the proactive bullying prevention efforts at Central Valley, but provided limited insight into this area of ABR focus.

Dan spoke about Advisory Period and character education initiatives as being proactive outlets for discussing self-esteem and bullying issues with students. To Dan, the School Safety Team was a vehicle for educating staff and parents, sharing data and discussing ways to create a “sense of safety in the school.” Dan received input and feedback from the Team. He made sure that they “know what we are doing and that’s my role with the School Safety Team. Every school has to have one.” While Dan utilized the team to discuss issues of school safety, there appeared to be minimal understanding that the ABR intended for this team to take an active role in school climate improvement. From Dan’s perspective, he believed,

The 2010 Bill of Rights, I think, lays out more what the district is responsible for...It forces the districts to document what you are actually doing with all
the forms, all the documentation. What did you do to address this concern of a possible HIB matter with the individual? So, I think it forces the district to allocate more resources to it, to prove they have these modifications pre and post-situation and it’s, you know, checks and balances for the school and the district and the State.

There was no evidence that Dan exerted any discretion in the direction of improving school climate. However, it was not surprising that Dan’s focus was primarily on the reporting and documenting of incidents. First of all, his role as a Dean was a disciplinary role. The ABS title was added on top of this position. Central Valley, being a large suburban school, had the luxury of Dean positions to attend to disciplinary issues while the Guidance Counselors attended to the proactive school climate issues. Second, Dan was limited in the amount of professional development offered to him to help him adequately make sense of the ABR in its totality. The structure of the school, in addition to lack of professional development, appeared to limit the depth of Dan’s sense making ability and this, in turn, impacted the way in which he exercised his discretionary abilities.

**Central Valley Staff: Use of Discretion**

Rachel as a Guidance Counselor and head of the Advisory Committee and Jeff as a classroom teacher and coach provided two different and important staff perspectives on the use of discretion. These two educators shared the fact that they did not have a specific title within the ABR, but they differed in the nature and level of classroom responsibilities. Both were also cautious and measured when
discussing the use of discretion as it related to the reporting of potential bullying situations.

Rachel Rachel was at an interesting juxtaposition to Dan because of her role as a Guidance Counselor and the head of the Advisory Committee at Central Valley. From this perspective, Rachel was much more focused on the proactive components of the ABR that dealt with school climate issues. When speaking about the use of discretion, Rachel exhibited much more freedom discussing programs and initiatives then she did talking about the reporting of potential bullying situations.

Early on in the interview, Rachel made a point to explain the way staff training was handled at Central Valley. She described how “everything was pretty outlined by the principal and the Bullying Specialist (Bruce) about how they wanted to handle [situations] and a lot of what’s the difference between bullying and like, just conflict.” Even though training focused on how to differentiate between the two, Rachel was adamant that staff “still have to report everything that the kid tells you and let the House Center and the Bullying Specialist figure out if it’s HIB or not.”

Rachel, as a member of a House Center, was certain that she was never going to “deal with it by myself,” because there were always people to talk to. She was clear on her role and that “it wasn’t going to be me who was going to decide” if it was a bullying situation.

Rachel also provided some insight into the staff’s understanding of their role and use of discretion. She admitted that in the beginning, when the ABR first went into effect, “people weren’t sure and they were going to report everything” because “it was a lot to take on.” Some of the over-reporting Rachel attributed to the fact that
“we’re always just stressing with, with all the different things that, you know, the bullying, the you know abuse.” In Rachel’s opinion, competing priorities and the stress that resulted led staff to report anything that raised the smallest doubt. Ultimately, Rachel’s impression was that “the teachers know, you know. When they’re unsure, just report it...they refer everything to us anyway.” Rachel appeared very eager to convey that she and the staff were aware that they were not expected to make decisions in these matters and this brought a sense of relief knowing the ABR officers were the ones who were tasked with this responsibility. When the discussion turned to the proactive climate improvement initiatives at Central Valley, Rachel exhibited a more relaxed demeanor and a more confident tone.

As head of the Advisory Committee, Rachel was given significant latitude in suggesting programming and deciding how Advisory lessons were structured. The Advisory program started prior to the 2010 ABR as the result of a Rutgers University grant, the Inclusive School Climate Initiative. Money from this grant was used to buy supplies to support disabilities awareness at Central Valley. The program was deemed so successful that Central Valley continued the program post-grant and transitioned it into a character education program. Through the Advisory program, Rachel and her committee worked to “hook everything in...with bullying” because “it all kind of goes together.”

While Rachel acknowledged that the “administration somewhat dictates what they want those themes to be...they give me the freedom to...throw things in.” She described one of her ideas during the October Week of Respect that was extremely well received by the students.
We showed a video. The kids loved it. I think cause it was something
different...it was one where the kids have words written on their face and it
was very powerful. The kids really liked it. We had a huge follow-up...like
more of a discussion instead of fill in the worksheet...We talked about all the
different parts of bullying and they, the kids, really liked it cause we asked for
feedback from them, from the staff, after each lesson.

The video, featuring students, was set to a song by the band Cold Play. The messages
that were imprinted across the faces of these students shifted from behaviors and
feelings that described bullying to a message of “what you can do to help a kid who’s
struggling.” From Rachel’s perspective, “it was just something that this age group
would like and they ended up really liking it.” Rachel was able to use her discretion
and her professional training to find a You Tube video that was relevant and
meaningful for Central Valley students. Harry, the principal, was supportive of the
idea, gave his approval and it turned out to be “a big day...a big message for the
kids.” This example demonstrated that when educators are free to use discretion,
informed by their professional training, they have the capacity to access locally
appropriate ways to address the needs of their school community. Uninhibited by
fear of legal consequences or other ramifications, Rachel, in the spirit of ‘civic
entrepreneurship,’ (Durose, 2011) appropriately and effectively channeled the
power of her position in an effort to contribute to the school climate improvement
component of the ABR.

**Jeff** As the only current classroom teacher interviewed at Central Valley, Jeff
offered a slightly different perspective on the use of discretion. He did not
voluntarily offer any insight into the topic until directly asked about it. As the final participant interviewed and in apparent anticipation of this line of questioning, Jeff was very clear that he did not have a problem speaking up when he encountered a situation that might fall under the definition of bullying. He firmly stated, “now, specifically, in an age of lawsuits and an age of blaming someone for something,” he was extremely conscious of the reporting process. “Unfortunately, as a teacher, you can keep your discretion if you want to, but I would rather keep my job and what I love to do,” he added.

However, as the interview progressed, Jeff shared that there were times when he was faced with using his “professional judgment” or “professional opinion” because “it’s middle school. There’s a lot of factors.” Jeff used an example to illustrate.

I can tell from the reaction of Student Two to what was said that it impacted them. I can see it and here’s the thing the student did, the body language that I observed from that child that tells me, I need to tell you I think it’s this. [However,] if it were two friends and I know that they’re friends and they sit together at lunch and they hang out and they’re on the same team and they’re just having that little banter back and forth and you can tell if the one kid smiles, ... then I have to use professional judgment.

In a situation where Jeff observed a student being impacted by a comment or a behavior, he would make sure to share the incident with the appropriate people, based on what he directly observed and his understanding of bullying. If his professional judgment led him to the conclusion that the incident was mutual and
between friends, more like conflict, he “might say, in passing,” to the appropriate people, what occurred. It appeared that Jeff relied heavily on the training that he received from Harry and Bruce in distinguishing between bullying and conflict to support his professional judgment in these types of situations. “They have to trust the teacher’s opinion,” Jeff explained. However, Jeff stood by his belief, “when in doubt, just push it on to the person whose job it is to determine. I just send it off and let them deal with it.”

Jeff explained that there is always so much that goes into trying to understand the social interactions of middle school kids. There are “so many little nuances” and not everything is “cut and dry.” He expressed frustration at the fact that “some people, who don’t work in the profession...don’t take into account the million factors of children’s lives.” Educators constantly faced the challenge of “so many different things that go on that you are trying to put it together and you always ask, okay, is that something that is or is not bullying?” For Jeff, it always circled back to trusting his instincts “as a professional and as a teacher of many years and as just a person.” Lipsky (2010) suggests that in the absence of needed resources, street-level bureaucrats sometimes may infuse personal biases into the decision-making process in an attempt to preserve their self-concept and their belief in their own competence. However, Jeff was quick to add that he was “going to make sure that I document [situations] in whatever way. Just so that it’s covered.” While Jeff considered himself a committed professional, capable of using his discretion, under the conditions of the ABR, he was always going to make sure that he took appropriate action to protect himself.
While Jeff believed that the staff had a basic understanding of what was expected of them under the ABR, he was not confident that there was a consistent level of understanding. He commented that, “if you understood what it was, then you wouldn’t have to be reminded over and over again.” Jeff suggested, “I think we need to continue to remind staff members that you shouldn’t always determine” whether a situation is important enough to mention. Although staff “understands what needs to be done,” there is always the unknown aspect of what is actually going on in each classroom. Jeff, however, appreciated the fact that, as a result of the ABR and the professional development he received, “there’s clarity as to what is expected” and that makes it a lot easier because it just becomes part of your routine, you know.” As a street-level bureaucrat, Jeff appeared to appreciate the efforts made by administration to simplify his work and provide him with a more manageable routine (Lipsky, 2010).

Although Jeff did run an Advisory group, Rachel and the Advisory Committee planned the lessons. Any discretion Jeff used in this process would have occurred during these sessions and was not brought forth in this conversation. What was interesting, however, were Jeff’s comments about what, in his opinion, might support his understanding of the ABR and it’s mandates. He mentioned that he would like to “see what other schools are doing. You know, what programs are they pulling in and maybe we should adopt those, too.” From his perspective, “the more information and more choices you have, the better equipped to, you know, have an arsenal of things.” Having conversations with other schools and districts was something that Jeff believed would give him better depth of understanding of how to
approach the subject of bullying with students. Armed with additional information, in the form of human, social and material resources, Jeff might have the opportunity to utilize his discretion in a more informed way during Advisory periods. Transforming knowledge into wisdom (Dewey, 2012) could potentially advance the school climate improvement initiatives. In a similar fashion to the educators at South Hills, Jeff appeared to have an organic interest in and hunger for more information and more access to professionals outside the walls of Central Valley to better inform his practice.

Summary

Discretionary practices were evident at both the administrator and staff levels at South Hills and Central Valley. While the use of discretion has long since been identified as an inevitable component of the work of street-level bureaucrats (Durose, 2011; Kelly, 1994; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Maynard-Moody, Musheno & Palumbo, 1990; Riccucci, 2005; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977), the use of the word, in connection with the implementation of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, engendered a certain degree of trepidation from the educators. The hesitancy in discussing the use of discretion related to this policy was evidenced by responses that were short, evasive or directly deferred to policy when the word was interjected into the conversation. Under normal conditions, educators use discretion in their daily activities to manage chaotic environments, reduce ambiguity and enhance the services they provide to students. Faced with a lack of resources, human, social and material, which have been identified as influencing the sense
making process, (Coburn, 2001; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1999), the door was left open for the use of discretionary practices.

The fact that the ABR was legislatively mandated and carries potential legal ramifications for non-compliance created reluctance at the local school site level to speak in-depth about discretion. However, its use, as a necessary part of the work of street-level bureaucrats, was nevertheless present and came through in the interviews as a natural part of the discussion.

South Hills, as a small school, used its context-specific human, social and material resources to find ways to best manage the ABR process. Due to its size, South Hills did not have many bullying incidents reported. Often, they were able to address situations before they escalated. Discretion was used when considering the specific nature of a potential bullying situation and the students involved. Longstanding relationships with students and families, in concert with in-depth knowledge of the students, were the central driving forces in the way that ambiguity was managed.

At Central Valley, a much larger school, the ‘triage’ process was clearly an attempt to manage the chaos and uncertainty that the ABR policy created there. Bruce and Harry walked a tightrope between simplifying the ABR process and adhering to legal mandates. They both effectively utilized the human, social and material resources available to them to come to a solid understanding of the policy and then effectively transmitted that knowledge to staff. Their process included taking the time to make an abstract concept concrete and engaging in a thoughtful process of reflection. According to Dewey (2012), this process allowed both Bruce
and Harry to take information and transform it into wisdom, which “is the finest fruit of that training” (p. 47).

Although educators made a point to downplay the use of discretionary practices when specifically discussing the reporting and investigating components of the ABR, there was a marked change in their demeanor when educators spoke about the use of discretion in building a positive school climate. Unencumbered by direct legal mandates and free to use their professional expertise, educators at both South Hills and Central Valley, demonstrated the spirit of ‘civic entrepreneurship,’ which Durose (2011) suggests fills the gap when there is a breakdown in the organizational structure. What resulted was the opportunity for these street-level bureaucrats to exercise creativity and innovation in their local context in the area of school climate improvement.

Informed by local context, South Hills and Central Valley administrators attempted to use discretionary practices to reduce some of the ambiguity for staff and students to lessen the disruption to their normal routine. Each school was cognizant of the seriousness of the law and was mindful to keep the use of discretion within the confines of the policy with respect to the reporting and investigation procedures. However, when given the opportunity to put creativity and innovation into play on school climate improvement initiatives, educators at both schools acted as citizen-agents who worked to best meet the needs of students within the confines of their organizational structure (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000).

While there was a prevailing sense of frustration among educators at South Hills and Central Valley because of the added responsibilities the ABR process
required, there was also some surprising support for the policy. The final data chapter examines the educators’ perspectives about the intent of the policy and some of the benefits that they believed were a result of this legislation.
Chapter 6:

The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights: “Teeth and Claws”

**Introduction**

The previous two data chapters addressed findings related to the organizational sense making process and the role of street-level bureaucrats in this process. In this final data chapter, the educators’ perceptions of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights and some of its effects on South Hills and Central Valley will be examined. While obvious challenges to this legislation were brought forward in the previous chapters, some beneficial outgrowths of the policy emerged upon going deeper into the experiences of the two middles schools at the center of this dissertation.

The 2013 Interim Report submitted by the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force reported,

Focus group feedback, survey responses and the EVVRS data revealed a positive response to the intent of the ABR, particularly related to promoting respectful behavior and a positive school climate. Specifically, focus group feedback and survey comments disclosed that the ABR was successful in heightening awareness of and the need to more adequately address bullying behavior in schools. (Interim Report, 2013, p. 11)

The findings of increased awareness and the need to do more were supported by this current research. However, in individual conversations with the educators in this study, insight was gained detailing the ways in which this awareness may be contributing to the development of a stronger school community by encouraging
conversations among all stakeholders, as well as some of the work that remains to be done.

The ABR requires enhanced communication at multiple levels of the organization. This mandate promoted an increase in overall awareness. Enhanced communication led to opportunities for deeper understanding of bullying behavior and the need for change. Previous data chapters discussed the importance of communication in the sense making process. Awareness was a critical first step in this process that had the potential to bring forth deeper levels of understanding through broader communication channels. This data chapter examines how the educators at South Hills Middle School and Central Valley Middle School experienced the ABR and the perceived benefits reaped by each site as a result of the law. Some lingering challenges are also presented. By virtue of the differences in size, culture and contexts of South Hills and Central Valley, each site presented with variations in this area.

**South Hills Administrators: Awareness and Its Implications**

In the interviews with the South Hills administrators, Steven and Martha, both spoke about the ways in which the ABR had increased the level of communication with a variety of stakeholders. Awareness and communication not only increased within the school, throughout the district and across professional communities, educators reported an increase in parental awareness by virtue of the improved communication in this small district.
Staff, Students and Professional Communities

As administrators, tasked with carrying out the dictates of the ABR, Steven and Martha both spoke with heightened awareness of the parameters of the law and what their roles were in facilitating the process. Both noted the increased communication with their colleagues, internally and externally, in an effort to make sure HIB-related decisions were as accurate as possible. Steven acknowledged that he “may speak with our Superintendent…or speak with the principal at the elementary school” in an effort to get another opinion. The motivating factor was litigation because it was “any district’s worst nightmare.” However, this fear ultimately prompted him to seek out information when faced with a situation and to ask staff to “alert me to any concerns you may have.” Steven also commented, “it was interesting going through that [State] self-evaluation process and communicating with the stakeholders to see, alright, what do we need to do.” Another opportunity to stretch the boundaries of communication presented itself as a result of the reporting component of the legislation.

Martha shared not only how she and Steven “work really closely on these things” and have “just excellent communication,” but how the PTA members on the School Safety Team helped her to “identify patterns” of HIB and how her professional association in NJASP helped her to “see how other people in other districts are doing it.” This increased dialogue that Steven and Martha found themselves participating in was important in facilitating deeper understanding. As Steven suggested, “There’s an awareness now and it’s going to take awhile for that
culture to change.” But with this awareness, a dialogue began that was significant in contributing to how educators came to make sense of the ABR.

As a result of the mandatory training, both staff and students became aware of the ABR and its process. Martha, as one of the providers of staff training, shared the reality that, “it opens a dialogue so I prefer to do the training.” In this capacity, Martha fielded questions and concerns from staff about issues specific to South Hills and encouraged continued dialogue on the subject. Steven was responsible for conducting the training of students, which he did via classroom visits and Power Point presentations. In his opinion, the “kids are aware of it…I think the kids are aware of what to do if they see something that’s wrong. But I think that they’re more well-versed in what not to say.” Steven’s comment left the impression that while kids may be learning what not to say, there was still more work to be done on building a culture where kindness, tolerance and respect was experienced as the norm.

Steven also encouraged staff to communicate directly with him about the referral process. If a staff member lacked clarity about what constituted HIB, Steven helped provide clarification. At times, Steven encouraged communication between staff, students and parents in an effort to remediate situations that may not have risen to the level of HIB, but that still needed to be addressed. Even though the intent of the ABR, from Steven’s perspective, was “CYA and everything else at the same time,” opportunities for partnership and dialogue appeared to be additional outgrowths of the law.
Both Steven and Martha mentioned ways in which the School Safety Team had been utilized as a vehicle for information sharing. Steven was honest about the “struggle with having parents on that [team]. It’s finding (hesitated) reasonable parents.” However, he shared that having the Team in place allowed him to “give them the data...that you have accrued through the year” and attempt to make sense of it. The use of data to inform decisions related to ABR implementation was a direct result of the mandate to implement a School Safety Team. The fact that Steven believed that parents were not “reasonable” may be linked to the lack of understanding that they had about the law and the fact that parents had not had adequate opportunities to make concrete connections to an abstract concept. According to Dewey (2012), “habits of active inquiry and careful deliberation in the significant and vital problems of conduct afford the best guarantee that the general structure of mind will be reasonable” (p. 49). If parents were perceived, by the educators, as being unreasonable, perhaps additional opportunities for discussion, deliberation and inquiry would have allowed for a deeper and more informed understanding of the ABR and its intent. It appeared, based on information provided by the South Hills educators, the parental sense making opportunities were limited.

Martha openly acknowledged that she could do more with the School Safety Team, but at a small school she felt there was less of a need. However, she used the Team to help her with some of her school climate improvement ideas, to solicit funds from the PTA, to identify bullying patterns within the school and as a way to involve and empower students in the school climate improvement process. Although the use of the Team was limited at South Hills, its creation provided an
important way to enhance and encourage communication among all stakeholders.

The School Safety Team component requires parental inclusion and therefore, it was one of the ways that parents were involved in the ABR. Only one or two parents, however, were included on this Team. Additionally, the law mandates that all parents be provided with information about the ABR and this requirement proved to yield some interesting additional opportunities for educators at South Hills.

Parental Awareness

A potential increase in parental awareness, based on data provided by the South Hills administrators, and the resulting opportunities for communication was a significant unanticipated finding that added an interesting perspective to this research. From early on in the interview, Steven spoke about the frustrations of this idea of parental awareness without real understanding. “One thing I have found, I think parents, in particular, use the terminology incorrectly,” he suggested. While the ABR brought awareness to harassment, intimidation and bullying, and brought the “issue to the forefront;” parents, according to Steve, appeared to “just use the word and they have no idea of the definition of it or what it entails or how it applies to State law.” “A constant source of misunderstanding and mistake,” according to Dewey (2102), “is indefiniteness of meaning.” (p. 118). Misunderstanding ourselves, others or things, carries the potential to “distort and pervert” an idea (Dewey, 2012, p. 119). When different meanings are intermingled or one meaning is substituted for another, the achievement of precise meaning is lost, and this, suggests Dewey “is the aboriginal logical sin-the source from which flow most bad intellectual consequences” (p. 119). Limited opportunities for parental training and sense
making led to a lack of true understanding that potentially inhibited greater support and involvement in bullying prevention efforts among this stakeholder group.

The law also requires that parents be notified when there is an investigation of HIB. Confronted with an investigation, Steven reached out to parents to explain the situation. His experience was “if you explain things to them, it goes pretty well and I also direct them to the policy itself. We just recently put together a Handbook, which is much shorter than the policy and, I think...more easy to read...it may give parents a snapshot of what’s going on or what the process is.” Parents, like students and educators, needed information and a sufficient level of understanding in order to make sense of the policy. According to the observations of Steven and Martha, some parents appeared to be receptive to increasing their awareness and understanding, when offered the opportunity to learn more.

Even minimally increased parental awareness provided Steven and Martha with new opportunities to approach parents and bring them into the conversation about bullying behavior in ways the administrators may not have taken advantage of prior to the passage of the ABR. As a result of the law, Steven said, “there’s awareness and then, you know, you call the parent. A lot of times, we’ll sit and meet with the child and the adult and kind of lay what’s out there.” Steven acknowledged that every case is different and “parents don’t always necessarily agree with you.” But the opportunity to dialogue with parents about a potential situation where a child “may be in with the wrong group, not in the right situation, not saying the right thing” helped Steven and the South Hills administrators “give them [the parents and students] tools to make better choices.” The perceived increase in parental
awareness, reported by Steven and Martha, often led to additional dialogue with parents and provided opportunities for teachable moments where behaviors were examined and alternatives presented. The Superintendent of the small South Hills district was also involved in the education of parents. According to Steven, the Superintendent actively worked with the PTA to develop a training program for all parents who served as chaperones at school-sponsored functions. With increasing responsibilities, administrators often wore multiple hats to meet demands in this small district. The local context made hands on involvement, from the top down, a hallmark of South Hills.

Similarly, early on in the interview with Martha, she shared how, as a result of the ABR, she “learned about parent communication and the need to communicate with parents and notify parents of the steps.” From her position as a school psychologist, the need to actively engage with families resonated with her professional identity and allowed her to hone in on the parental component. Her passion was evident when she stated,

One of the things I love best about the law is that it helps me to identify bullies and contact their parents and families and say to them, ‘Let's be proactive. Let’s get counseling. Let’s do education...[let’s] give them social skills to replace some of their bullying behavior’ at a much earlier point in time.

Parents, according to Martha, were much more receptive to counseling services after the law was passed. Prior to the ABR, “we didn’t have the full weight of the law.” Previously, parents were often insulted when counseling
was suggested. Martha now had the ability to speak to parents about consequences and the requirements of the law. “So that’s been a big change, parental awareness and the parental receptivity,” Martha commented. As people become more familiar with a subject or a process, “its strange and unexpected corners are rubbed off” (Dewey, 2012, p. 127). Based on the reported experiences of Steven and Martha, it appeared that when the ABR process was demystified for parents, they were more receptive and open to its benefits.

Martha believed that the ABR encouraged the school to be more proactive and to address minor behavior issues earlier to avoid a potential investigation. When minor behavioral transgressions were reported, Martha had the chance to engage in “pre-counseling” and “warning” and tried to “nip things in the bud before they get too bad.” She was clear that she did not think the law had “been a barrier at all.” As a school psychologist Martha believed, “It’s been great. It’s opened the door to all kinds of interventions...opened doors for families that really had quite a lot of crisis going on.” In Martha’s opinion, the increased level of awareness, including media coverage, brought forward “the idea that the outcomes for bullies are worse than the outcomes for victims or bystanders.” This recognition helped Martha tremendously in her position as someone who offers services to families. She shared her belief that as “school psychologists, we promote positive school environment and we promote positive mental health and...both of those areas are very much our responsibility. [But] not for quite as much paperwork, not for quite as many man hours.” Nevertheless, Martha gave the impression that by bringing awareness to
bullying behavior and having the weight of the law behind her, parental receptivity increased and allowed her to better address the behavioral needs of students. In Martha’s professional estimation, this was a positive outcome.

South Hills Staff: Awareness and Its Implications

Beth, Sheila and Josh all agreed that the ABR brought awareness to the forefront for students and staff. Beth commented, “I think it became a buzzword and all the schools had to initiate it and you would be held accountable so it kind of came to the forefront.” This sentiment was echoed by Josh, who talked about the way in which the policy had made everyone more aware that “every comment is taken seriously now” and there is a specific process that had to be followed. At the same time, Josh appeared relieved that he could say to students that he had no choice but to report a situation. “I tell them, it’s my job. I have to let somebody know about this,” Josh explained, when confronted with a potential HIB situation. The process allowed Josh to maintain his relationship with students because all parties had been made aware of the required reporting procedures.

Beth and Josh both struggled with the feeling that, while the students seemed to be aware of the policy and knew what they should do, the students did not always make the better choice. “They all know it. They can tell you...this is what I should do,” suggested Beth. “It’s just getting them to take those steps...there’s that getting them to realize and take ownership of it” that was still a challenge. Josh, again, concurred when he acknowledged, “I think students are aware...they know about it. I just don’t know if they know how to go about it.” As his final comment in the interview, Josh reiterated this point when he shared, “So, I think they’re very aware
of it. I just don’t, I don’t think they all understand what ‘it’ is, you know. I mean they all say, oh, HIB, HIB, HIB,” but he questioned if the students really had a solid understanding of harassment, intimidation and bullying. According to Dewey (2012), “to understand is to grasp meaning” (p. 107). Without a solid understanding of bullying as a maladaptive behavior with negative implications, it may be more challenging to help students to embrace more positive, pro-social behaviors.

Even with some of the lingering challenges that Beth and Josh spoke about, there was, by default, an increase in communication efforts. Beth believed that, as a result of the ABR, “there is a lot more talking to the students, trying to find the root” of what was going on. However, she also shared her frustration with the lack of resources, programmatically, as well as the precious resource of time, which prevented educators from more comprehensively addressing maladaptive behaviors. When time permitted, Beth, Sheila and Josh welcomed the opportunity to speak to colleagues about a particular student. Sheila commented that her colleagues were “invaluable resources to understanding why a kid is acting a certain way” and “having the time to be able to connect with somebody about a student is really important.” Beth and Josh agreed that the lack of time and access to colleagues was a disadvantage.

Beth shared an additional concern that there were certain inconsistencies in the way that staff approached the policy and behavior issues in general. She believed that “everyone has to be on the same page” and, as a school, they needed to remain as consistent as possible in enforcing the policies. Beth acknowledged that every school year is different and “some years, it’s better than others. Some years,
students seem very tolerant of each other and willing to help.” As the interview concluded, Beth’s final thoughts were, “But the school is starting to do some really good things. We’re getting there.”

Beth, Sheila and Josh all conveyed positive feelings about having a focus placed on finding ways to support and promote a stronger school community and an atmosphere of tolerance and respect. Beth and Sheila appeared committed to learning how to build school culture through community building and fostering stronger connections within the school. Josh, from his position as a coach, mentioned the value for students in seeing that “this is larger than just their school environment...it’s out in the community in terms of what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable.” While carrying out the letter of the ABR law placed additional stressors on educators at South Hills, it appeared that there were some benefits that supported educators’ organic tendencies towards initiatives that focused on building strong communities based on tolerance and respect. These elements are in line with the spirit of the ABR (Interim Report, 2013), as well as the research that suggests that bullying is a systemic problem that requires intervention aimed at the entire school system (Cross, et al., 2011; Olweus, 1994; Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003; Smith et al., 2004; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

This chapter now turns to examine Central Valley and the way in which administrators and staff experienced the mandated ABR. First, the perspectives of the administrators, Harry, Bruce and Dan, will be presented before turning to the experiences of the staff, Rachel and Jeff.
Central Valley Administrators

The word ‘aware’ was used a combined total of only three times by Harry and Bruce in their interviews and it was never used in reference to increased awareness as a perceived benefit of the ABR within Central Valley. Dan used the word once as he expressed what he perceived to be an increase in staff awareness as a result of the ABR policy. Administrators at Central Valley instead appeared to have moved past surface awareness of the ABR and exhibited a deeper level of understanding.

Awareness and Beyond

As Bruce stated, early on in the interview, “we all were thrown into the fire and we had to get to know it.” Central Valley administrators “were all on the clock for it without knowing anything about” the ABR. Although the law forced them to work quickly to develop an understanding, Harry, on several occasions referred to this challenge as “a healthy type of process and it’s one that I’ve appreciated from the State level.” The law, in Harry’s opinion, “has given schools the required teeth and claws to really address this issue” of bullying. Dan suggested that the required documentation process “forces the district to allocate more resources” and “to prove” that they actively responded to bullying situations. “It’s a checks and balances for the school and the district and the State to say we are being proactive,” acknowledged Dan.

Educating students about their behavior and training staff to identify the difference between conflict and bullying was another positive outgrowth of this legislation at Central Valley. Bruce concurred that the definitive steps in the process and his ability to make a clear distinction between conflict and bullying were
helpful. After spending a significant amount of time on his own sense making process, Bruce was able to turnkey the information to staff during the mandated training sessions. According to Dewey (2012), “the ‘slow but sure’ person, whether man or child, is one in whom impressions sink and accumulate, so that thinking is done at a deeper level of value than with a slighter load” (p. 34). Bruce took the time to deepen his understanding and therefore, he was in a better position to translate this information to others. In Bruce’s estimation, “staff developed a better eye, we all have, a better eye for the real thing and that helped a lot...I mean I can’t take full credit for that, but I do think it’s because they had more information to go on.” Harry acknowledged that the process itself was “very specific and targeted and clear as to what has to happen, when it has to happen and how it has to happen. I like the fact that there is an expectation of remediation and education with the bully.” Once again, the “teeth and claws” of the ABR provided a means for meeting social-emotional needs of students, which was viewed as another important support for educators.

Harry and Dan also discussed the beneficial way that the data generated by this process aided them in providing more detailed and specific information to stakeholders. One specific use of the School Safety Team at Central Valley was to enhance communication by encouraging discussion about school safety among staff and parents. Harry extolled the benefits of being “much more intentional” with the data they had accrued through this process. He used it with both students and staff to make the abstract more concrete and encourage a deeper level of understanding. Bruce also came to the realization that the law gave him additional leverage to speak
to parents about situations. “There were times where you could get on the phone with a parent and say, you put the ball in their court and say, here’s what’s going on” and this increased level of communication allowed Bruce to bring parents into the discussion and work collaboratively toward resolution. Much of the communication, Bruce conceded was due to fear and a need to manage the process internally. He was “nervous” and he wanted “to seek out whatever [he] could and speak to people...so a lot of conversations. Not just at the [Rutgers] BPI, but with [the] principal and some of the Specialists in other buildings in the district.”

Communication, the result of both fear and mandate, appeared to be a positive outgrowth of the ABR at Central Valley. The experiences of staff members Rachel and Jeff, however, were slightly different due to competing priorities and their responsibilities within the organization.

**Central Valley Staff: Awareness and Its Implications**

Rachel and Jeff, as staff members, agreed that there was increased awareness of the definition of bullying and of the process required when a potential HIB situation was reported. Jeff attributed this awareness of staff and students to the fact that the ABR was being “emphasized” and “pushed.” Students were more aware of things they should not say and do because the “push” brought it to “the forefront” of everyone’s mind. However, Jeff remained skeptical of any significant and lasting change as a result of the legislation for several reasons. Children may be “aware of what bullying is...and what they should not be doing. They can recognize it and know it’s not right, but then being an involved member takes the strength that most, a lot of kids don’t have.” In addition, Jeff cited frequently shifting priorities and the
reality that “there are so many things in a school that you want to be in the forefront of kids’ minds, that some things slip by.” Rachel agreed that the staff needed consistency and she identified this as a key to “getting things to stick” because staff need to “know the expectations.” If bullying prevention is “not a school-wide focus, then it’s not going to stay with the kids,” Jeff commented. The voices of the Central Valley educators echoed existing research that suggests that a whole school approach that is multi-level and multi-year is the most effective in addressing the bullying problem (Black, 2007; Cross et al., 2011; Frey, et al., 2009; Olweus, 1994; Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003). Consistency, clarity and having staff on the same page also “makes it a lot easier because it just becomes part of your routine, you know,” Jeff added. Attempting to make order out of chaos (Weick, 2001) in an effort to simplify and reduce the complexity of tasks and create manageable routines (Lipsky, 2010) are hallmark traits of the street-level bureaucrat as he/she engages in the sense making process. Rachel and Jeff clearly expressed the need for manageability and consistency in their work.

Both Jeff and Rachel acknowledged that accompanying the increased awareness was an increased level of communication throughout the school. Dialogue occurred between administration and staff, staff and students and administration, and staff and parents about bullying behavior and a consistent language emerged. Jeff commented, “There’s a language...that’s consistent to everyone. You have to have the same language, that you know, the kids, the teachers and everyone needs to be on the same page.” This process of arriving at a consistent unit of meaning is what Dewey (2012) refers to as “definition” (p. 119). From this
universal stating point, conversations ensued. With staff, conversations occurred during mandated training; with students, dialogue occurred within the context of Advisory periods; and from Rachel’s professional perspective as a Guidance Counselor, she encountered an increased level of communication with the members of her House Center, as well as with parents.

Although Jeff and Rachel acknowledged that having a specific, formal ABR process was helpful to begin to get everyone on the same page, they lamented that there is more that could be done. Jeff suggested that staff members were aware of the ABR process, procedures and language, but he questioned the level of understanding across the board. “I don’t know about consistent understanding. I don’t know if everyone understands. I would think that if you understood what it was, then you wouldn’t necessarily need to be reminded over and over again,” he said. Rachel, from her position as Guidance Counselor, suggested that more training for parents and more collaboration with community agencies would be welcomed. Jeff and Rachel expressed the need for continued work with all stakeholder groups, over time, to achieve the desired level of consistent understanding. Although more work was needed, the increased awareness, to date, ignited broader and deeper conversations about bullying prevention inside and outside of Central Valley.

**Summary**

The legislatively mandated Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights increased awareness of bullying behavior and called to action specific processes and procedures for addressing and reducing this behavior at both South Hills and Central Valley. The
heightened awareness led to the broadening and deepening of multiple channels of communication as the result of mandate and necessity. The so-called “teeth and claws” of the ABR not only supported the overall sense making process at these middle schools, it led to infusing life into interventions that supported the positive social-emotional growth of students. Due to the variations in school size and culture, South Hills and Central Valley exhibited unique approaches, but approaches that were appropriate to each local context.

Beginning with the training of the educators, street-level bureaucrats who are the smallest organization unit, awareness efforts spread out to students, parents and other stakeholders via the process of communication. Who is talking to whom, and the nature of these conversations, are key elements in the sense making process. Researchers and philosophers are in agreement that the depth of conversations and thought processes lead to high-level thinking and understanding (Dewey, 2012; Coburn, 2005a; Spillane, 1999), critical ingredients of sense making.

As communication channels broadened and deepened at both schools, educators’ ‘zones of enactment’ expanded. Spillane (1999) contends that expansive zones and higher quality connections are significant contributors to facilitating rich discussions and engendering change. Rich, deep communication is likely to enhance individuals’ understandings of the structural changes inherent in the ABR (Coburn, 2001; Little, 2003; Spillane, 1999) and work to reduce the ambiguity or equivocality (Weick, 2001) experienced at South Hills and Central Valley. Conversations with students, staff and parents, although they unfolded in site-specific ways were nonetheless evident and important.
However, significant challenges to maintaining the momentum were identified. Competing educational initiatives continued to cause a constant shift in priorities, which led to the inability to maintain a consistent focus on bullying prevention and school climate improvement, as championed by the ABR. Without some level of consistency and continuity, it was more challenging for educators to simplify and manage the processes and procedures of the ABR and incorporate them into existing routines. As a result of the ABR, educators and stakeholders at South Hills and Central Valley had an increased awareness and understanding of the specific processes and procedures in place for addressing potential bullying situations. More importantly, the enhanced communication and dialogue, getting all stakeholders on the same page, was critical for establishing a culture of change supported by all stakeholders. Change, however, takes time. Consistent attention, opportunities for communication and deepening understanding were key ingredients to maintaining momentum and fulfilling the spirit of the ABR. Due to contextual differences, each site ultimately presented with its unique approach. South Hills relied on its small size and limited staff to enhance the intimate, trusting relationships already developed with parents. Central Valley, on the other hand, utilized its larger size and staff to more clearly delegate responsibilities, allowing individuals to delve deeper into the ABR components they were directly responsible for attending to. Regardless of the contextual factors of each school, there were keystones that appeared to be essential in facilitating the sense making process of street-level bureaucrats. The ABR appeared to provide the impetus for these foundational elements to take root.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to delve deeply into the lived experiences of the middle school educator participants in an effort to better understand how street-level bureaucrats engaged in the organizational sense making process. In order to view this process in action, this study observed the sense making process in two middle schools through the lens of the 2010 New Jersey Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR). It was also the intention of this research to ascertain whether there was a phenomenon of power available to these communities of educators that was significant to examine, explore and understand.

This research was grounded in literature on organizational sense making theory and the characteristics of street-level bureaucrats, as well as literature that examined school behavior policies and bullying prevention programs. The three data chapters (4-6) that emerged, presented educators’ experiences with the sense making process related to the ABR, their perspectives and behavior as street-level bureaucrats, and their perceptions of the law in general. Chapter 7 explains and summarizes the data. The first section of the chapter summarizes the anticipated findings of this research in relation to the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 1. The next section of the chapter reviews the research questions that this dissertation set out to answer, including the actual, and in some cases, unanticipated findings that came to light. This discussion will then turn to the potential phenomenon of power available to street-level bureaucrats that emerged. Finally,
this chapter will address the significance of this dissertation, as well as implications for policy, practice and future research.

**New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights**

Although New Jersey's 2002 Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying law appeared to be quite comprehensive compared to the laws other states had on the books at the time, it ultimately proved to be rather weak and ineffective (Livio, 2010). As a result, the 2010 Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights was introduced and passed by the legislature in an attempt to clarify, strengthen and bring accountability to bullying prevention efforts. This dissertation was an effort to go deep into the professional lives of educators in two New Jersey middle schools to better understand how they made sense of the ABR given the resources at their disposal. Ultimately, the sense making efforts of educators and their resultant comprehension determined the way in which this policy was implemented locally. Having laid out the data in the last three chapters, this chapter will now begin to summarize the anticipated findings of this research, as well as the actual and unanticipated findings that emerged.

**Anticipated Findings**

Based on the provisions of the law and the mandates it set forth, there were four findings that this research anticipated would yield data from the educators who participated. This research anticipated data would be captured regarding compliance, change, research-based program implementation and the reduction of bullying behavior as a result of educators engaging in the sense making process of
the ABR. The findings in each of these categories at South Hills and Central Valley will be discussed before turning to a discussion of actual and unanticipated findings.

**Compliance**

At both South Hills and Central Valley, the sense making process was driven by the need to be in compliance with the ABR for fear of legal repercussions. At the administrative level, litigation was perceived as “any district’s worst nightmare” and school officials “didn’t want to get caught” so they put significant effort into understanding certain elements of the ABR policy and passing the information onto staff. Great care and attention was given to making sure that the required professional development sessions were held for students, staff and parents and that policies were posted and visible on district websites. Existing administrative staff assumed the responsibilities of the Anti-Bullying Coordinator and the Anti-Bullying Specialist and worked diligently to become familiar with and adhere to the mandates of the law.

The administrators and staff at both schools were familiar with the procedural elements of the ABR that were outlined in the policy and that needed to be followed. Because of the threat of litigation, compliance with the reporting, investigating and documenting components was taken very seriously at all levels. Staff, at both schools, was very clear on the need to report incidents not only to be in compliance with the law, but also to protect themselves and to preserve their jobs. Fear gave rise to strict adherence to those specific elements of the ABR that were reportable and visible to outside entities.
Compliance at both South Hills and Central Valley was less evident with respect to the elements of the ABR that were not subject to stringent State-level reporting or other means of accountability. According to the ABR policy,

A school district shall form a school safety team in each school in the district to develop, foster and maintain a positive school climate by focusing on the on-going systemic process and practices in the school and to address school climate issues such as harassment, intimidation and bullying. (P.L. 2010, Chapter 122, C §18A: 37-21)

The School Safety Team, for example, is required to meet twice a year and the law outlines specific goals and tasks of this body. Specifically, the law directs that “the members of a school safety team shall be provided professional development opportunities that address effective practices of successful school climate programs or approaches” (C. §18A: 37-21, d). However, there was less State-level focus on this requirement and no legal precedent for non-compliance. Therefore, less attention was paid to making sense of the School Safety Team provisions at South Hills and Central Valley. The low priority of this element was evidenced by the lack of awareness and attention it received at all levels of each organization. Little effort was placed on helping educators to understand what the Team was designed to do and to help them make sense of its purpose. Without a clear and precise accountability process, this component of the ABR received less attention. Fear, combined with competing priorities and no additional monetary support, led these street-level-bureaucrats to make decisions about which elements of the ABR were attended to and which were not. In an atmosphere of scarce resources, little training
and a lack of clear direction (Kelly, 1994; Ricucci, 2005; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977), educators chose to maintain a focus on the ABR elements that threatened consequences for non-compliance.

Fear and State-level oversight resulted in compliance with the mandated reporting, investigating and documenting elements of the law. The need to comply, by default, forced a stronger sense making process across the organization because educators needed to have a sufficient level of understanding of what the ABR entailed. The proactive school climate improvement pieces outlined in the ABR were often a secondary focus due to competing priorities. While a School Safety Team existed at South Hills and Central Valley, both principals acknowledged its shortcomings. At South Hills, the Team did not meet the two-meeting-per-year benchmark and at Central Valley, Harry, the principal, admitted that the team was not a leadership body and that he was at the mercy of a “tricky collective bargaining agreement” which prevented him from utilizing the Team more effectively.

Although, the Teams were used to facilitate discussions and share data regarding the identification, reporting and investigation of potential bullying incidents, there was less time devoted to school climate improvement plans and initiatives. With no clear State-level accountability procedures in place, the School Safety Team was not utilized to its full capacity as envisioned by the ABR. This, however, does not mean that South Hills and Central Valley did not have mechanisms in place to address school climate improvement. Both schools did. What it does indicate is that fear of non-compliance forced educators to become aware of certain elements of the ABR and this attention, in effect, directed the initial stages of the sense making process.
Change

Change was a very broad finding that was anticipated from this research. As a result of any mandated policy, some degree of change will emerge. What was unclear, prior to data collection, was what types of changes would be observed, the depth of these changes, and what role local context would play. It was anticipated that South Hills and Central Valley, as a result of compliance with the ABR, would experience procedural changes in the way potential bullying situations were handled. However, these changes did not necessarily lead to pedagogical changes or a shift in understanding due to the lack of opportunities for educators to engage more fully in the social sense making process.

Competing priorities left little time for engagement in the sense making process or reflection on information presented in professional development sessions. Without these opportunities, the overall quality of mind training, as Dewey (2012) terms it, was in jeopardy. “Failure to afford time and leisure conduce to habits of speedy, but snapshot and superficial judgments,” according to Dewey (2012, p. 34). Lack of time to go deep into the understanding of bullying behavior and the ABR minimized the chance that quality thinking would result. Bruce, from Central Valley, provided a strong illustration of how expanded zones of enactment and sufficient time to engage in thinking and reflection led to a better and more complete understanding of the subject. Bruce spent time making abstract concepts more concrete for his staff in an effort to enhance understanding. Steven, the South Hills principal, observed that while awareness of both bullying behavior and the
ABR was present at South Hills, it would still take time for the culture to change. Time was continually cited as a vitally important resource that was lacking.

While the ABR was designed to identify and remediate bullying behavior, it was also intended to support and encourage culture change by improving school climate. Lack of time ultimately dictated the order of priorities. To facilitate lasting and significant change, individuals and organizations require the time and space to fully engage in the sense making process. According to Dewey (2012) “the way in which subject matter is furnished marks, therefore, a fundamental point. If the subject-matter is provided in too scanty or too profuse fashion, if it comes in disordered array or in isolated scraps, the effect upon habits of thought is detrimental” (p. 175). Dewey contends that time for clear organization of and reflection on thoughts is the best way to come to an accurate understanding of information and then translate it to others.

The most obvious changes at South Hills and Central Valley revolved around the heightened awareness about bullying behavior and the need to swiftly and adequately address it so as to be in compliance with the law. Awareness of the ABR policy led to the implementation of reporting and investigating procedures, as well as increased attention to bullying prevention efforts through channels such as the Advisory Period and assemblies. What is unclear is if these changes will endure if accountability at the State level eases. Competing priorities clearly hindered maintaining a stronger focus on HIB matters. Several participants remarked that initiatives that are “pushed” or come to the “forefront” are the ones that get attention. Therefore, procedural changes, such as those developed for reporting and
investigating, were much more evident than changes related to school climate improvement.

**Research-based Programs**

This research anticipated that there might be some evidence of researched-based bullying prevention programs visible at some level of each organization. The spirit of the ABR, according to the 2013 Interim Report submitted by the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, is to help improve school climate and the School Safety Team was designed as a vehicle to assist in this initiative. Resources listed on State-sponsored websites suggested several researched-based bullying prevention programs, including the Olweus Program, to guide schools in the process. These programs are whole-school climate improvement programs that seek to build community in the classroom, throughout the school and within the community at large.

None of the South Hills or Central Valley educators who participated in this study mentioned any specific researched-based program within their schools. Given the consistent challenges of lack of time and competing priorities, and the reality that the ABR was initially an unfunded mandate, it is not wholly surprising that each school worked with the resources that were available to them. It is important to point out here that there is no clear evidence of a proven successful program within the existing research on bullying prevention programs (Smith et al., 2004; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007; Merrell et al., 2008). What the research does show is that there are certain key programmatic features that are critical in improving school climate, and ultimately, reducing bullying behavior, which include a whole school, multi-level
and multi-year approach (Black, 2007; Cross, et al., 2011; Frey, et al., 2009; Olweus, 1994; Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003).

Interestingly, many of the school climate improvement activities already in place at South Hills and Central Valley hinted at the inclusion of these three most important programmatic components, even if a formal bullying prevention program was not being utilized. Some of the educators in this study, as they spoke about what they needed and wanted at their school to move toward a healthier climate, appeared to be ‘organically magnetized’ or naturally pulled toward these components without being aware of researched-based programs. Although these educators did not specifically mention any bullying prevention programs by name, they appeared to instinctively be attracted to key features, including a consistent, ongoing approach to school climate improvement, a whole school approach, and the involvement of community-based supports to enhance school initiatives.

**Reduction in Bullying Behavior**

This dissertation was not specifically designed to quantitatively measure a change in bullying behavior or the reporting of incidents at either of the schools. However, the qualitative nature of the study did allow for the educators’ perceptions on this topic to be revealed. The educators at both schools shared that, in their opinion, bullying was not a significant problem at their school. While it did exist, the feeling was that it was well within the normal range for middle schools, even prior to ABR implementation.

Each school noted that the definitional confusion and uncertainty during the first year of the ABR led to over-reporting of incidents. In year two, with more time
to digest and make sense of the definition of bullying and the new procedures, a greater understanding was developed by staff and the number of reported incidents decreased. Each school also learned how to handle or “triage” situations in their own way and make the process more manageable. Therefore, administrators, at South Hills and Central Valley reported that bullying incidents had decreased at their school since year one of the ABR. This, however, does not necessarily indicate that school climate improved or that bullying behavior diminished. It merely suggested that the number of reported incidents decreased.

What educators acknowledged, at both sites, is that the number of reported incidents decreased since the policy took effect. Martha, the ABS at South Hills, shared that as a small school, if they had three investigations in a month that would be significant. But she reported a “steady reduction to this point” and she believed it was due to the school being more proactive and intervening in situations earlier before they warranted a full investigation. Bruce, the original Anti-Bullying Specialist at Central Valley reported that in the first year Central Valley had 76 cases, half of which were reported in the first five weeks of school. According to Bruce, this made Central Valley the county leader in reported incidents. The second year, there were 41 reported cases and, at the time of his interview for this research, he believed that Dan, the current ABS, had fewer than 10 cases to date. Bruce suggested that the drop in numbers was the result of staff having “a better eye for the real thing” and therefore, over reporting was reduced. The law clearly brought attention to the issue at South Hills and Central Valley. However, it was not clear if
the reduction in numbers was due to a decrease in actual bullying behavior or merely a decrease in the number of reported incidents.

**Additional Findings**

Since there was no extant research available, prior to this study, to suggest how educators, as street-level bureaucrats, were making sense of the ABR and responding to its mandates, there was abundant room for findings to emerge that had not been considered or anticipated prior to data collection. Therefore, this dissertation sought to answer the following questions: What are educators, as street-level bureaucrats, interpretations and understandings of the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights? How do the contextual factors of human, social and material resources affect the sense making process? By including two study sites in this research, findings emerged that were site-specific and indicated the significance of local context in the sense making process.

It is important to note here the challenges that obtaining two study sites for this research presented. As an outsider, with no current school district affiliation, this researcher encountered a significant obstacle in securing sites to participate in this research. Over a six-month period, several personal and professional contacts were accessed, including the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, and 50 districts were contacted via email. Eleven districts responded and declined to participate in the study. Ultimately, South Hills and Central Valley emerged as willing participants. It is unclear if fear, competing priorities or a combination of the
two was the reason for the lack of response and willingness to participate. However, it is a finding of significance that warranted mention.

**Interpreting and Understanding the ABR: Administrators**

The interpretation and understanding of the ABR varied depending on what position an educator played in the ABR implementation process. Administrators, in general, spent more time and had more access to professional development and therefore had expanded sense-making opportunities. With more sense making opportunities came a deeper understanding of the definition of bullying and the requirements of the ABR. All administrators in the study displayed a definitional knowledge of bullying as laid out in the policy. Clear references were made to “imbalance of power,” “distinguishable characteristics” and behavior that had a negative impact on the victim. Administrators were very clear that while individuals may have their own interpretations and beliefs, the language of the law is what took precedent.

**Fear.**

Fear played a significant role in the amount of time and effort that administrators at South Hills and Central Valley put into making sense of the ABR and ultimately deepening their understanding of it. Litigation was deemed a “district’s worst nightmare” and administrators were “on the clock” for understanding this policy and translating the information to staff. Phrases such as “baptism by fire,” “thrown into the fire” and “we didn’t want to get caught” were peppered throughout the interviews with administrators and provided good
reasons to justify the time and energy devoted to making sense of the ABR, especially the reporting, investigating and documenting components. Sense making efforts included internal and external conversations with colleagues and other professionals, which led to expanded zones of enactment. Although fueled by fear, the end result was a deeper and richer understanding of the definition of bullying and the nuances of the ABR. Administrators at both sites commented on the value of conversations, particularly those held outside of the district, as being essential to supporting their understanding. Since administrators are ultimately the gatekeepers of resource allocation (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1998, 1999, 2000), as they developed a better command of the policy, they were able to more effectively turnkey the information to staff.

**Interpreting and Understanding the ABR: Staff**

To describe bullying, the staff at both South Hills and Central Valley used key words such as “physical” and “emotional” harm, “characteristics,” “power differential,” “upstander” and “bystander,” phrases that demonstrated that interaction with the policy had occurred, either through training or individual efforts. Several staff participants indicated that the understanding they had about bullying behavior was informed by “common sense” and prior knowledge based on early life experiences. The focus for staff was primarily centered on understanding what they needed to know to be in compliance with the ABR and to protect themselves and their jobs.
Fear.

Staff at South Hills and Central Valley was very aware of the ABR processes and procedures in place at their school and how the policy affected them. There was no question that staff was going to make sure to report and document any potential bullying situations for fear of repercussions. Staff was aware that they needed to protect themselves and they behaved accordingly. Comments such as not wanting to be the person who “never raised a red flag,” and “I would rather be over reacting than under reacting” and if something is not reported, “that's going to come back to me” were shared. In general, the need to report was taken very seriously and was accompanied by a tone of relief that the actual decision-making could be pushed up the chain of command. “It wasn’t going to be me who was going to decide” was one staff comment, while another, extremely passionate about his job, was vested in keeping “my job and what I love to do.” Fear dictated the behavior of these staff members with respect to the reporting of potential HIB incidents. Even when there was a strong pull to exercise professional judgment and take into account the “million factors of children’s lives,” staff consistently acknowledged that they needed to act to protect themselves.

Context Matters

South Hills and Central Valley provided two different middle school perspectives based on their size. The resources available to each site also varied and therefore, impacted the sense making process. The human, social and material resources available at each local site directly impacted what information got attended to and how deeply. The resources available and the means by which they
were activated impacted the sense making process. Early research has shown that the contextual factors of human, social and material resources influence the sense making process (Coburn, 2001; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1999). These factors are critical in creating a space for deep, rich, meaningful conversations to occur that lead to substantive change (Coburn, 2001; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1999). At South Hills and Central Valley, it was incumbent on the administrators to effectively activate the human and material resources at their disposal and then take advantage of the internal and external conversations available to them. These administrators, as gatekeepers of resource allocation (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1998, 1999, 2000) were the facilitators of the sense making process (Coburn, 2001) at their sites.

**Human Resources**

Spillane (2004) defines human resources as the knowledge, expertise and experience of individuals. Clearly, both South Hills and Central Valley had unique personnel and therefore, presented differently in this area. The initial meaning of the ABR to any individual depended greatly on existing human resources (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 1999; Spillane, et al., 2002; Weick, 1979). When complex information is presented, individuals tend to use past experience to inform and clarify future decisions or interpretations (Dewey, 2012; Weick, 1995). It was evident that participants in this study approached the understanding of bullying behavior and the ABR using the process of retrospection, or past experience, first. Participants spoke of using “common sense” or past knowledge and experiences to inform their initial perceptions. These understandings or perceptions may or may not have been
accurate and one objective of the ABR was to provide a common language and clear understanding of bullying behavior for educators. As Bruce from Central Valley stated, personal definitions can run the gamut from “soup to nuts” and individual definitions should not be considered. Especially when there is the potential for litigation, it was more important for schools to achieve definitional consistency and procedural uniformity. This task, however, was heavily reliant on the sense making process at each school and the resources available to support it.

Social Resources

Individual, human resources, while important and significant in the sense making process were not sufficient to reduce and manage the information, processes and procedures that the ABR required. This equivocality, as Weick (2001) refers to it, is best managed through the social sense making process that involves active communication between and among participants (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 2004; Weick, 2001). Administrators at both South Hills and Central Valley cited internal and external conversations as being essential to enhancing their understanding of the ABR. Staff, on the other hand, had significantly fewer opportunities for internal dialogue and no opportunities for dialogue with professionals outside of the school building, which impeded a deeper sense making process for them.

Staff professional development was primarily conducted through staff meetings, Power Point presentations and assemblies that doubled as student presentations. Absent were formal opportunities for staff to dialogue internally or externally about bullying prevention and the ABR and advance their understanding.
South Hills and Central Valley administrators and staff would have welcomed the opportunity for enhanced communication, but lack of time and competing priorities significantly hampered deep and meaningful discussions of this topic.

South Hills and Central Valley presented with different experiences of the social sense making process seemingly due to the differences in size. At South Hills, administrators assumed duel roles. Steven was both principal and the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator and Martha was both the school psychologist and the Anti-Bullying Specialist, allowing less time to engage in sense making. At Central Valley, on the other hand, roles were more singular. Bruce and Dan, during their tenure as the Anti-Bullying Specialist, had that role as their prime responsibility within the context of the Dean position. Harry functioned solely as the principal, with the role of Anti-Bullying Coordinator being assumed by a Board Office administrator. With clear, specific roles to fill, the Central Valley principal and ABS, while working in a much larger environment, had the opportunity to maintain a more focused approach to ABR implementation and engage in more conversations with colleagues. The benefit of this singular focus is evident in the time and attention that Bruce allocated to understanding bullying behavior and the nuances of the law. He invested time making the abstract concepts of the policy more concrete for himself by creating tables, scales and checklists. He then presented the concrete examples to staff to help them comprehend the more abstract concepts of the ABR. Dewey (2012) contends that there is much value in beginning with concrete thought and moving toward more abstract. “Go from the concrete to the abstract; it represents the dynamic and truly educative factor” of the thinking process (Dewey, 2012,
p.130). Bruce’s personal sense making efforts and experiences were key to facilitating the sense making process of staff and helping them to gain a deeper understanding.

Comparing South Hills and Central Valley on the ability to go deep into the process of understanding demonstrated the value of time for social sense making and reflecting. Central Valley administration appeared to have a deeper definitional understanding of bullying and the beginning of a common language for staff that allowed more consistency to develop throughout the organization. Central Valley developed a site-specific “triage” process to help them manage the requirements of the ABR. This deeper command and understanding was then communicated to the Central Valley staff, which in turn, exhibited a slightly more consistent understanding of the definition of bullying than the staff at South Hills. Neither the South Hills staff nor the Central Valley staff was afforded opportunities to dialogue externally, limiting their sense making ability in general.

Material Resources

South Hills and Central Valley administrators acknowledged the vast material resources available on State-sponsored websites. However, quantity does not determine quality or relevance. Lack of time was a significant impediment that prevented administrators from sifting through the myriad resources, especially when they were not necessarily sure what they were looking for. Neither the South Hills nor Central Valley administrators reported receiving any additional monies for ABR implementation from outside of the school. Internal resources, such as the PTA, were utilized or existing programs were adapted to accommodate bullying
prevention efforts. South Hills, as small school in a small district, cited lack of staff as a challenge and this need was evidenced by the duel roles assumed by the ABR administrative staff. At both schools, time was cited as the least available and most sought after material resources needed to support ABR implementation efforts. Lack of time hindered conversations. Lack of time hampered additional or more effective professional development opportunities. Lack of time was a direct result of a myriad of competing priorities and initiatives that educators faced daily.

**Street-Level Bureaucrats and Discretion**

In the absence of sufficient resources to assist in the sense making process, the door was left open for these educators, as street-level bureaucrats, to use discretion in an effort to manage tasks and routines (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). In the absence of deep knowledge and understanding individuals often reach back for personal experiences to make sense of new information. The mere mention of the word discretion by this researcher, however, brought forth a noticeable sense of trepidation during the interview.

The ABR set a “reasonable” person standard for educators to determine if a situation meets the definitional standard of HIB (P.L. 2010, Chapter 122). However, in the 2013 Interim Report “professionals suggested that they were uncomfortable exercising discretion in applying the reasonable person standard to investigations” (Interim Report, 2013, p. 17). Administrators at both schools were very careful not to infuse personal beliefs and values in their interview responses. Instead, their knowledge and understanding of the policy and the potential legal ramifications for non-compliance helped them to remain focused on the ABR language. However,
administrators were much more open when discussing the use of discretion in the area of school climate improvement activities. As mentioned previously, this area of the ABR was not closely monitored, nor did it have any prior legal precedents that incited fear in educators. Therefore, educators felt free to openly discuss the ways in which they approached this process within their local site.

Staff also was very careful to dance around the use of discretion when it was directly posed in a question regarding the recognition and reporting of potential bullying incidents. However, due to the nature of the work of street-level bureaucrats, discretion was an inevitable component of their work. The data demonstrated that the depth of understanding of the ABR was diluted as it filtered down from the administration to staff. This outcome appeared to be a result of the limited sense making opportunities available to the staff. It is within this space, where understanding was superficial or incomplete, that these individuals had the potential to rely on individual values and beliefs to guide them (Beck, Czerniak & Lumpe, 2000; Spillane, 1998).

Sheila, a South Hills staff member who was in her first year at the school and at the middle school level provided interesting insight here. With not much information or understanding about bullying behavior and the ABR, other than what was provided during the required staff development and the Week of Respect activities, Sheila reached back to her childhood and her interactions with her friends to try to make sense of bullying behavior. Her personal experiences were her frame of references for sense making about the ABR. This behavior suggested that in the absence of strong sense making opportunities that allowed individuals to make
appropriate and correct sense of information, there was the potential for values and beliefs to supplant the intended policy message and therefore, impact policy implementation in an unintended way. However, as Lipsky (2010) suggests, not every discretionary decision is one that is contrary to organizational goals. Often decisions align very closely. It was observed that the use of discretionary practices, with respect to school climate improvement initiatives, aligned very closely with the intent of the ABR. This finding was particularly interesting in light of the fact that the educators in this study appeared to be much freer to discuss their use of discretion absent fear of reprisal.

What ultimately came forward, as educators at South Hills and Central Valley discussed school climate improvement activities, was the spirit of educators as civic entrepreneurs (Durose, 2011). Educators at South Hills and Central Valley, as citizen-agents, described using creativity and innovation to solve organizational problems and meet the needs of the individuals they served, all while working within the confines of the bureaucratic process (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). The work of the educators at South Hills and Central Valley appeared to illustrate the way that front line workers substitute pragmatism for the unrealistic views of policy makers (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). Lacking resources and faced with uncertainty, the street-level bureaucrats at South Hills and Central Valley utilized their discretion to make the best possible decisions regarding the improvement of their individual school climate. While there was the potential, in the absence of the necessary resources, for personal biases to be infused into the ABR process, this did not appear to be the case at South Hills or Central Valley.
Lipsky (2010) suggests that this behavior is a result of these street-level bureaucrats attempting to preserve their self-concept and their belief in their own competence. At both South Hills and Central Valley, the educators viewed themselves as professionals and were interested in providing a safe and successful environment for students. Their goals were in line with the spirit of the ABR even if certain mandates were not fully understood and followed to the letter of the law.

**Unanticipated Findings**

This research observed some important findings that were not anticipated prior to data collection, but appeared to be significant in supporting the sense making process. Heightened awareness of bullying behavior in schools, as a result of the ABR, was not a new finding. It was cited as a focus group result in the 2013 Interim Report submitted by the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force. However, by going deep into the lives of the educators at South Hills and Central Valley, this current research yielded data that illustrated the value of and necessity for enhanced communication across the board. Data also emerged that brought to light the importance of developing a common language surrounding the ABR to facilitate consistency in the sense making process. Enhanced communication and the development of a common language will be discussed next.

**Enhanced Communication**

As a mandated school policy with legal ramifications for non-compliance, awareness of the ABR across all levels of the organization was inevitable. Awareness was the first step to understanding. Communication was the process by which
educators became aware of the ABR and its provisions and it was an essential component in the sense making process. The ABR facilitated enhanced communication across all levels of the organization and therefore, acted to support sense making. However, the data also revealed that where communication opportunities were absent, limited or lacked substance, the sense making process was hampered.

At South Hills and Central Valley, the administrators took advantage of opportunities to dialogue outside of their districts, expanding their zones of enactment (Spillane, 1999). These conversations were highly valued, even though sometimes they were perceived as lacking in quality and depth. Bruce commented that the conversations with colleagues from other districts at the Rutgers BPI were helpful. However, he also felt that they often lacked “nuts and bolts” and failed to provide much needed guidance. Spillane (1999) contends that it is not just the expansiveness of the zones of enactment that are critical, but also the quality of the conversations taking place. Nevertheless, these outside conversations were often brought back to South Hills and Central Valley and sparked increased internal dialogue, which supported the sense making process at each local site.

Administrators not only talked to each other, they dialogued more with staff, students and parents. School-level data generated as a result of the ABR and school self-evaluations were both intentionally used to direct conversations about bullying prevention efforts. Staff members, in some cases, were encouraged to dialogue directly with parents when a behavior issue arose that could potentially be addressed without triggering an investigation. When time permitted, staff relished
the opportunities to talk to each other about a particular student or situation. However, these opportunities were limited and sporadic. Even the South Hills superintendent had increased contact with PTA members as they worked to develop training for parent chaperones. Who is talking to whom and the nature of these conversations also impacts the sense making process (Dewey, 2012; Coburn, 2005a; Spillane, 1999) and these emerging networks were observed at both South Hills and Central Valley.

**Parental Communication**

The ABR requires schools to offer training to parents, as well as to provide access to the State and school board policies pertaining to the reporting and investigating of potential incidents. Parents of the accused bully and victim had to be notified if an investigation was initiated. South Hills and Central Valley administrators provided the minimal training for parents. However, the ABR mandates often led them to dialogue with parents prior to a serious issue arising that might trigger an investigation. The weight of the law also provided opportunities to offer remedial services to families that may have previously been refused. At South Hills, Martha appreciated that she was often able to suggest interventions with the intent of helping a student and family and, at the same time, avoiding the investigative process. Administrators at South Hills and Central Valley shared examples of increased parental communication and partnership in resolving issues and this approach was a direct result of the law. While enhanced communication opportunities between educators and parents were created as a result of the ABR, educators reported being discouraged due to, what they perceived
as, a lack of parental understanding. This challenge was not difficult to understand, given the scant training and sense making opportunities provided to parents. However, the administrators reported that parents appeared to display more reasonable responses, as well as a willingness to partner with educators, when given sufficient information.

Parents, themselves, require a sense making process if the ultimate goal is to help them to understand and eventually support the ABR. Since existing bullying prevention research suggests that a multi-level approach to bullying prevention, including classroom-level, school-level and community-level interventions, is most effective, it would seem prudent to continue to work toward parental inclusion and understanding. At South Hills and Central Valley, the ABR communication requirements, grounded in the policy, appeared to encourage parental partnership in the bullying prevention efforts.

**Common Language**

The ABR laid the groundwork for definitional clarity around bullying behavior and provided all stakeholders with a common language. This common language was vitally important. Dewey (2012) suggests the importance of clear definitions in the meaning making process. Because the ABR attempted to develop a clear and common language to recognize bullying behavior, it allowed educators, parents and all stakeholders to more easily get on the same page. Bruce, from Central Valley, demonstrated the value of using a common language and making abstract concepts more concrete in an effort to facilitate the understanding of staff and students. From the top down, Central Valley educator participants exhibited a
more consistent understanding of the difference between bullying and conflict, which strengthened their ability to accurately identify a potential bullying situation. Parental misunderstanding was cited by educators at both schools as being a challenge. With limited training provided to parents, this reported challenge was not surprising. Consistency and being on the same page were cited as necessary conditions for bullying prevention efforts to take hold. Working toward establishing a common language for all stakeholders appeared to be a key ingredient to facilitating a more comprehensive sense making process. The ABR initiated this language development and brought the importance to the forefront.

**Phenomenon of Power**

In addition to answering the research questions set out in Chapter 1, this dissertation sought to examine if there was a potential phenomenon of power at play at these two middle schools as they attempted to interpret the ABR policy. Stone (2012) suggests that “power is a phenomenon of communities” that is intended to “subordinate individual self-interest to other interests” (p. 34). This power is fueled by passion rather than pure reason (Stone, 2012). Since this study was also framed in light of educators as street-level bureaucrats with a propensity toward the use of discretion, it was especially relevant to discern if there was a power within these school communities that elevated the common interest above personal self-interest with respect to the ABR. The data that emerged from this study indicated that there was, in fact, a phenomenon of power available to these middle school educators. This finding unveiled itself in several ways.
South Hills Middle School and Central Valley Middle School were each individual communities nested within larger communities. They were each nested within a district, within their town, within their county and within the State. The specific context of each of these schools, including size and the availability of resources, had an impact on the way in which the educators made sense of the ABR. Individual educators have agency in the activation of the human, social and material resources at their disposal and these individuals collectively formed these school communities. According to Bandura (2006) through “collective agency [individuals] pool their knowledge, skills and resources and act in concert to shape their future” (p. 165). By virtue of individual and collective agency, there was power available.

As Stone (2012) contends, policy-making is not solely a rational decision-making process. Values matter (Fitz, Davis & Evans, 2006; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). At all levels of the policy process, including the implementation level, people “must bring their own values into the picture” (Stone, 2012, p. 10). This discussion now turns to the ways in which the ABR policy existed in tension with the emotions, experiences and values of the educators at South Hills and Central Valley and how this tension was negotiated. Because this phenomenon presented in a unique fashion at each school, the contextual differences at South Hills and Central Valley will be considered individually before addressing the commonalities.

**South Hills**

The small size of South Hills Middle School, and the district it was nested within, meant that ABR administrators wore multiple hats. Steven was the principal and the district Anti-Bullying Coordinator and Martha served as the school
psychologist and the Anti-Bullying Specialist. With the passage of the ABR, these educators assumed extra administrative responsibilities with no additional time and limited supporting resources to assist them. It was not difficult to surmise that the ability to effectively engage in a quality sense making process was truncated for these individuals. Lack of opportunities for administrative sense making and understanding ultimately trickled down to staff since administrators are the gatekeepers of resource allocation. Insufficient resources and scant opportunities to engage in quality sense making required staff to close the knowledge gaps regarding the meaning of the ABR. The sense making process began at the individual level, where educators relied on personal knowledge, experience and worldviews. If material and social resources were lacking, individuals were placed in a position of relying predominantly on their own human resources. This reliance had the potential to significantly impact policy implementation depending on the nature of the personal values and beliefs educators held.

Steven and Martha, as ABR administrators, were very careful to describe their understanding of bullying behavior and the ABR in language grounded in the policy itself or professional knowledge. Discussions of personal beliefs and values were avoided. Beth, Sheila and Josh, on the other hand, did not posses the same level of policy familiarity or professional knowledge related to bullying behavior, and therefore, relied more on personal values and beliefs to frame their understandings. With respect to identifying potential bullying situations, Josh talked about his daughter. Sheila talked about her friends. Beth talked about her nephew and her brother. Even though they may have reached backed to some of these beliefs and
values to help them solidify their understanding, they always arrived back at the reality of the law and what they were required to do. Values, beliefs and prior experiences were sometimes expressed as a desire to be able to do more to help students and improve the school community. But educators routinely stayed within the confines of the policy with regard to following reporting, investigating and documenting procedures. This is where they subordinated individual self-interest to other interests and power was muted. The passion of the educators, in this case, was held in check in deference to policy.

The phenomenon of power manifested itself differently with respect to school climate improvement programs that were not under close scrutiny and surveillance and where educators felt more freedom to act autonomously. Both at the administrative and the staff level, these conversations assumed a different tone. Martha, for example, was much more open and forth-coming in discussing the many bullying prevention and character education programs she was spearheading. Beth, Sheila and Josh spoke openly about the specific things that they tried to do in their subject area to help students learn to be kind, respectful and more community oriented. These efforts closely aligned with the objectives of the ABR and the spirit of the legislation. It was evident that these educators possessed a passion to help students grow socially and to learn how to exist as contributing and cooperative community members. Josh, from South Hills, often used behavior challenges in his physical education classes to build community and cooperation. Absent fear and legal consequences, the South Hills educators relished the freedom to passionately pursue community-wide goals and exert individual agency. There appeared to be a
phenomenon of power, nested within the South Hills community that was in line with the mandated ABR policy. Although this power appeared to be activated in a manner consistent with organizational goals and in the best interests of the school community, its activation was curtailed when fear of repercussions was present.

Central Valley

As a large, suburban middle school, Central Valley had clearly defined roles for carrying out ABR implementation. Harry wore the principal’s hat, Bruce and Dan, at different points in time, served as the Anti-Bullying Specialist from a Dean’s position, and there was a district Anti-Bullying Coordinator located at the Board Office. This clear delineation of responsibilities allowed for a more in depth sense making process at the administrative level of the organization. Bruce’s experience as the first ABS at Central Valley illustrated the value of having time and exerting effort towards understanding the ABR. There was clear passion conveyed by Harry and Bruce about their vocation. Harry sought to use his knowledge and expertise to empower his staff to be more competent and self-directed. Bruce characterized his sense making efforts as his own “neurosis,” but he demonstrated a desire to provide staff with the best information possible about bullying behavior and the ABR. There was an underlying implication, however, that they were keeping the full spectrum of this passion in check in order to remain focused on actions that kept them in compliance with the law. Individual agency was exerted to a limited extent, as evidenced by the “triage” process they developed, but they remained within the parameters of the law.
Ultimately, the knowledge and information gained by the administrators filtered down to staff. Because Harry took a “serious” tone in staff professional development sessions, Rachel and Jeff were very clear on the expectation to report potential incidents. Although, Jeff made known his desire to use his professional judgment, in the end, he was not willing to sacrifice his job and reputation when consequences loomed on the horizon. Even if his professional judgment might, in fact, be in the best interests of the students he served, he was reluctant to step outside the bounds of the law. Jeff recounted a time when his natural tendency was to act as a citizen-agent (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000), and although his desire was to make the best decision possible for the students involved, he still could not forget that the ABR required educators to take certain actions. His passion had to be tempered by prudence. Rachel was similarly reluctant to make any decisions on her own and deferred to ABR administrators or consulted House Center colleagues. Her professional training as a guidance counselor seemed to take a back seat to following the dictates of the law. At Central Valley, these examples demonstrated where the phenomenon of power in this community was frustrated. Passion had to be subordinate to reason, or in this case, law. Therefore, the use of individual agency, also referred to as discretion or professional judgment, was subverted. Regardless of the fact that Central Valley educators may have known their students better or had a clearer picture of a complex student situation, they stayed the course and let the ABR policy dictate their individual and collective responses to potential bullying situations.
With respect to the ABR components that addressed school climate improvement, the approach was different and less constrained by fear. Rachel, as head of the Advisory Committee, acted more freely as a civic entrepreneur (Durose, 2011). Activities were designed with the students’ needs and interests in mind and not constricted by fear of consequences, as evidenced by Rachel’s work to find and utilize a developmentally appropriate You Tube video for students that captured their attention and made an impression. Community members from within Central Valley and from outside were brought into the proactive school climate improvement process. As current research suggests, a multi-level approach to bullying prevention has been determined to be the most effective. In a less restrictive and punitive climate, Central Valley educators were organically magnetized toward community building solutions that reached beyond their walls and into the surrounding environs. Rachel demonstrated her natural tendency, based on her professional knowledge and experience, toward innovation and creativity. This power, that is a phenomenon of communities, appeared to flourish in the absence of fear.

Commonalities

South Hills and Central Valley were faced with different challenges in making sense of and implementing the ABR based on contextual factors. The size of each school, as well as the human, social and material resources each school had access to, determined the quality of the sense making efforts. Nevertheless, there was a phenomenon of power that appeared to be available to the educators at both schools. Fear, however, had the ability to impede this power when it came to
handling potential bullying situations. The clear and specific processes and procedures outline in the mandated legislation left little room for individualized approaches. While educators yearned to be trusted and for the opportunity to exercise their own professional judgment or discretion, fear quickly made them relent.

When educators had the freedom and latitude to make decisions to best serve their students, they were organically magnetized, or pulled, in a direction that was driven by a higher purpose. When fear of reprisal or legal consequences was not present, educators felt free to utilize individual and collective agency in ways that were in step with the spirit of the ABR, as was evidenced in the way that South Hills and Central Valley approached school climate improvement. Without restrictions or consequences, educators at both schools exhibited the collective desire and tendency to act as civic entrepreneurs (Durose, 2011) and citizen agents (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). Their actions did not emanate from a position of self-interest, but with a larger interest in mind, the development of citizens equipped to operate within the larger community.

The Panopticon Effect

Certain elements of the ABR in New Jersey schools are monitored by the State in such a way as to draw interesting parallels to Foucault’s (1979) surveillance theory and his discussion of the way power is enacted within systems. Foucault (1979) describes the panopticon as a physical or social structure designed to observe and regulate the activities of those in its purview. Foucault does not recognize individual or collective agency. Instead he views individuals as passive
participants in systems of power (Bushnell, 2003). While Foucault focuses on
students, Bushnell (2003) extends the concept by suggesting, “schooling can be
mapped as a panopticon in which teachers are in their cells, observed, and
monitored” (p. 256). This dissertation found that although the educators at South
Hills and Central Valley were subject to surveillance with the ABR, the power that
these street-level bureaucrats had access to within their communities was only
frustrated under certain conditions. Under other conditions, the educators felt not
only free to utilize this power, but did so with intentions and actions that were
aligned with the spirit of the policy.

This dissertation brought forth the reality that at both South Hills and Central
Valley, administrators and staff, felt the eyes of the State clearly fixed on their
activities related to the reporting, investigating and documenting of potential
bullying incidents. It was the fear of legal repercussions that restricted the use of
individual and collective agency at South Hills and Central Valley. With little
autonomy available to them in this area, educators were forced to place more
attention on compliance, rather than on seeking local solutions that might lead to
substantive change. The individual and collective power of these professionals was
subverted by fear.

In the absence of fear, however, educators at both schools demonstrated the
use of individual and collective agency with respect to school climate improvement
through teachers’ opportunities to reflect and act with intellectual autonomy, on
their presence within a collegial community, and on the trust they enjoy from peers,
clients and supervisors” (p. 255). When given the freedom and opportunity, the educators at South Hills and Central Valley utilized their professional judgments in ways that were in line with the spirit of the ABR. They acted as professionals and their activities aligned with organizational goals. A phenomenon of power does, in fact, exist within the communities of South Hills and Central Valley that could potentially be harnessed to affect significant and enduring changes that not only reduce bullying behavior among students, but also fosters a strong, cohesive community between and across all levels of the organizations. Because of fear, however, the power and passion that lies within each community to meet the needs of its members is kept at bay.

**Significance of this Research**

The significance of this research is that it highlights the importance of local school districts having access to adequate and appropriate resources to effectively interpret and make sense of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. Prior sense making research has shown that the contextual factors of human, social and material resources are essential for a quality sense making process that leads to substantive change (Coburn, 2001; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Spillane, 1999). Ultimately, the way in which the sense making experience is situated in schools can make a difference in the way policy is interpreted and implemented (Spillane, 1999). When educators have opportunities to understand policies on a substantive level, rather than just a surface level, there is a better chance of research-based policies taking hold at the local level and fostering actual change. In the absence of deep understanding of the
ABR, it is more likely that compliance will be experienced, rather than an actual change in school climate.

This research also illuminates a significant phenomenon of power that is available to educators as street-level bureaucrats. Across disciplines, research has concluded that discretion is an inevitable part of the work of street-level bureaucrats who are attempting to implement policies while operating in environments with scarce resources, little training and a lack of clear direction (Durose, 2011; Kelly, 1994; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Maynard-Moody, Musheno & Palumbo, 1990; Ricucci, 2005; Taylor, 2007; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977; Weissert, 1994). This discretion, akin to individual or collective agency, represents a potential phenomenon of power available to communities of street-level bureaucrats. By examining the way in which the ABR policy was interpreted and understood, this research found that this power was simultaneously frustrated and supported. Within this one singular policy, an interesting juxtaposition presented itself.

Stringent oversight and the potential for litigation shrouded the reporting, investigating and documenting components of the ABR in fear at the local school site level. Discretionary practices in this area were significantly curtailed by policy mandates and potential legal consequences. In direct contrast, educators approached the school climate improvement component with a sense of freedom and autonomy. Administrators and staff spoke openly, often with professional pride, about the various ways that they acted as civic entrepreneurs to improve the school climate. According to Lipsky (2010), in the absence of adequate resources, street-
level bureaucrats use discretion, often infused with “personal biases,” to cope (p. 85). This behavior, Lipsky suggests, is the result of street-level bureaucrats attempting to preserve their self-concept and their belief in their own competence. Identifying themselves as consummate professionals, the educators at South Hills and Central Valley demonstrated the way their values ‘organically magnetized’ them toward actions that aligned with the spirit of the ABR. Very often, according to Lipsky (2010) these discretionary decisions do align with organizational goals. Within each local community, fear frustrated the use of this power, while freedom allowed it to flourish.

**Implications for Policy, Practice and Future Research**

While this research is not generalizable due to its limited scope, there are potential opportunities to inform policy and practice, as well as suggest future studies on related topics. This final section will address all three of these issues. The potential value of this dissertation may be to spark discussion on New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights as it continues to take hold in schools and to further suggest ways of supporting research-based policy implementation efforts by supporting a quality sense making process.

**Policy**

Mandated State policies have value, especially when they are rooted in sound research. Many of the existing components of the ABR emerged as the result of *There Is Not a Moment to Lose: An Urgent Call for Legal Reform and Effective Practices to Combat Bullying in New Jersey Schools (2009)*, a report submitted by the New Jersey Commission on Bullying in Schools, which was developed based on
meetings, hearings, public testimony, research and analysis. State-level resources provided to support the ABR also make reference to research-based programs, such as the Olweus Bully Prevention Program referenced in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. After the initial passage of the ABR, the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force began collecting data regarding implementation at the local level. To date, the Task Force has submitted a 2013 Interim Report and a 2014 Annual Report. The 2015 Annual Report is due out in January. There has been a strong and sustained effort to develop and implement a bullying prevention policy in New Jersey that is grounded in research. This dissertation, by looking in depth at two middle schools, supported many of the findings of the task force, but also brought to light some additional challenges and areas for potential improvement.

The recent wave of implementation research suggests that implementation really is a problem of the smallest unit (McLaughlin, 1987). Therefore, this dissertation sought to look closely at the sense making process of street-level bureaucrats who are the smallest, or more aptly, the closest organizational unit to ABR implementation. Improving school climate and ultimately reducing bullying and other harmful behavior should be a priority in New Jersey. As Dewey suggests, “since problems of conduct are the deepest and most common of all the problems of life, the ways in which they are met have an influence that radiates into every other mental attitude...the deepest plane of the mental attitude of every one is fixed by the way in which problems of behavior are treated” (p. 49). Helping educators to understand bullying behavior and bullying prevention activities, and ultimately assisting them in making sense of the ABR, requires that the necessary resources be
made available. It is also imperative that opportunities for appropriate activation of these resources is provided.

While the State Department of Education listed numerous material resources on its website, many research-based, and offered professional development outside of the school and district for administrators, these efforts need to be enhanced and sustained. Quality social sense making opportunities are critical. There are two important ideas that warrant further policy consideration with respect to the ABR. First, ABR implementation might be enhanced if educators, at all levels of the organization, parents and community members received adequate, quality opportunities to engage in the sense making process. Second, policy makers should be wary of school behavior policies that resemble previous attempts at the implementation of zero-tolerance policies.

Administrators at South Hills and Central Valley concurred that the opportunities to dialogue with colleagues outside of the district were invaluable and that these discussions encouraged further internal communication. Continuing to support administrators by providing quality, external professional development that utilizes subject matter experts and allows for interaction with colleagues is essential. Armed with information and confidence, administrators can return to their local sites better prepared to turnkey information to staff and parents.

With additional funds for districts, release time could be granted for staff professional development. South Hills and Central Valley staff continually cited lack of time and competing priorities as being the biggest hindrances to ABR policy implementation and the sense making process. The fact that the ABR was initially an
unfunded State mandate sent a message to stakeholders. Even if this message was unintended, it did cause some educators to question the State’s full commitment to this policy. Although money was eventually allocated for a Bullying Prevention Fund, the red tape and conditions set forth on these funds continued to make it appear to be a more symbolic gesture than a substantive one designed to support real climate change in schools.

Fear was the prevailing sentiment with respect to ABR implementation. The overarching tone of fear surrounding the ABR at South Hills and Central Valley caused educators to focus more on the reporting and investigating components than on the improvement of school climate. From the perspective of the South Hills and Central Valley administrators, it was these reactive components of the ABR that were focused on during State-sponsored professional development sessions outside of the district. No mention was made of State-sponsored events that provided guidance on school climate improvement. Although, the spirit of the ABR portends that improving school climate is at the heart of the ABR, the lack of substantive State-level support for these initiatives reignites the symbolic versus substantive debate surrounding this policy.

The reactive reporting and investigating components of the ABR have some similarities to past zero tolerance behavior policies. While local school administrators do have some level of discretion in making determinations about what situations rise to the level of HIB, the litigious nature of this policy raises the question of just how much latitude is a reality. Research shows that zero tolerance behavior policies are ineffective and often have negative, unintended outcomes for
students (Brown-Davis, 2001; Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Force, 2008; Kajs, 2006; Martinez, 2009). With this research in mind, the *There is Not a Moment to Lose* (2009) study effectively balances the need for intervention strategies to curtail bullying behavior in schools with positive school climate improvement initiatives.

Lack of time, competing priorities and fear forced the South Hills and Central Valley educators to focus on the reactive components of the ABR, rather than prioritize school climate improvement. Achieving the intended balance between the reactive and proactive elements of the ABR may be one way to avoid negative outcomes for students. But this balance will require that the State fully and adequately support the local implementation of the research-based ABR components, especially school climate improvement initiatives. The goal of the ABR is to facilitate change in schools. This requires significant support and partnership from the State. It is important to note that administrators in this study appreciated the “teeth and claws” of this legislation, as well as the support it provided in approaching and talking to parents about their children's behavior. Within this collaborative process, keeping local districts accountable is by no means a bad thing.

One staff member, within the course of his interview, shared his view that accountability is necessary because “when you’re not held accountable, we take shortcuts as people.” There is a balance that needs to be achieved between State-level accountability and local autonomy that will make the best use of the power located among the professionals in the local school communities. Without a collaborative effort, there is a strong possibility that schools will continue to take a
reactive approach to ABR implementation that will maintain the status quo at the local level, rather than result in substantive change.

Supporting and strengthening the sense making process of all facets of the ABR could potentially enhance educators’ understanding of the wide-ranging implications of bullying behavior, as well as educate them on research-based bullying prevention programs. Armed with comprehensive information, the discretionary powers of these street-level bureaucrats may be unleashed in a direction mutually valued at all levels of the organization and society.

**Practice**

If policy makers work to more effectively partner with districts and support administrators in the sense making process related to bullying prevention and climate improvement, then administrators will be better equipped to partner with staff. Well-informed and knowledgeable staff will be able to educate, support and encourage their students within their local context. Educators ultimately want to be valued and respected as professionals. South Hills and Central Valley educators expressed this desire. However, they need to be provided with appropriate information and understanding of new policies when they are introduced at the local site. This is time well spent, especially when critical behavior policies are at the forefront.

With respect to the ABR, districts would benefit from improving the sense making opportunities for staff. At minimum, staff needs time and access to internal colleagues to dialogue about bullying behavior and climate improvement activities to facilitate a deeper understanding. Power Point presentations once or twice a year
will not adequately support a quality sense making process. Ideally, allowing staff opportunities for social sense making outside of the local site would better support and enhance the sense making process and educators’ ability to deeply understand the ABR.

Contextual differences at South Hills and Central Valley suggested that a one-size fits all approach may not adequately meet needs of students, parents or the surrounding community when it comes to addressing behavior issues and working to improve school climate. As educators acquire more knowledge and understanding in this area, they will be better equipped to support the specific student population they serve. Educators need to be trusted enough to know their charges and to activate their professional judgment and passion toward developing the most appropriate solutions. Staff at South Hills and Central Valley displayed clear tendencies towards acting as civic entrepreneurs and citizen-agents, when given the freedom to assume these roles.

If districts offered educators and parents opportunities for knowledge acquisition, conversation and reflection, the students would benefit. Time to think, reflect and learn needs to be valued at all levels of the organization. As educators engage in this process to deepen their understanding of the ABR, they will be modeling this process for students. However, districts cannot achieve a sound sense making process when they are continually inundated with State mandates, confronted with shifting priorities and devoid of the necessary resources. Partnership and cooperation is required at all levels from policy makers, to district administrators to local staff to parents and the community at large.
Implications for Future Research

South Hills and Central Valley were different in their size and demographic composition, as well as the resources available to them for the sense making process. Future research might look at schools with comparable settings to further understand the way that resource availability and activation affects the sense making process. By using what Marshall and Rossman (2010) refer to as second-degree span generalizing, additional data may be revealed. Using the process of transferability (Marshall & Rossman, 2010), there is also the opportunity to further examine the existence of the phenomenon of power available to communities of street-level bureaucrats in other local settings to gain a better understanding of how this power operates. Additionally, a longitudinal study designed to examine the entire sense making process of street-level bureaucrats beginning with policy inception might yield a depth of data that this study was unable to capture.

This study was limited by the fact that many districts declined to participate. Therefore, convenience sampling was the process that led to the selection of South Hills and Central Valley as study sites. Future opportunities to purposefully sample sites might allow a researcher to better control for and examine certain aspects of the sense making process and the behavior of street-level bureaucrats. This researcher, being an outsider, as well as a State-level employee, was challenged with building trust with the interview participants in a short period of time. Using an insider as the research instrument within the study sites might potentially yield additional data points not revealed in this dissertation.
Conclusion

There are negative consequences to bullying behavior. Research indicates that harassment, intimidation and bullying negatively impact social and academic achievement of both the victim and the bully (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara & Kernic, 2005; Nishina, Juvonen & Witkow, 2005; Rigby, 2008). Children who bully often carry these negative behaviors over into adulthood (Rigby, 2008), making this not just an issue in schools, but making it a real concern for society. Therefore, this dissertation sought to understand how educators in two middle schools made sense of New Jersey's 2010 Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights given the human, social and material resources at their disposal. The ABR is rooted and grounded in research and therefore, it was important to better understand the organizational process by which these research-based ideas were translated into practice at the local level.

This study determined that the sense making process of the educator participants was contingent on the types and levels of resources available to them. Social sense making opportunities emerged as a critical component needed to reach deep and meaningful understanding of bullying behavior, its future implications for individuals and society and a comprehensive picture of the ABR. Lack of time and competing priorities prevented educators from acquiring deep understanding that can lead to pedagogical shifts and substantive change. This study further revealed that while these educators innately acted as street-level bureaucrats working to manage and routinize their work in a chaotic environment, they most often utilized their discretion in ways that aligned with the intent of the policy. The educators at
South Hills and Central Valley were, at the core, committed to the social, emotional and academic well being of the students.

Fear, however, dictated the way in which these educators responded to ABR reporting and investigating procedures. As professionals seeking to maintain their jobs, they were careful not to deviate from policy mandates where potential legal repercussions were a reality. This fear sometimes acted to constrict their professional judgment, or individual agency, as they were forced to put the law at the forefront of their decision-making. However, in situations where fear was not their master, educators acted as civic entrepreneurs or citizen-agents working to achieve the best outcomes for students using creative and innovative solutions designed to meet individual needs.

When educators felt free to make decisions that were in the best interests of their students, there was a power in play that brought forth creative and locally appropriate interventions. Allowing for locally appropriate interventions may be the best way to facilitate and sustain change in schools. Finding ways to harness and encourage the organic tendencies of educators to act in creative and innovative ways towards building strong and respectful school communities should be a priority. There is a power available to communities of street-level bureaucrats in schools that should be recognized, honored and utilized.

Mining this power source may assist in moving the educational system away from a carceral (Foucault, 1979) feel to the school experience where fear guides action and the status quo is ultimately maintained. As Quicke (2000) suggests,
This freeing of agency from structure is compatible with liberal principles in so far as it celebrates and fosters individual autonomy, where this is conceived as only achievable through involvement in open, democratic communities. As such, it involves a release of creative energy which is directed in a positive, democratic-enhancing way at existing forms and structures, and helps to establish the social conditions for the realization of human potentialities, the flowering of new communities and the enrichment of life for all. (p. 300)

Moving away from the carceral function of education (Foucault, 1979) would mean fully supporting the sense making process, pulling back on overly prescriptive local interventions, and allowing educators more freedom to meet the needs of their school communities. State-level partnership is vital in providing research-based solutions and interventions that can be locally adapted. However, the State must also demonstrate commitment to the policies they mandate by providing more than just symbolic support. If there is true commitment to addressing HIB behavior in schools, for the sake of the students and society at large, then substantive State-level support in the form of locally appropriate resources needs to be a serious consideration.
References


APPENDIX A: DISTRICT/SCHOOL RECRUITMENT LETTER

[Date]

Dear [Anti-Bullying Coordinator and Principal]:

My name is Kristen Kugelman and I am a doctoral student at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. I am currently seeking two middle schools in which to conduct research for my dissertation.

My study focuses on how educators interpret and make sense of policy that originates from outside of the local site. Specifically, I am interested in how certain local contextual factors, such as human, social and material resources, affect the way in which educators interpret a policy. To look at this issue, I am using New Jersey’s HIB policy as a lens. I am reaching out to ask if you and some of the staff at [name of school/district] would be willing to participate in this study.

My research is a qualitative case study analysis that will be using individual interviews and focus groups as the primary data collection methods. As a former teacher, I do understand many of the frustrations that educators face. It is possible that this study could provide some very insightful information as to how educators make sense of policy and what types of resources act as supports or barriers.

I clearly recognize that one of the most valuable and scarce resources is time—and that is what I am asking from you and the staff. Specifically, I would like to conduct a one-time individual interview with the Principal, the Anti-Bullying Coordinator and the Anti-Bullying Specialist. Each interview would last approximately one hour.

I would also be conducting one focus group with volunteers of 4-6 educators in the school. The focus group would last approximately 2 hours in order to allow everyone a chance to speak. At a future date, I would follow-up the focus group with a brief, individual interview of each focus group participant to give each person a chance to share specific experiences. Let me assure you that all information would be kept in the strictest of confidence and names would be changed.

Please let me know if this is a study you would be willing to participate in. You can contact me via email at (kristen.kugelman@gse.rutgers.edu) or by phone at 609-462-3365.

I appreciate your time and consideration and I look forward to speaking with you.

Regards,

Kristen Kugelman
APPENDIX B: District/School Approval Letter

[Date]

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to give Kristen Kugelman, a student at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers, approval to conduct her dissertation research at [name of school]. She will complete her research during the 2013-2014 academic school year.

Ms. Kugelman will be researching how middle school educators interpret and make sense of New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) policy. The purpose of her research is to develop an understanding of the role that local contextual factors of human, social and material resources play in this sense making process.

I understand that Ms. Kugelman will be collecting data using qualitative research methods that will include audio-recorded interviews with administrators and teachers and the collection of school documents pertaining to staff professional development related to HIB.

Ms. Kugelman has informed me that all research associated with this project will be stored in a secure location and will remain confidential. Teacher and institutional pseudonyms will be used. Ms. Kugelman has also expressed the willingness to share the findings of her research with the district.

Administrators and teachers will elect to participate voluntarily and may choose not to answer any question or questions with which they feel uncomfortable. Any participant will have the right to withdraw at any time.

Sincerely,

Superintendent of Schools
APPENDIX C: Participant Consent for Individual Interview

Consent to Act as a Participant in a Research Study

Title of Study: A Street-Level Perspective: How Middle School Educators Make Sense of New Jersey's Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying Policy

Principal Investigator: Kristen Kugelman
Graduate Student
Rutgers University
Graduate School of Education
(609) 462-3365
Kristen.kugelman@gse.rutgers.edu

Invitation to Participate:
You are invited to participate in research that is being conducted by Kristen Kugelman, a doctoral student at Rutgers University. You are being asked to participate in a one-time individual interview that will last for approximately two hours. This consent form contains information about the study that will be reviewed with you. You will have the opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered. When all of your questions have been answered, you will be asked to sign this consent form if you agree to be in the study. A copy of the form will be given to you to keep for your records.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to understand how educators, as street-level bureaucrats, come to interpret and make sense of New Jersey's Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying policy and what role local contextual factors play in the process. No research is currently available as to how HIB is being understood by the educators tasked with its implementation. Bringing forth the voices of these individuals may help to identify supports and barriers to the policy implementation process.

Subject Selection:
You have been purposefully selected to participate in this study based on the following criteria: You are the school principal, the Anti-Bullying Coordinator or the Anti-Bullying Specialist in one of the identified case study schools.
Interview Procedures:
Your participation in this study will last approximately two hours. The interview procedures are as follows:

- As the principal investigator and interviewer, I will ask you a serious of open-ended questions about your knowledge and understanding of New Jersey’s Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying Policy and the way in which your school or district has implemented this policy.

- I will ask you to share your thoughts and perceptions about the implementation process in an effort to gain a better understanding of how this State policy is received and interpreted at the local school site level.

Interview Transcripts
Transcripts of your interview may be requested and reviewed by you for accuracy.

Benefits
You will not receive any direct benefit for participating in this research. However this research may provide policymakers and educators with some insight into certain local contextual factors that may support or hinder the way street-level bureaucrats come to make sense of policy originating from outside the school.

Risks:
There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research apart from a breach of confidentiality by the identification of study participants based on their title. The risk of any breach of confidentiality will be minimized by me by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and securing all information in either a locked drawer or password protected data file.

Compensation:
For your time and participation in this study, you will receive a $10 gift card.

Cost:
There is no cost for your participation in this research project, except the investment of your time.

Confidentiality:
This research will be kept confidential. School names will be changed and participants will be assigned a pseudonym. Research records will include some information about you, such as your name, position at the school and phone number. However, I will keep this information confidential by limiting access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location, either locked in a file draw at my home office or using a locked data file on my computer. My dissertation committee and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that
will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only generic results will be stated, unless you have agreed otherwise.

**Research Results**
Upon the conclusion of my research, the results will be made available to you.

**Withdrawal:**
Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time, and you may refuse to answer any questions you are not comfortable with.

**Audio Taping**
Interview sessions will be audiotape recorded to assure for greater accuracy in recording information.

**Research Questions:**
If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Kristen Kugelman at (609) 462-3365 or by email at Kristen.kugelman@gse.rutgers.edu or Catherine Lugg, dissertation chair, at catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu.

**Subject Rights:**
If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Sponsored Programs
3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
848-932-0150
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu
Voluntary Consent and Certification

All of the above information has been explained to me and all of my current questions have been answered. I understand that I may ask additional questions about this research should they arise during the course of my participation in the study.

By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research study. A copy of the consent form has been given to me.

___________________________
Participant’s Name

___________________________  ______________
Participant’s Signature        Date

************************************************************************

Audio Recording Consent

By signing this form, I agree to be audio taped by the principal researcher. A copy of this consent form has been given to me.

___________________________
Participant’s Name

___________________________  ______________
Participant’s Signature        Date
## Certification of Informed Consent

I certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study to the above-named individuals and I have discussed the potential benefits and possible risks of study participation. Any questions that the individual had about this study have been answered, and I will always be available to answer future questions.

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APPENDIX D: Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I would like to ask you some questions about your understanding of New Jersey’s Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying policy, specifically the most recent addition to this policy, the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) which was signed into law in 2010. Specifically, I am interested in learning about how you have come to understand and make sense of this policy. In order to work with a policy and put it into practice, we all need to have some way of making sense of what it means. I am interested in learning about how you have made sense of this policy and what resources have helped you to do that.

I am going to be asking you about three specific types of resources that may or may not have helped you in understanding the policy. I will be asking about human resources, social resources and material resources. To make sure we are on the same page, I want to let you know how I am defining each of these types of resources for the purposes of my research.

Human Resources: knowledge, expertise and experience
Social Resources: communication networks
Material Resources: tangible media supports, allocation of time and staff

If you need clarification at any point, please feel free to ask. If, at any time, you wish to conclude the interview, you are free to do so.

First, I would like to ask you a few general questions about yourself and about bullying here.

Background

1. How many years have you been at this school/district?

2. What was your role at the school/district in 2010 when New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights law took effect? What is it currently?

3. Tell me what you understand the definition of bullying to be.
   a. Is this an understanding you had before the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights became policy?
   b. What or who helped you to come to your current understanding of bullying?
4. Describe the environment here at your school.
   a. Do you perceive bullying to be a problem?

5. Did your school focus on bullying prevention prior to the 2010 ABR?
   a. Was there a formal bullying prevention program in place? Informal?
   b. Is there now?

Now, I would like to talk about what you understand about the HIB policy.

Knowledge (Human Resources)

1. How would you explain the components of the 2010 ABR policy to someone who did not know anything about it?
   a. Reacting to incidents.
   b. Preventing incidents.
   c. School Safety Team.
   d. Various levels of intervention.

2. How did you learn about the components of the State policy and how it would affect your school?
   a. Who told you?
   b. How were you told?
   c. When were you told?
   d. What kind of information were you given about your role in bullying prevention?

So far we have talked about the State HIB policy and the policy/process at your school. I would like to understand more about how specific resources may have affected your understanding of the ABR policy.

Resources to Support Understanding (Social and Material Resources)

1. How is information about the bullying policy shared at your school?
   a. Who is involved in the process?

2. What types of social or material resources are in place to support your understanding of the anti-bullying policy?
   a. Tell me about any training that has occurred or is ongoing.
   b. Tell me about any state-level supports or outside professional development that is available.
c. How is staff professional development supported? School Safety Team. Time.

d. Tell me about budgetary allocations for HIB implementation?
   a. State
   b. District

3. Tell me about specific resources that have been helpful in contributing to your understanding of the HIB policy.
   a. What would you like to see more of?
   b. What resources do you think have been most helpful to your staff?

4. Do you ever feel like there are not enough resources available or not the rights kinds?
   a. How do you cope with this?
   b. What specific types of resources would be most helpful to meet the objectives of your school’s Bullying prevention efforts?
   c. How much discretion do you need to use to fulfill your obligations?
      a. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being not at all and 5 being completely), how much discretion do you have to use?
      b. Do you feel adequately prepared?
      c. What would help you to feel more prepared to make decisions?

5. How well do you believe bullying is addressed in your school?
   a. Is the focus more on intervention (after an incident is reported) or prevention (improving school climate)?
   b. What resources are helpful in the implementation process?
   c. Tell me about hindrances that you observe in the process.
   d. If you could improve the process, what would you do or what do you need?

6. Do you believe staff has a consistent level of understanding about the policy?
   a. If yes, how do you think this has been achieved?
   b. If no, what has hindered achievement?

7. Is there anything else that you would like me to know about your school or the resources used to implement the HIB policy here?
   a. School resources
   b. State resources
APPENDIX E: IRB Approval

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
ASB III, 3 Rutgers Plaza, Cook Campus
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

August 14, 2012

Kristen Kugelman
7011 Elm Court
Monmouth Jct NJ

Dear Kristen Kugelman:

( Initial / Amendment / Continuation / Continuation w/ Amendment )

Protocol Title: “Lost in Translation: A Case Study of New Jersey’s Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying Policy in Two Districts”

This is to advise you that the above-referenced study has been presented to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, and the following action was taken subject to the conditions and explanations provided below:

Approval Date: 8/14/2012  Expiration Date: 8/13/2013
Expedited Category: 7  Approved # of Subject(s): 40

This approval is based on the assumption that the materials you submitted to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) contain a complete and accurate description of the ways in which human subjects are involved in your research. The following conditions apply:

- This Approval—The research will be conducted according to the most recent version of the protocol that was submitted. This approval is valid ONLY for the dates listed above;
- Reporting—ORSP must be immediately informed of any injuries to subjects that occur and/or problems that arise, in the course of your research;
- Modifications—Any proposed changes MUST be submitted to the IRB as an amendment for review and approval prior to implementation;
- Consent Form(s)—Each person who signs a consent document will be given a copy of that document, if you are using such documents in your research. The Principal Investigator must retain all signed documents for at least three years after the conclusion of the research;
- Continuing Review—You should receive a courtesy e-mail renewal notice for a Request for Continuing Review before the expiration of this project’s approval. However, it is your responsibility to ensure that an application for continuing review has been submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the expiration date to extend the approval period;

Additional Condition: Authorization from the following research site must be forwarded to the IRB prior to commencement of study procedures at the site(s): All Participating School Districts

Additional Notes: Expedited Approval per 45 CFR 46.110

Failure to comply with these conditions will result in withdrawal of this approval.

Please note that the IRB has the authority to observe, or have a third party observe, the consent process or the research itself. The Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) number for the Rutgers University IRB is FWA00003913; this number may be requested on funding applications or by collaborators.

Respectfully yours,

Sheryl Goldberg
Director of Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
gibel@grants.rutgers.edu

cc: Sharon Ryan
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
ASB III, 2 Rutgers Plaza, Cook Campus
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

September 26, 2013

Kristen Kugelman
7011 Elm Court
Monmouth Jct NJ 08852

Dear Kristen Kugelman:

( Initial / Amendment / Continuation / Continuation w/ Amendment )

Protocol Title: “Lost in Translation: A Case Study of New Jersey's Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying Policy in Two Districts”

This is to advise you that the above-referenced study has been presented to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, and the following action was taken subject to the conditions and explanations provided below:

Approval Date: 7/21/2013 Expiration Date: 7/20/2014 Expedited Category(s): 7
Approved # of Subject(s): 40 Currently Enrolled: 0

This approval is based on the assumption that the materials you submitted to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) contain a complete and accurate description of the ways in which human subjects are involved in your research. The following conditions apply:

- **This Approval**-The research will be conducted according to the most recent version of the protocol that was submitted. This approval is valid ONLY for the dates listed above;
- **Reporting**-ORSP must be immediately informed of any injuries to subjects that occur and/or problems that arise, in the course of your research;
- **Modifications**-Any proposed changes MUST be submitted to the IRB as an amendment for review and approval prior to implementation;
- **Consent Form(s)**-Each person who signs a consent document will be given a copy of that document, if you are using such documents in your research. The Principal Investigator must retain all signed documents for at least three years after the conclusion of the research;
- **Continuing Review**-You should receive a courtesy e-mail renewal notice for a Request for Continuing Review before the expiration of this project’s approval. However, it is your responsibility to ensure that an application for continuing review has been submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the expiration date to extend the approval period;

Additional Notes: Continuation with Amendment Expedited Approval per 45 CFR 46.110(b)(2) on 7/21/13 for Modification of Key Personnel(s): C. Lugg as New Faculty Sponsor (Additional); S. Ryan (Removed)

Failure to comply with these conditions will result in withdrawal of this approval.

Please note that the IRB has the authority to observe, or have a third party observe, the consent process or the research itself. The Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) number for the Rutgers University IRB is FWA00003913; this number may be requested on funding applications or by collaborators.

Respectfully yours,

Dr. Beverly Tepper, Ph.D.
Professor
Chair, Rutgers University Institutional Review Board

cc: Catherine A. Lugg
A STREET-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE: NEW JERSEY MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATORS

July 2, 2014

Kristen Kagelman
701 Elm Court
Monmouth Jct NJ 08852

Dear Kristen Kagelman:

Protocol Title: "A Street-Level Perspective: How Middle School Educators Make Sense of New Jersey's Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying Policy"

This is to advise you that the above-referenced study has been presented to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, and the following action was taken subject to the conditions and explanations provided below:

Approval Date: 6/27/2014
Expiration Date: 6/26/2015
Expedited Category(s): 6, 7
Approved # of Subject(s): 40
Currently Enrolled: 10

This approval is based on the assumption that the materials you submitted to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) contain a complete and accurate description of the ways in which human subjects are involved in your research. The following conditions apply:

- This Approval: The research will be conducted according to the most recent version of the protocol that was submitted. This approval is valid ONLY for the dates listed above;
- Reporting: ORSP must be immediately informed of any injuries to subjects that occur and/or problems that arise, in the course of your research;
- Modifications: Any proposed changes MUST be submitted to the IRB as an amendment for review and approval prior to implementation;
- Consent Form(s): Each person who signs a consent document will be given a copy of that document, if you are using such documents in your research. The Principal Investigator must retain all signed documents for at least three years after the conclusion of the research;
- Continuing Review: You should receive a courtesy e-mail renewal notice for a Request for Continuing Review before the expiration of this project's approval. However, it is your responsibility to ensure that an application for continuing review has been submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the expiration date to extend the approval period;

Additional Notes: Continuation Expedited Approval per 45 CFR 46.110; Closed to Enrollment

Failure to comply with these conditions will result in withdrawal of this approval.

Please note that the IRB has the authority to observe, or have a third party observe, the consent process or the research itself. The Federal-wide Assurance (FWA) number for the Rutgers University IRB is FWA00005913; this number may be requested on funding applications or by collaborators.

Respectfully yours,

[Signature]

Acting for--
Dr. Beverly Tepper, Ph.D.
Professor
Chair, Rutgers University Institutional Review Board

(FA)  cc: Dr. Catherine A. Lugg