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WISCONSIN STATE
LEGISLATURE ...
PUBLIC HEARING
COMMITTEE RECORDS

2009-10

(session year)

Assembly

(Assembly, Senate or Joint)

**Committee on
Education**

(AC-Ed)

(FORM UPDATED: 07/02/2010)

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**INFORMATION COLLECTED BY
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Date ?

**Testimony to the Assembly Committee on Education
Shel Gross, Director of Public Policy
Mental Health America of Wisconsin
SB154**

My wife and I received a holiday card from a high school friend of hers who we hadn't heard from in a while. The letter that came with the card was not your typical holiday letter, however. It told the story of their 19 y/o son's serious suicide attempt. While their son is now doing fine, like many such families they had no clue their son was in such pain or why. It turns out that his suicide attempt was a result, in part, of bullying that he had experienced starting in 5th grade.

Unfortunately, this story is not unique. As the attached fact sheet shows, being bullied is associated with depression and anxiety and increases risk of suicide in our young people. For this reason Mental Health America of Wisconsin supports the bullying prevention measures contained in SB154.

MHA's interest in addressing bullying stems in large part from our suicide prevention efforts through grants from the State of Wisconsin and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Our concern is for both those who are bullied and those who do the bullying—both are at risk for negative outcomes. We specifically addressed bullying in our Well Aware newsletter, which has been produced for school administrators as part of our federal grant. A copy of that article is also attached.

It is important to note, as that article makes clear, that bullying also interferes with students' engagement with school, which makes the school's involvement in bullying prevention an integral part of their primary role of educating our children. If children are not present at school because of fears of being bullied, or if they are preoccupied with thinking about being bullied while in school they are unable to learn.

We commend the work that the Department of Public Instruction has done in developing bullying prevention curriculum, but this curriculum will help no one if it is not put into action. SB154 will ensure that happens.

We are pleased to see bipartisan support for this bill and urge you to support its passage.

Bullying: What We Know

BULLYING: THE FACTS

Bullying is:

- ❖ Aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power or strength.
- ❖ Bullying can take many forms: physical, verbal, nonverbal or emotional (intimidation through gestures or social exclusion), and cyber (using the Internet, text messaging, or email to slander or embarrass).
- ❖ Bullying is a form of victimization, not a conflict.

The Prevalence of Bullying

- ❖ The incidence of behaviors such as bullying has increased, while school violence has declined in the past several years.¹
- ❖ Studies show that between 15-25% of U.S. students are bullied with some frequency while 15-20% report that they bully others with some frequency.^{2,5}
- ❖ In a survey of students in 14 elementary and middle schools in Massachusetts, more than 30% believed that adults did little or nothing to help in bullying incidents.³

BULLYING: THE IMPACT

Children who bully are more likely than their peers to:^{4,5}

- | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| ❖ Get into frequent fights | ❖ Steal property | ❖ Be truant from school |
| ❖ Be injured in a fight | ❖ Drink alcohol | ❖ Drop out of school |
| ❖ Vandalize property | ❖ Smoke | ❖ Carry a weapon |

Research has also shown that:

- ❖ Children who bully are more likely to report that they own guns for risky reasons, such as to gain respect or frighten others.⁶
- ❖ Boys who were identified as bullies in middle school were four times as likely as their non-bullying peers to have more than one criminal conviction by age 24.⁷

Effects of bullying

- ❖ Children who are being bullied are more likely than their peers to be depressed, lonely, and anxious; have low self-esteem; feel unwell; have more migraine headaches; and think about suicide.⁸
- ❖ Stresses of being bullied can interfere with student's engagement and learning in school, as well as cause fear of going to school.^{9,10}
- ❖ Bystanders to bullying are also impacted. The climate of fear and disrespect that bullying creates negatively impacts student learning.^{10,11}

This fact sheet was created by the Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources

(608) 262-9157 or (800) 248-9244 • <http://wch.uhs.wisc.edu>

WHAT WORKS IN BULLYING PREVENTION¹²

- ❖ Programs that show the most promise are comprehensive in approach. They involve the entire school community, including families, and incorporate school-wide interventions, classroom activities, and individual interventions.
- ❖ Effective programs require strong administrative leadership with ongoing commitment and staff development on the part of the adults in the school system.
- ❖ Bullying prevention efforts should begin early - as children transition into kindergarten - and continue throughout a child's education, with no "end date."

The most promising school-based bullying prevention programs incorporate the following characteristics:

- ❖ A focus on creating a school-wide environment or climate that discourages bullying
- ❖ Student surveys to assess the nature and extent of bullying behavior and attitudes
- ❖ Training to prepare staff to recognize and respond to bullying
- ❖ Development of consistent rules against bullying
- ❖ Review and enhancement of the school's disciplinary code related to bullying behavior
- ❖ Classroom activities to discuss issues related to bullying
- ❖ Integration of bullying prevention themes across the curriculum
- ❖ Individual and/or group work with children who have been bullied
- ❖ Individual work with children who have bullied their peers
- ❖ Involvement of parents in bullying prevention and/or intervention activities
- ❖ Use of teacher or staff groups to increase staff knowledge and motivation related to bullying

¹ **U.S. Department of Education.** (2002). National Center for Education Statistics, *The continuation of Education 2002*, NCES 2002-025, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002 and <http://nces.ed.gov/>.

² **Melton, G. B., Limber, S. Flerx, V. Cunningham, P., Osgood, D.W., Chambers, J., Henggler, S., & Nation, M.** (1998). *Violence among rural youth*. Final report to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

³ **Mullin-Rindler, N.** (2003). *Findings from the Massachusetts Bullying Prevention Initiative*. Unpublished manuscript.

⁴ **Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M.D., Haynie, D. L., Ruan, W. J., & Scheidt, P. C.** (2003). Relationships between bullying and violence among US youth. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 157, 348-353.

⁵ **Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P.** (2001). Bullying Behaviors Among US Youth: Prevalence and Association With Psychosocial Adjustment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 285, 2094-2100.

⁶ **Cunningham, P. B., Henggeler, S.W., Limber, S. P., Melton, G. B., and Nation, M. A.** (2000). Patterns and correlates of gun ownership among nonmetropolitan and rural middle school students. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 29, 432-442.

⁷ **Olweus, D.** (1993). *Bullying at school: what we know and what we can do*. NY: Blackwell.

⁸ **Limber, S. P.** (2002). *Bullying among children and youth*. Proceedings of the Educational Forum on Adolescent Health: Youth Bullying. Chicago: American Medical Association. Available online: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/39/youthbullying.pdf>.

⁹ **NEA Today.** (1999). *Easing the strain of students' stress*. Departments: Health. September 1999. NEA Washington, DC www.nea.org/neatoday/9909/health.html.

¹⁰ **National Education Association.** (2003). *National bullying awareness campaign*. www.nea.org/schoolsafety/bullying.html.

¹¹ **Banks, R.** (1997). *Bullying in schools* (ERIC Report No. EDO-PS-97-170.) University of Illinois Champaign, Ill.

¹² **Health Resources and Services Administration.** www.StopBullyingNow.hrsa.gov.

Devoted To:

- Improving academics
- Deterring violence
- Fostering resiliency
- Enhancing coping skills
- Reducing risk
- Preventing suicide

Boosting resiliency [protective factors in schools]

When it comes to resiliency, some students just seem to fare better than others. There are youngsters who bounce back readily from tough times. They appear hardy and quick to recover from adversity. These students are buoyant and self-reliant.

Then there are other students, those more prone to angst. They may be stressed easily and overwhelmed by circumstances that more resilient students often brush off. Poor academic outcomes for these stressed youngsters aren't the only obstacle they face.

These at-risk students can be prone to self-destructive behaviors and be vulnerable to negative things in their environment—bullying, cutting, binge drinking and drug use, promiscuity, and violence against others or suicide.

Protecting youngsters from suicide is not only about recognizing those at risk and intervening reactively to dissuade them from self-harm. Effective youth suicide prevention is much more comprehensive because it promotes positive behaviors that can reduce the likelihood that a vulnerable child will become suicidal.

Schools play a central role in fostering resiliency and protective factors, shown to be a key to student success—academic and beyond. As administrators, you can lay the foundation for a school culture where children feel a sense of belonging and connectedness. You can put practices in place that influence student behavior and boost outcomes. And you can encourage development of protective factors that indeed boost social and academic competence.



STRENGTHENING RESILIENCY IN YOUR STUDENTS Feedback from a national expert in protective factors for suicide prevention



John Kafets, PhD
Curriculum Expert
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As administrators, you know well that if students are stressed and not feeling safe, academics suffer. The good news? Noteworthy programs for suicide prevention in schools can help. Among these is the Lifelines™ program. A curriculum targeting students ages 12-17, Lifelines teaches warning signs for suicide, how to respond to a suicidal peer and help-seeking behaviors. A new CDC-funded study of Lifelines shows it increases teens' confidence in a school's ability to respond to at-risk kids. These findings are key, as enhancing students' trust in school staff may help break the culture of silence that isolates students at risk from adults who can help them. As a 30-year researcher and developer of curricula for at-risk students, I commend the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Mental Health Association of Wisconsin in collaborating on this *Well Aware* newsletter to support programs and policies so vital to children, their future and ours as well.

A bulletin for WISCONSIN education leaders including:

- School Board Members
- Superintendents
- Principals
- Student Services Directors
- Central Office Administration
- Deans of Students

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

School leaders can do a lot to boost resiliency in their students. First step? Consider protective factors for youths that can boost social and academic success.

UNDERSTAND THE RISK

Research shows that, on average, 11 percent of students have difficulty learning due to mental disorders. Moreover, youngsters with emotional disturbances have high dropout rates. So, it's critical that school personnel become more astute at identifying these children early and connecting them with resources.

PUT PROTECTORS IN PLACE

Fostering social and personal resources in youngsters can enhance their resiliency and guard against their succumbing to negative behaviors. These protective factors include:

Social Resources:

- Strong interpersonal bonds
- Social support
- Sense of belonging
- Strong attitudes and values that guard against suicide

Personal Resources:

- Strong sense of self worth and self esteem
- Good cognitive skills
- Sense of personal control
- Self-management skills to deal with stress, anger and depression

INTERVENE PROACTIVELY

Schools can do much to enhance student resiliency and promote protective factors. See "Helping Hand" on page 2.

Teaching empathy early on [helping students reach their full potential]

Compassion and empathy for others, especially for those less fortunate, is a cornerstone of a caring community. That's why districts throughout Wisconsin have embraced anti-bullying policies, and why DPI has expanded its Bullying Prevention Curriculum with instructional units for grades 3-5 and 6-8. That gives Jackie Baldwin of St. Germain a great sense of satisfaction.

A mother of two sons, now grown yet both with emotional challenges from an early age, Jackie watched as her boys battled ridicule and were ostracized by their peers. When younger son Mike told her he didn't want to be alive anymore, Jackie felt compelled to act. Her tenacity and advocacy supported the school

district in its efforts to implement bullying prevention that is in compliance with Wis. statutes, the Civil Rights Act and Title IX—all mandating nondiscrimination policies that prohibit harassment and intimidation, including in schools.

Yet Jackie's efforts to be more proactive about bullying and discrimination in her community were not without setbacks.

"At first my son felt that adults were not taking his concerns seriously, nor were they intervening to bring consequences to perpetrators who were carrying out acts of bullying," notes Jackie. She adds that her son was already coping with a disability and ridicule. Jackie urges schools to consider their culture and

climate, and work toward a more supportive environment for all. This was key, she notes, to her son's achievements which included a prestigious President's Education Award for outstanding academic achievement, and scholarship from the Nicolet College Foundation.

"The question is, how to assist the child not as resilient as others, and help them reach their full potential," Jackie adds. The biggest thing she's learned from her work in advocacy to counter bullying? "Kids need to be taught early on how to be compassionate. That's the core of the matter."

Learn more: DPI Bullying Prevention Curriculum at www.dpi.wi.gov/pubsales/pplsvc_2.html.



A critical barrier to student success, bullying often starts in early school years. It can negatively impact a student's connection with school and their overall ability to learn. That's why bullying prevention is critical to a school environment conducive to learning and where students feel safe at all times. It's also consistent with the New Wisconsin Promise to ensure a quality education for every child.



Reaction to Wisconsin Senate Bill 154 on the School Bullying Section

Date ?

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As far as the ten provisions under School Bullying in SB 154, I have no objections and agree with them since they appear to be the same ten that were in SB 202. I commend the State Legislature for a reasonably good start on a widespread problem in Wisconsin public schools.

My concerns revolve around two major issues.

- (1) **The use of the term bullying:** The concept of "bullying" continues to be diffuse and amorphous within the educational literature whereas the term harassment contains a more precise definition and has a legal discriminatory component to it. I have become quite familiar with the Pupil Nondiscrimination – Pupil Harassment Bulletin No. 99.03 published by Wisconsin DPI in 1999 and I have used its provisions in several of my research studies on disability harassment in schools. Wisconsin State Statutes cover many more protected classes than the federal government and likely most other states. The pupil harassment bulletin includes, for example, four types of disabilities: physical, mental, emotional, and learning as legally protected classes.

My most recent research indicates that disability harassment in secondary public schools (grades 6 to 12) in SE Wisconsin is ubiquitous across disability, gender, and racial ethnicity. Based on focus group interviews with four groups of young people with various disabilities and two groups of parents of students with disabilities, the participants reported that young people with disabilities are experiencing harassment in urban, suburban, and exurban/rural school districts (Holzbauer & Conrad, 2010).

In another study, K-12 teachers of students in special education reported that they frequently *observed* disability harassment conduct. In this study a total of 90 teachers in special education from an urban public school system in Wisconsin responded to 15 items. Across the sample, it was found that 97% of the teachers had observed school-related disability harassment of students in special education, with 56% reporting *many observations* of such conduct (Holzbauer, 2008).

- (2) **A lack of any enforcement provision in the bill.** I am aware of anecdotal accounts by parents with children in special education of how DPI and many other cases have not taken seriously formal complaints of disability harassment in school situations (Weber, 2007). If this is so, how will this bill, on generic and, likely, vaguely defined school bullying without any enforcement provision to comply, be any different in comparison to DPI's failure to respond to clear experiences of legally discriminatory harassment that is stated in their own well written policy bulletin from 1999?

What will make school districts in Wisconsin comply with the provisions in SB 154? Woods and Wolke (2003) in a study attempted to determine whether the content of anti-bullying policies is indicative of the prevalence of direct and relational bullying in 39 elementary schools with a total sample of over 2,300 students. In other words, do schools with a more detailed anti-bullying policy have lower rates of bullying? No correlation between the content and quality of bullying policies and the prevalence of direct bullying behavior was found. In fact; schools with the most detailed and comprehensive anti-bullying policies had a higher incidence of relational bullying and victimization behavior. In short, school anti-bullying policies per se may provide little guidance in regard to the actual amount of direct bullying behavior in schools.

As I stated in the beginning, SB 154 is a good start but what is truly needed is a systemic buy-in of the policy, which has serious consequences for non-compliance, starting with the school bully to the school secretary to the classroom teacher to the school principal to the superintendant of the school district.

Thank you for your attention. Please accept these two copies of my research manuscripts.

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Running Head: A TYPOLOGY OF DISABILITY HARASSMENT

A Typology of Disability Harassment in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study of disability harassment was to develop a typology of disability harassment experiences anchored in the perspectives of students with disabilities who have experienced harassment in urban, suburban, and exurban-rural schools. Based on focus group interviews with four groups of young people with various disabilities and two groups of parents of students with disabilities, six major types of disability harassment were identified and placed on a continuum from least to most aggressive. For each type, signature behaviors were ascertained as was their respective frequency. Based on the authors' findings, they propose several intervention practices for secondary schools that could help to address the multiple faces of this formidable challenge.

Over the last three decades there has been a rapidly growing body of literature that provides anecdotal accounts of harassment of young people with disabilities in a wide variety of social situations (Holzbauer and Berven, 1996). Among these accounts have been vignettes of disability harassment of an adolescent boy with a facial disfigurement due to a severe burn in a family situation (Vash, 1981), of a child with congenitally deformed legs in school (Wright, 1983), of young adults with learning disabilities at work (Williams, 1993), and of a teenage girl with a physical disability in the community (Eisenberg, 1982). In a similar vein, Wright provided other poignant stories of ridicule, taunts, and unrelenting jeers of students with disabilities by their peers who did not have disabilities. Linn and Rousso (2001) in their work on gender equity in special education, reported that many adolescents with disabilities pointed out how they had been teased, stared at, cornered, hit, and ostracized by their peers—and occasionally by adults—in light of their disability and placement in special education classes.

Consonant with the evolution of scholarly study of disability harassment, Holzbauer and Berven (1996)—who developed an early definition of disability harassment while concurrently inviting continuing dialogue on the concept—approvingly quoted Crocker (1983, p. 697) with respect to her definition of sexual harassment: “No definition will be absolutely complete—it is extremely difficult to encompass every dimension of a problem we are still learning about.” Since then, various definitions of disability harassment have been advanced (see Holzbauer 2002; 2004). For the purpose of this study, disability harassment is defined as *actual* “school-related harassment conduct on the basis of disability...that conveys aversion, denigration, or hostility toward a student in special education because of that person’s disability” (Holzbauer, 2008, p.166).

In Holzbauer’s (2008) study, K-12 teachers of students in special education reported that they frequently *observed* disability harassment conduct. In this study a total of 90 teachers in special education from an urban public school system responded to 15 items adapted from a workplace disability harassment

scale he had earlier developed (Holzbauer, 2002). Across the sample, Holzbauer found that 97% of the teachers had observed school-related disability harassment of students in special education, with 56% reporting *many observations* of such conduct.

As widely-reported in anecdotal literature, school-related disability harassment can create offensive, hostile, and intimidating school environments that can interfere with school performance and educational opportunities of students in special education. Two senior officials in the U.S. Department of Education, Cantu and Heumann (2000, p. 1) put it this way: Disability harassment can seriously interfere with the ability of students with disabilities to receive the education critical to their advancement.”

Notwithstanding the fact that disability harassment of students in special education is recognized as a form of illegal discrimination in all public schools, as are gender and other protected classes (Holzbauer, 2004; Weber, 2002; 2007), the harmful psycho-social stress of being devalued in harassing school situations—whether it is based on disability or gender—is almost always a deeply humiliating experience in which students face a choice between getting help and “keeping the secret” (Hamilton, Alagna, King, & Lloyd, 1987; Holzbauer & Berven, 1996). In such situations, students with disabilities no doubt are embarrassed and even blame themselves. In turn, students with disabilities no doubt underreport their experiences with harassment due to such fears as not being believed, little being done even if reported to school personnel, and fear of retaliation (Holzbauer, 2004). For many of the same reasons, parents of students in special education are often reluctant to file formal complaints of harassment in their school districts (Weber, 2007).

A report by Hergert (2004) indicated that parents of students with disabilities were very aware that harassment is disproportionately targeted toward children who are “seen as different” and less powerful—and that children with disabilities are even “easier targets” if they are small or awkward. In another research study, Sheard, Clegg, Standen, and Cromby (2001) employed a survey of parent concerns regarding 54 students with severe intellectual disabilities (ID) who had recently left school. They found that over one-half of the parents of these students strongly emphasized the harassment that their children had faced.

Not only do many individuals with disabilities drop out of high school because of harassment (Cantu & Heumann, 2000), but many continue to face an array of challenges as they transition from secondary school settings into postsecondary education and the adult workforce—even with support from special education and vocational rehabilitation (Hanley-Maxwell, Szymanski, & Owens-Johnson, 1998). As they transition to adulthood, many students with disabilities experience social exclusion, suffer low academic achievement, stop attending school, make few attempts to seek gainful employment, and drop out of the workforce altogether if they experience harassment in their first or second job (Holzbauer, 2004). As long as a stigma is held by student peers and educators in secondary schools, it will continue to remain a gateway to disability harassment (Corrigan et al., 2000; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988) and will thwart a major goal of special education and vocational rehabilitation, namely, successful transition to employment for students with disabilities (Holzbauer, 2004; Rubin & Roessler, 2007).

Especially in recent years, there is a growing body of scholarship showing that the experience of disability harassment is probably a highly significant barrier for students with disabilities in securing and maintaining employment. According to Holzbauer (2004), young people with disabilities who experience harassment in secondary schools are at great risk of not achieving the goal of successful employment in the short-run as well as the long-run. His argument is anchored in his own scholarship on the prevalence of *work-related* disability harassment, a study of 52 individuals who were eligible for services from a state vocational rehabilitation agency in the Midwest, which found that the experience of harassment for adult workers with disabilities is widespread (Holzbauer, 2002). Workplace disability harassment has also been found to be widespread in two recent studies (Chan, McMahon, Cheing, Rosenthal, & Bezyak, 2005; McMahon, Chan, Shaw, Wilson, Holzbauer, & Hurley, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

Notwithstanding the prevalence and the negative impact of disability harassment on students with disabilities in secondary schools and the plethora of anecdotal accounts in the literature, there is little

research that actually captures the myriad faces of disability harassment in concert with drawing on the voices of young people with disabilities as well as the parents of students with disabilities. Nested in this context, the overarching purpose of this study was to develop a typology of disability harassment experiences anchored in the perspectives of individuals who have been recipients of harassment rather than those of the harassers (Holzbauer & Berven, 1996). Specifically, the researchers sought to identify the major types of disability harassment in secondary public schools (grades 6-12), including the specific behaviors associated with each type along with the frequency of these behaviors. These research questions guided the study. (1) *What are the major types of disability harassment described by individuals with disabilities and parents of individuals with disabilities, and for each, what are the distinctive behaviors associated with it?* (2) *How frequently do these behaviors find expression?*

Method

A qualitative focus group design (see Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998) was the research method that guided the study. Focus groups, which have been used for sensitive topics with children (Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gilmore, & Wildon, 1995), on sexual conduct of young women (Overlien, Aronsson, & Hyden, 2005), and with low income populations (Jarrett, 1993), were used because disability harassment in secondary schools is clearly a sensitive topic. The following sections discuss the composition of the focus groups, recruitment of the groups, focus group procedures, roles of the moderators, data analysis, and data validation.

Focus Group Composition

The selection of participants for the focus groups was purposeful rather than random (Morgan, 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). The entire sample of participants, which altogether constitutes six focus groups, came from the greater metropolitan area of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Young people. The overall sample included four focus groups of adolescents and young adults.

Across the four groups, a total of 18 individuals (ranging in ages: 14 - 26) were selected. Seven of the 18 participants were ages 14 through 17 (having been selected based on their ability to recall their school experiences), and 11 group participants were adults, that is, 18 through 26 years of age. The reasoning behind this sampling strategy was: a) some participants had their secondary education extended until they were 21, if stipulated, in their Individual Education Plan (IEP) and, b) other participants were no longer in secondary school but still clearly recalled their secondary school experiences regarding harassment with a high degree of accuracy. The latter is likely due to the personal impact of their experiences, in some cases after years of reflection. (While the researchers found that the older adolescents and young adults were, in general, more articulate than the younger adolescents, there were two major exceptions. A female participant and a male participant, both of whom were 14 years old at the time of their focus group meeting, made especially meaningful contributions to the study.) These 18 participants included 12 individuals with a specific learning disability (SLD), four with cerebral palsy (CP), one with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), and one with a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

The challenges of segmentation and topic sensitivity were addressed as part of the methodology used in the study. Gender, which was evenly divided at 9 males and 9 females among the 18 young people in the study, was chosen as a segmented population. Even though race was not considered a segmented group, three people of color were included. Focus groups divided by gender helped the moderators maintain focus on the topic (Morgan, 1996) and encouraged female participants to openly address such sensitive matters as the interaction of disability and sexual harassment.

Parents. In consideration of the factors often associated with parental and youth dynamics in focus groups, Stewart and Shamdasani (1998) caution against including parents of adolescents in the same focus group as their children on the grounds that the presence of parents may reduce the willingness of adolescents to speak out and express their feelings. Therefore, two focus groups in the study included 14

parents of children with disabilities. To be selected, a single criterion was used: their child had to have attended secondary school. The disabilities of their children included: ID (5), SLD (4), CP (3), and ASD (2). Eight of their children were males and six were females. The parent-participants identified examples of harassment experiences that they had direct knowledge of or that their children had reported to them.

Size is yet another important variable in focus groups, especially with respect to special populations discussing sensitive topics (Hoppe et al., 1995; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). According to Morgan (1996), smaller is better. The average number of participants across all six focus groups was 5.3 with a range of three to eight members. Three overlaps existed of young people and their parents, with at least several weeks in between their respective group meetings. There was not any echoing of reports of disability harassment except for one account of a cruel prank independently described by a daughter and her mother, which enhanced the validity of that experience. In summary, this research study consisted of six focus groups (four young people groups and two parent groups) and totaled 32 participants.

Recruitment Sources

Morgan (1996) stressed the importance of identifying sources used in locating potential participants for focus groups and other information about recruitment procedures. In this study the lead researcher considered young people and parent participants from urban, suburban, and exurban-rural public school districts within Southeastern Wisconsin. The most effective method of recruitment proved to be when the researcher attended three transition programs and two resource fairs on weekday evenings and on a weekend. These events were designed explicitly for young people with disabilities and their parents. On each occasion, the lead researcher simply handed out informational flyers to willing young people and/or parents. The flyer stated: "I am doing a study of how young people with disabilities are treated in middle school or high school." If they were interested, potential participants wrote down contact information. A few parents called the lead researcher and were selected by telephone contact after an assessment of their

eligibility. Another major source for recruitment was through several offices for disability services on local area college campuses in the southeastern part of Wisconsin, such as the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UWW). The director of the Center for Students with Disabilities at UWW asked her staff on several occasions to facilitate the recruitment on campus of students with disabilities for the focus groups. In short, what worked was direct and sometimes ongoing contact with potential participants and a few other committed individuals who valued the project as an important line of inquiry. Last, and perhaps not least, another strategy in recruitment that enhanced participation was cash incentives. As Morgan (1998, p. 68) put it: "money matters in recruitment." Recruitment flyers also indicated that each participant would receive \$50 in cash at the conclusion of the focus group meeting.

Focus Group Procedures

A much debated question in qualitative research concerns the degree of standardization of procedures and the set of questions that are posed (Morgan, 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). Most scholars agree that the best decisions are based on conscious assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of standardization with regard to the goals of the particular project. For this study, each focus group meeting consisted of a time frame of 90 minutes. The proceedings were audio/video taped with the permission of the participants for purposes of obtaining an objective and accurate record of each event, including affective and non-verbal communications. Two disability organizations in metropolitan Milwaukee gave permission to conduct the focus group sessions at their locations. *Independence First* (two focus groups) is the area's center for independent living, and *Disability Rights Wisconsin* in one of its district offices (two focus groups) is the mandated agency for state-wide protection and advocacy for people with disabilities. Rooms in the UWW student union were made available to conduct the two other focus group meetings for student-participants with disabilities. All three facilities were easily accessible.

Focus group discussions require guidance and direction in order to remain *focused* on the topic of

interest. To that end, the lead researcher utilized a type of design described by Morgan (1993) that organizes the interview guide according to a “funnel” pattern that begins with open-ended questions and then proceeds to a fixed core set of questions. This has the advantage of maintaining comparability across groups in each discussion. Following the design of Morgan, the lead researcher incorporated a set of *a priori* guided interview questions that had been developed from a survey-questionnaire in the research study of observed disability harassment by teachers in special education (see Holzbauer, 2008). Sources of these types of observed harassment were derived from a review of the professional literature on disability, bullying in school and work situations, court cases, and legal guidelines. While these fixed questions for the young people (they were slightly modified for the parent groups) made up a significant part of each focus group meeting, open-ended questions were also used extensively across all of the focus groups.

Role of Focus Group Moderators

As with the degree of standardization, there is an ongoing debate over what should be the amount of structure and direction that focus group moderators should employ (Morgan, 1996). The answer can only be determined by the broader research agenda, the types of information sought, and the specificity of the information required (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). While encouraging open discussion, the moderators followed the overall design of Morgan (1993), which is a more or less directed approach. Since it was anticipated that some participants might need emotional support, two moderators conducted each of the six focus groups on the grounds that the participants were a special population and they were dealing with a sensitive topic (Hoppe et al., 1995; Race, Hotch, & Packer, 1994).

Data Analysis of First Research Question

The lead researcher identified another individual—a professor at a major research university with extensive experience in qualitative inquiry—to become a full-fledged partner in the study. Since the aim of the study was to identify the major types of disability harassment and the signature (distinct) behaviors of

each, a *positioned subject approach* (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 1993) was utilized that anchored the research findings in evidence that included direct quotations (Conrad & Serlin, 2007). More specifically, both researchers conducted the data analysis in two distinct sets, namely, first individually and then collaboratively. The four stages follow:

1. *Individual data analysis.* The two researchers each prepared a separate analysis of the data collected during the six focus group interviews. More specifically, each focused on identifying the major types of disability harassment and, for each, the signature behaviors associated with the respective type. Beforehand, individuals with exemplary transcription and typing skills provided verbatim accounts based on the entire audio/video recordings of the six focus groups for the historical record. All of the six interview transcripts were then read and all of the DVDs were viewed separately and, in turn, the researchers independently wrote up their findings across the focus group interviews.

2. *First joint data analysis aimed at identifying the major types of harassment.* The researchers subsequently devoted an extensive amount of time in face to face dialoging across their respective preliminary findings with a major focus on identifying the “major types of harassment” and a secondary focus on the “behaviors” associated with each. After extensive discussion, a tentative typology of disability harassment—along with a preliminary list of behaviors associated with each type—that drew on both of their earlier analyses was jointly developed. The resultant typology went significantly beyond their individual analyses. To illustrate, while both had identified three and four types of harassment, only two of the seven types of harassment that had been initially identified survived the joint analysis.

3. *Individual data analysis: Further testing of the major types of harassment and major behaviors associated with each.* Each researcher then reviewed each transcribed interview in light of the emerging typology and, in turn, made modifications both in the typology and in associated behaviors.

4. *Second joint data analysis: Further testing of the major types of harassment and the major behaviors associated with each.* In turn, several major changes both in the identified types and a number of

changes/additions in the number of the behaviors associated with each were made. Throughout this dialogical conversation, each of the researchers returned numerous times to the interview transcripts for purposes of refining harassment types and accompanying behaviors. Upon reaching theoretical saturation—that is, the theory was no longer being refined, they concluded their joint analysis. (Over the course of the analysis, it should be noted that several of the terms listed under “behavior” in transitive verb form were used as labels for one or more “types”).

These procedural steps were then followed for purposes of delineating, organizing, and presenting the findings: (a) consulting Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (1999) for accurate characterizations of distinctive behaviors; (b) coding all expressive examples of disability harassment for the six focus groups according to a system suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) such as, harassment reports from the first parent’s focus group were coded as 1P01, 1P02 ... and reports from the second [young] women’s focus group were coded as 2W01, 2W02 ... ; (c) systematically categorizing each coded example indicative of a distinctive behavior under a major type; and (d) selecting the more illustrative descriptive quotations for each behavior plus checking the original audio/video recordings to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis of Second Research Question

To ascertain how frequently the behaviors find expression under the major types of disability harassment, descriptive statistics were utilized. They included counting the results of numerical frequencies of the coded reported expressions in different dimensions of the behaviors found under the types of harassment (Fink, 1995). Three frequency categories were originally established for each report within a distinctive behavior: *once, a few times* (2-5), and *many times* (6 or more).

Data Validation

The lead researcher acted only as an observer during the focus group sessions to reduce potential

research bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 1998). In order to reduce other forms of research bias and reactivity in qualitative research, the researchers anchored their findings in several validity tests identified by Maxwell. They included: *searching for discrepant evidence* (identifying different types of harassment and discovering another group of harassers other than originally anticipated), *feedback* (securing the services of a qualitative data analysis researcher who was unfamiliar with the problem under study and who engaged in data analysis along with the lead researcher), and *comparison* (initially analyzing the data separately and independently by the two research analysts before coming together).

Results

Across the focus groups in the sample, the experience of disability harassment in secondary schools was ubiquitous and cut across the categories of disability, gender, and racial ethnicity as well as public school districts. However, there were two young men in a male focus group that seemed to go out of the way to minimize the psycho-social impact of harassment that they experienced. Yet ironically, at the same time these individuals emphasized that they had endured some disability harassment even though they claimed that their friends “had their backs” in middle school and high school. Exceptions, especially when rare, often prove the rule.

First Research Question

With respect to the first research question, which was to identify the major types of disability harassment and the signature behaviors associated with each type, six major types of disability harassment were identified. Within each type the researchers identified various behaviors based on statements of the focus group participants. In turn, the researchers chose to place each of the six types in one of three overall cultures of disability harassment [marginalization (relegation of a fringe group to the side-lines), denigration (defamation of a group), and intimidation (inducement of fear in a group and contemptuous treatment of that group)] that unexpectedly emerged during the data analysis. The six major types of disability

harassment identified are: pigeonhole, abandon, manipulate, belittle, scare, and violate (all in transitive verb form), which covers an assertive-aggressive continuum of types from the least assertive to the most aggressive. Under each type are signature behaviors that range from the least severe to the most severe. The three overarching cultures, the six types of disability harassment, and the signature behaviors under each type are displayed in Table 1.

<Table 1 here>

Quotations from focus group participants across the findings provide concrete examples of the distinct behaviors identified under each of the six major types of disability harassment—from least assertive (pigeonhole) to most aggressive (violate). Because these quotations at once give expression to and illuminate the findings, they are used to fuel the narrative presentation in the results section.

(1) Pigeonhole (to assign to a specific and often oversimplified degrading category):

Patronize – According to a high school participant with a SLD, “regular ed students will talk really slow to students in special ed as if they wouldn’t get it if they didn’t [over-enunciate]. D o y o u u n d e r s t a n d?”

Gawk– A college-participant with a TBI from an automobile accident upon returning to school explained:

“One day, when I was in high school, I just couldn’t handle people staring at me in the hallway—I could tell that they were—and it was just too much for me to handle.... [They] would stare me down until I would glare at them. . . . I don’t know why I was such an attraction to watch. . . . I was like a show. So I called my

mom to come and get me because I was sick. It was all I could do to get out of there.” *Spurn* – The

following statement was made by a working mother: “There was a pretty serious situation where what my daughter [with an ID] had to say was disregarded. She wasn’t [viewed as] a reliable reporter or something like that after a boy had pushed her into a concrete wall and chipped her front tooth [in high school]. She

said who actually pushed her but the school [officials] were like, ‘Well, nobody saw it and we can’t believe what she said.’” *Scorn* – Another student with SLD who recently graduated from college stated: “Some of

the students [in secondary school] wouldn't use put-downs [directed at me] and that was a problem. It was degrading the way that they looked at me and would treat me. It was like I was less of a person because I wasn't as smart as the other students. Like, how should I put it? I could feel it that it was there [from teachers, too], *but it was silent.*"

(2) Abandon (to withdraw protection, support, or help; to desert): *Ignore*--Teachers tolerate and ignore bullying of students in special education while administrators make excuses. I was constantly going to the administrator, not getting satisfaction at the middle school. It was just terrible for her [daughter with a SLD]." Several other parent-participants in the same focus group echoed her comments. One participant with a SLD stated in regard to the harassment: "You tell the teachers and they don't care. They don't say anything. They tell you to just ignore it, just walk away. When they [bullies] are after you, they just follow you." Another participant with a SLD who is a senior in college followed up with "because they know that there aren't going to be any consequences, nobody is going to stop them." A senior high school student with CP said that "my teachers didn't do a damn thing about it" [that is reporting harassment by other students]. *Neglect*--A high school participant with a SLD stated: "Like the teachers would help other kids instead of you 'cause they know that you can't, they think that you can't, understand subjects. So they will just, if you raise your hand and say 'I need help,' they will just go by your desk. 'Look at you.' They will pass you and help other kids." "Yeah, it's just like talking to the wall" another student with a SLD quipped; he then asked rhetorically: "you wonder if others [teachers in special and regular education] don't care if you fail or not fail? It's just like you get tired of it and just don't want to do the best you can." *Shun*--A mother of a daughter with dyslexia told how her daughter experienced a great deal of social isolation while in middle school: "Like when she would go and sit at the lunch table and they [other students] would get up and move to the next table and she is left sitting all alone. It got so bad at the middle school that I pulled her out. . . . In high school, it did not get much better. In phy ed class her peers select partners for different gym

activities and she is never selected. Nobody wants to be with her so she ends up with the phy ed teacher. In her other classes, too, teachers say 'pick your group' and nobody wants her in their group so she ends up doing a class project with just her and the teacher." *Shun*—"If you were a student in special ed, your reputation went down the tubes. So don't expect to be invited to any kind of party or anything. You're not going anywhere. Have fun staying home with your parents for the rest of your high school career."

Ostracize—A student with a TBI reported that "I would walk down the hallway and I would basically clear a path for myself. There would be two strands of people at my sides saying "Oh my God, I can't believe she's walking." *Ostracize* — A mother with a son with high functioning ASD often watched from a distance at her son's high school. In her words: "For the most part, other students do not know he exists, especially walking down the hallways. He eats at the special education table or by himself. It's [socializing]; he's desperate for it. He's desperate for friends. He's desperate for people to think that he's somebody. His grades are high enough but he's found out that hard work doesn't make him friends."

(3) Manipulate (to influence deviously; to falsify for personal gain): *Trick*—A parent who had become a strong advocate for her high school-aged son with a mild ID reported sarcastically how he was being set-up by his special education teachers: "You know what I really love is the harassment that they actually do to special needs kids who are behind. They tell them: 'You're going to graduate at 18, right? No later than 19.' They know mommy wants them to stay until they're 21 'We're graduating you at 18, right?'" *Feign*—Students in her high school would say to the participant with a TBI: "can I help you study for this test? I'd really like to just come over and hang out with you, watch a movie or something.' They would just say it in front of the teacher so the teacher would have the assumption that I had a study buddy . . . but then it would come time on Saturday morning when I called them and tried to set it up and they wouldn't answer the phone." *Entrap*—A parent with a high school student with ASD said: "Some kids might not know that he's special ed but that he's a little off, that he's a little odd. People think he's weird. He's gotten teased

and he can get angry and they'll tease him even more and he'll tease back but he'll be the one to get in trouble" [with the administrator]. Another parent reinforced this as follows: "I agree with you. When [her son with an ID] gets in trouble, he doesn't know how to give the perception of [knowing] what happened and he is always the one to get the dirty stick in the end." *Goad*—According to a junior in college with severe CP: "My speech therapist in middle school wasn't very nice to me, very rude. [She] tried to force me to communicate in ways that were inappropriate for me. She degraded me." *Slander*—According to a study-participant with a SLD, "that's how the rumors started: 'Ooh! Do you need some help? I'll help you study.' And then on Monday morning there would be a whole new barrage of stuff about you because they helped you so they could talk smack about you later." Another young woman with a SLD reported how "a lot of boys go around telling secrets about me . . . when [I am] walking down the hallway. You can hear everything they say about you. If you come up to one of them and ask what were they talking about? They don't say a thing." A third participant in the focus group added: "they'll say it was nothing; they just shut you out. 'Oh, I didn't say anything about you.'"

(4) Belittle (to represent or speak of a person as unimportant): *Tease*—One participant in college with a SLD told us: "Sometimes [while in high school], if I say something stupid or not . . . my friends mostly went 'dur, dur, dur' or something like that. They were just kidding around but like it kind of made me mad." *Needle*—A participant with a mix of dysgraphia and dyslexia said that a teacher would go out of her way just to needle him. As he reported, the teacher told him: "Well, you have two parents that are writers. Why can't you do this stuff?" Every single time she made a big deal when I didn't finish my homework, every single time she said: "oh, you don't have your homework again," and then she'd kinda wait for the laugh" [from the rest of the students in class in middle school]. *Name-Call (Epithets)*—A parent-participant of a high school student with CP emphasized that there is "verbal abuse among the kids with each other, disabled kids among each other and the other children. . . . Ah, my daughter would come home

crying. 'Somebody called me stupid and I can't talk right and retarded, that I look dumb.'" Another student in college with spasticity, a type of CP, said: "Some kids were mean, calling me 'spaz.'" Two parents talked about teachers in special education verbally abusing their children with a SLD and an ID respectively. In their words: "It's not just students in regular ed and special ed." "It is not just peers who are bullies but teachers working with my son, which say incredible things and are harassing him." A student with a SLD said: "It's the teachers. I almost filed a harassment order because he [her math teacher] called me stupid...because I didn't understand the assignments. The guy was a jerk."

Name-Call (Slurs)—"As for the ones who were a little bit delayed, there were a lot of times that I heard things said about the kids in special ed rooms. It is basically your typical 'retard' or something like that. For the most part, a lot of the people who did say these things didn't know who these kids were" according to a college student-participant. Other participants also indicated the "most common slur was 'retard'" [that they heard in their secondary schools]. *Name-Call (Slurs)*—A senior in high school with a SLD introduced a different form of slur as a gesture. "Some students do signs [beating their chest with an open-flat-hand-down] to me and other students in special ed." This is a crude sign that means 'retarded.' Another high school participant chimed in: "A lot of kids do it [use this hand sign] to like regular ed kids too 'cause they're acting stupid." *Gossip*—A junior in an alternative high school with a SLD told her focus group members "I didn't have that many friends. More people made fun of me because I didn't understand homework or whatever. Students talked behind my back and spread rumors and the whole school would know" [throughout her time in middle school]. Another participant with a SLD stated: [After he was beat up after school] "some kids 'like are you okay?' and then they would be like 'hey, this kid got punched and it was funny.' They just talk behind your back. *Mimic*—"Every day, at all the schools that I've been in now, when I'm walking the halls sometimes, they, kids, just make fun of me, how I talk and I'm like, are they saying that to me? But it's just, um, people turn on me—you know? They mock it" [the way he speaks], said a participant with a SLD and a nasal tonality to his voice. A male college junior with CP said: "I think in middle school it

goes back to the public thing that sometimes people would imitate how I walk. When I used to see it, it kind of got to me. 'You have no idea who I am.' In high school it didn't matter anymore. People could imitate me all they wanted but they're not going to break me down." A female college junior with CP indicated: "Yes, [there was mimicry of her] in the halls, especially in middle school, just in the halls when the teachers weren't around." *Ridicule*—A senior high school student with CP reported that boys without disabilities would "ask me to the prom and then not take me." Her mother independently in a parent focus group corroborated her daughter's experience of being "teased around homecoming and prom by a bunch of guys, such as betting who would ask her to the dance, only to let her know later on it was just a prank." *Mock*—A parent observed her daughter with an obvious ID who was slow to get on her school bus at home. "Waiting behind the bus, a lady jumps out of her car and yells 'hurry and get on the bus you stupid bitch.'" The same high school senior with CP indicates that "my walking on certain days [with her walker is difficult] totally. Like behind my back, 'she's crippled; she can't do anything, like she's stupid.' And I'm like saying they're stupid." Lastly, a college senior with a SLD of dyscalculia recounts that "I had a math teacher who knew that I had a problem and he would call on me anyway.' What about you; what do you think?' And I would always go: 'I don't know' and there were boys in the back of the class who would go: 'I don't know; I don't know.' They would mock me every time I spoke. They would mock what I said."

(5) Scare (to frighten; to alarm): *Taunt*—A freshman in high school with a SLD laments: "I hate being in special ed because people start making fun of me about how I have a disability. I can't get rid of it. 'Don't sit by him...' They say 'watch your back; he's in special ed; he might have diseases that pass to another person.'" *Prey*—A senior in college with a SLD related this experience: "There was some people who would actually stand outside the [special ed] room and wait: 'So who's going in the room? Are you in that room? So are you trying to go in here?' I don't know how many times I was late. Like, I would hide in the girl's bathroom and wait and then the bell would ring and I would run all the way to the room."

Prey/Threaten—[In middle school and high school] "she follows wherever I go. She follows me to the library;

she follows me to my class; she calls me names everywhere; and I hate it. I get real mad and want to get up in her face and say something but I don't want to get in her face because she'd tell that I threatened her...Like yesterday, she told me that she was going to beat me up. She is really smart. I'm not smart like she is" according to a participant with a SLD. *Threaten*—A parent-participant complained about threats by staff: "If you don't stop doing [blank], I'm going to do [blank]" to her daughter with an ID. *Torment*—A participant with dysgraphia and dyslexia reported: "Yeah, my teacher used to like try to make me write stuff on the board just so the class could laugh at me because I can't write well. So she just like, be like, 'who can write, you know? Oh, you.'" *Torment*—A mother stated that her son with an ID "had his mouth taped by a teaching assistant in middle school because he wouldn't stop talking. He doesn't have the filters to stop, to channel the energy."

(6) Violate (to rudely disturb or do harm to a person): *Trip*—A current high school student with a SLD talked about how in middle school "other students would trip me" in order to make fun of her as she would walk down the halls. *Steal*—A parent related how after pretending a friendship with her son [with an ID] in school the student would then take his money. "Just when I think he has a friend and I give him \$20 and they're supposed to go to the CD store, he comes back with a \$5 CD and no change." Another student with a SLD and a nasal tonality to his voice sadly related: "Like, some kids are like just go to my locker. I don't know how they could get my combination. Like, they'll probably ask a friend of theirs what my combination is. They will tell and they will open my locker. They will start taking, like my personal stuff, like my cell phone." *Shove*—A parent-participant indicated that there were "peers pushing and shoving and tripping" her son with an ID in secondary school. *Hit*—Two similar reports by parents are presented. "It's a long complicated story and it ends with her [a daughter with a SLD] actually being hit by the teacher... As far as I'm concerned, it's mandatory that they [the administrators] were supposed to report this. They did not do this. It wasn't reported to the police. It was reported to the school resource officer who asked the teacher if he did it, and of course he denied doing it and that was the end of it." The other parent detailed

accounts of “hitting, choking, kicking, and slamming of her son with an ID and another student in the classroom by a teacher. “So the principal called the police. I have to harass and harass the DA’s [District Attorney’s] department. Do you know that the DA did not bring charges against the teacher? So you come out feeling that they don’t care.” A third parent of a daughter with an ID said that “a boy punched her [daughter] in the eye, for no reason. [She] came home with a black eye.” Finally, this account: In middle school during recess after lunch, a participant with a SLD expressed how he would retreat to a small wooded area on the school grounds. “I would go in there just to get away from everyone and then some people [peers] would come corner me in there and beat me up.”

Second Research Question

The researchers asked: Within each of the six major types of disability harassment, how frequently does each of these behaviors find expression? They analyzed the data with respect to this question from three different perspectives. *Expression One:* The frequency counts of the evidential data are recorded in Table 2. The grand total equals 166 expressions of disability harassment from the focus group participants within the 28 distinct behaviors identified. From the three frequency categories of behavior expression, the *once* category was eliminated due to its singularity of frequency (see the behavior “trip” in Table 2) and was included in a *few times* category (2 through 5), which counted for 62% of the distinctive behaviors. In turn, 38% came under the *many times* category of 6 or more in which 11 behaviors of harassment are included within this category from most frequent (name-call) to least frequent (goad). The sum of the 11 behaviors (N = 100) makes up 60% of all the expressions within the 28 behaviors. *Expression Two:* All expressions of disability-related harassment in secondary schools, whether they came from student peers, school staff, or both, were recorded in the six focus group meetings. Accordingly, experiences of harassment based on disability by school staff or both school staff and student peers are reported for each behavior along with totals within the major types in Table 3. In summary, roughly 37% of the 166 expressions of harassment were placed in the categories of school staff (53) and both school staff and students (8). *Expression Three:*

The researchers analyzed the results from the unexpected emergence of a cultural perspective on disability harassment during the analysis stage. The total frequency in percent of the culture of marginalization equals 37% of the quotations of disability harassment and is not far behind the culture of denigration of 44%, which was anticipated to have the highest frequency (Holzbauer, 2008), especially under the harassment type of belittle with its 51 individual expressions found in Table 2. That leaves the culture of intimidation at 19%.

<Tables 2 and 3 here>

Discussion

The authors conclude by reflecting on the extent to which disability harassment in secondary schools is reported to be widespread by participants; reviewing the results of the first research question regarding the major types of disability harassment and their related behaviors; addressing the three frequency expressions of disability harassment identified from the second research question; and discussing various implications of the research for special education.

Ubiquitousness of Harassment in the Study

Across disability. While not explicated as a research question *per se*, it is important to emphasize the widespread harassment of secondary students with disabilities that cut across the focus groups. Twelve of the 18 young people in the focus groups indicated they had a SLD. While this disability is not considered an obvious one in comparison to other disabilities, such as CP (4) and ID (5 from the two parent groups), to other students and many of the school staff there was no apparent difference in reporting of experiences of harassment based on any specific disability under the six major types and with regard to the distinct behaviors in order of severity. In this context, it is worth noting that a previous study of workplace disability harassment of adults found that there was no inferential statistical association between the experience of harassment and obviousness of disability (Holzbauer, 2002). In short, this research suggests that individuals with disabilities are often known by other people as having disabilities in specific situations, such

as in school and the workplace and, in turn, they remain vulnerable targets for harassment even with a less obvious disability, for example, a SLD.

Across gender and race. The gender breakdown of the young people and the students of parent-participants were almost identical. In this study, student-peers and school staff alike were found to be equal opportunity harassers regardless of the gender of their targets. The results indicate that the incidence of harassment was only slightly higher within the overall *culture of intimidation* for males and under the major type, *manipulate*, for females in secondary schools; otherwise, there was no meaningful difference. The ubiquitous nature of harassment based on gender also mirrors the results of Holzbauer (2002) that found no statistical relationship between experiencing disability harassment and gender. Three of the young people and four of the children of parents (based on the racial ethnicity of their parents) from the focus groups were likely young people of color, roughly 22% of the total. There were no significant differences in regard to reporting disability harassment based on racial ethnicity.

Across school districts. The fact that disability harassment in public secondary schools cuts across school districts of the entire sample is an important finding of the study. Although the researchers did not originally intend to attain the specific school districts of focus group participants, they were able through indirect means to determine the locations of their districts. In dividing the 32 participants into three groups, 14 came from urban school districts, 14 from suburban districts, and 4 from exurban-rural districts. Across the focus groups interviews, the researchers concluded that there was far greater commonalities than differences between the three categories of school districts in regard to experiences of disability harassment except for the behaviors of *neglect* (usually by school staff) under *abandon* and *hit* under *violate*, which may be more common in urban school districts. These exceptions are understandable considering that, in general, many public urban secondary schools are reported to have a higher degree of difficulty in hiring and retaining quality educators and experience more routine fighting between students with and without disabilities. That said, the significant difference was with regard to the parents: parents

from suburban school districts, usually after much effort on their part, had a greater chance of engaging school administrators in solutions to challenges associated with disability harassment.

Major Types of Disability Harassment and Signature Behaviors of Each Type

The development and refinement of a typology of disability harassment came about through the unanticipated synergy between researchers, which included lively and extended periods of joint data analysis. Beginning with the first joint data analysis meeting that lasted an entire day, they found remarkable agreement regarding the identification of the six types of disability harassment along with the designation of least assertive to most aggressive across the types as well as the three overall cultures.

The approximately 60 different quotations of reported disability harassment experiences reported in the results section of the study stand poignantly on their own. These quotations, which represent more than one-third of the total number of quotations that could have been used, were identified based on four criteria: (a) they gave meaningful expression to disability harassment; (b) they have a ratio of approximately two student peers to every one school staff as harassers; (c) they provide insight into experiences that cut across specific disabilities, gender, and parents as well as younger participants, and (d) they provide evidence for each of the distinctive signature behaviors. More specifically, the researchers systematically started with the first type and first behavior and ended with the last type and last behavior in which they placed each of the 166 expressions of disability harassment in one of the major types and then decided where to include the quotable expressions after a distinctive behavior under each type. While subjective interpretation was involved in the selection process, there were only a handful of quotations that gave the researchers extended pause and reflection.

Three Expressions of the Frequency of Behaviors

First, the researchers compared the 28 distinctive behaviors of disability harassment, *post facto* of completing their analyses and reporting the results, to a recent survey study that described 15 specific

observations of disability harassment by teachers in special education (Holzbauer, 2008). The frequency of behavior expressions within the category of *many times* (six or more) from most frequent to least frequent in Table 2 included: name-call (epithets and slurs), ostracize, gawk, hit, ridicule, mock, and torment. By adding the behaviors of feign and mimic with a frequency count of five, these distinctive behaviors constitute 10 of the 15 conduct expressions found in the Holzbauer questionnaire with seven having identical terms and three being very similar in meaning (*gawk/stare*, *hit/physical aggression*, and *feign/patronizing aversion*).

Second, the fact that 53 of the 166 expressions of disability harassment came from school staff, which covered a hierarchical range of professional school personnel within secondary schools from educational assistants to school administrators, remains perhaps the most daunting of the findings. This fact combined with the eight reports of harassment initiated by school staff and conjoined by student peers, indicates a serious problem has come to light. Since the less assertive types of pigeonhole, abandon, and manipulate represent a higher percentage of harassment behaviors by school staff and staff/student peers in comparison to the more aggressive types (belittle, scare, and violate), student peers are likely to view the less assertive harassment of students with disabilities by the adults in their schools as a “green light” for them to join in and/or engage in more aggressive types of harassment of peers in special education. To demonstrate this phenomenon, Weber (2007) highlighted numerous accounts of disability harassment by school staff or staff and student peers in federal court cases.

Third, a similar view of the “green light” phenomenon is seen when evaluating the three cultures of marginalization, denigration, and intimidation in relation to disability harassment in secondary schools. The researchers concluded that within any culture, if individuals are viewed as existing on the margins of that particular culture, greater denigration is likely to be culturally tolerated, which can then lead to a culture of intimidation of them based on fear and resulting in aggression towards them.

Implications for Special Education

This concluding section discusses the relation of disability harassment and transitional risk factors; the impact of harassment discrimination on the legal profession, young people with disabilities, and their parents; the limitations of the study; along with recommendations for future research.

A seamless transition from special education to vocational rehabilitation at risk. Since the transition of students in special education from secondary school to higher education/job training to work is seen as key, high academic achievement and age-appropriate social maturity are two fundamental tools needed for success. Yet, this study found that many of these secondary special education students reported numerous harassment behaviors by their peers and teachers that negatively affected their academic achievement. Due to peer or self imposed social marginalization as a result of harassment, students with disabilities may often lag behind in normal adolescent interpersonal skills that take place during a critical time in their psychosocial development. This may result in advancing a school culture of denigration, thereby making them even greater targets for peer harassment in their isolation. In short, secondary students with disabilities are likely to remain undereducated and behind in ordinary social-interaction skills and therefore at risk for having a seamless and successful transition. Unless special educators, school administrators, and rehabilitation practitioners *seriously* examine the impact of stigma that disability harassment can have on individuals with disabilities and implement systematic prevention and intervention methods to reduce the marginality of individuals with disabilities in secondary schools, the laudable vocational goal of meaningful work will continue to be thwarted as students in special education attempt to move into the world of work.

Discrimination, fearful students, and angry parents. Disability harassment is an illegal form of discrimination in all public schools in this country and is covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (Holzbauer, 2008; Weber, 2007). Weber (2002; 2007) argues that many federal court judges have continued to resist viewing blatant and horrific cases of disability harassment by school

educators as a civil rights discrimination issue. Instead, they frequently have ruled that it is simply a matter of writing a different special educational accommodation for the student. In other words, rather than attempt to change a culture of intimidation, they order a change in the student's IEP.

Holzbauer (2004) lists three reasons why students with disabilities are fearful of reporting incidents of harassment: a) they think that they will not be believed (they should when school staff are the ones doing the harassment); b) they assume nothing will be done (they should when school staff repeatedly minimize or disregard their reports); and c) they anticipate retaliation for reporting incidents of harassment (they should when school staff often and routinely take the side of student peers without disabilities in harassment incidents and give those students a sense of entitlement to retaliate without having to face serious consequences). The findings from the focus groups indicate that these concerns have become a reality for many of the young people in the study. Is it surprising that many secondary students in special education who experience harassment quietly endure their humiliation as a customary and expected part of their role in life? If some of these students may be unfortunately resigned to that fate, the parents, as strong advocates, are angry and frustrated by the failure of school staff, especially administrators, to take effective action to prevent and intervene in incidents of harassment of their school children. This anger was palpable during both parent focus groups. Most were aware of their parental rights and the rights of their children in special education to be free of school-related harassment. However, in most of their cases, it made little difference. It appears that a common tactic taken by many school administrators at the local school and district levels is to avoid or delay responding to parents that have complained of disability harassment of their children.

Study limitations. There were several sampling limitations, which were based largely on demographic considerations. To begin with, the study was limited to the southeastern region of Wisconsin, specifically the greater Milwaukee metropolitan area. Other limitations included disability (two-thirds of the young people were students with a SLD), gender (only two of the parent-participants were males), and

racial ethnicity (three of the young people were from racial minority backgrounds, two Asian Americans and one Latino).

Recommendations for research. For a typology to be valid, it should be replicable and applicable in different contexts. Future researchers need to repeat this study (but with additional sources of data): (a) by comparing other geographic areas of Wisconsin and other regions of the country, (b) by having young participants be representative of a broader range of disabilities, which is ideally based on a physical genesis/mental-behavioral continuum of disability (Weiner, et al., 1988), (c) by recruiting parents who are more evenly divided by gender, and (d) by including participants from more diverse ethnic backgrounds. In addition, researchers should investigate what kinds of prior coping strategies were used by targets and parents and their effectiveness in school situations [see Holzbauer (2002) for a detailed account in this area regarding workplace strategies of adult recipients of disability harassment.] Above all, future investigators should examine the impact of secondary school disability harassment based on social stigma and how to deal with the multiple faces of the problem. Special educators, regular educators, school administrators, rehabilitation professionals, and researchers need to build on and extend this work.

In conclusion, the persistent low rates in high school completion, successful employment, and full community integration of young people with disabilities in transition remain major challenges that face special education—challenges in which disability harassment may often play a major role. This exploratory study not only found high levels of disability harassment but also a continuum of widely-varying disability harassment experiences of secondary students in special education—expressions reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of students peers as well as school staff. Anchored in a typology of disability harassment and specific behaviors under each type, this study illuminates the variegated landscape of disability harassment in secondary schools. In so doing, this research can serve as a foundation for addressing disability harassment in practice as well as inform future inquiry in the field of special education.

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Keywords: disability harassment; parents of students in special education; school bullying; secondary school administration; teachers in special education

Table 1

Three Cultures, Six Major Types of Disability Harassment, and Behaviors within Each Type

Culture of Marginalization		Culture of Denigration		Culture of Intimidation	
Pigeonhole	Abandon	Manipulate	Belittle	Scare	Violate
Patronize	Ignore	Trick	Tease	Taunt	Trip
Gawk	Neglect	Feign	Needle	Prey	Steal
Spurn	Shun	Entrap	Name-Call**	Threaten	Shove
Scorn	Ostracize	Goad	Gossip	Torment	Hit
		Slander	Mimic		
			Ridicule		
			Mock		

Note: ** Examples for this behavior include epithets or slurs.

Table 2

Frequencies of Reported Quotations for Each Behavior along with the Totals in Number and Percent of N=166 under the Six Major Types of Disability Harassment

Culture of Marginalization			Culture of Denigration				Culture of Intimidation				
Pigeonhole	Abandon		Manipulate		Belittle		Scare	Violate			
Patronize	5	Ignore	8	Trick	3	Tease	3	Taunt	3	Trip	1
Gawk	8	Neglect	10	Feign	5	Needle	4	Prey	2	Steal	4
Spurn	5	Shun	8	Entrap	5	Name-Call	17	Threaten	4	Shove	2
Scorn	4	Ostracize	14	Goad	6	Gossip	5	Torment	7	Hit	8
				Slander	4	Mimic	5				
						Ridicule	7				
						Mock	7				
Total 22 (13%)		Total 40 (24%)		Total 22 (13%)		Total 51 (31%)		Total 16 (10%)		Total 15 (9%)	

Table 3

Frequencies of Disability Harassment by School Staff (plus Both School Staff and Student Peers in **Bold**)
 Including Quotations Reported for Each Distinct Behavior along with the Totals in Number and Percent
 within the Six Major Types of Disability Harassment

Culture of Marginalization			Culture of Denigration			Culture of Intimidation		
Pigeonhole	Abandon	Manipulate	Belittle	Scare	Violate			
Patronize	5	Ignore 7-1	Trick 2	Tease 0	Taunt 0	Trip	0	0
Gawk	1-1	Neglect 10	Feign 2	Needle 3	Prey	0	Steal	0
Spurn	2	Shun 2	Entrap 1-1	Name-Call 3	Threaten	2	Shove	0
Scorn	2	Ostracize 3-1	Goad 5-1	Gossip 0	Torment	2	Hit	2
			Slander 0	Mimic 0				
				Ridicule 1				
				Mock 1				
Total 11 of 22 (50%)	Total 24 of 40 (60%)	Total 12 of 22 (55%)	Total 8 of 51 (16%)	Total 4 of 16 (25%)	Total 2 of 15 (13%)			

Disability Harassment Observed by Teachers in Special Education

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The occurrence and impact of disability harassment of students in special education apparently have a low priority for official policy makers and education administrators. Literature on policies of generic school bullying, one state's prohibition of pupil harassment, and a federal memorandum of school-based disability harassment are reviewed. The purpose of this preliminary study is to investigate observed occurrences of harassment of students with disabilities based on 15 specific types of harassment conduct and explore potential policy implications of such conduct. Ninety special education teachers from a large public school district reported on their direct observations of harassment of their students. The most frequently reported types that occur "many times" in rank order include epithets, slurs, mimicking, mockery, and staring. Overall, 96.7% of the participants report that they observed more than one incident of these types of school-related disability harassment conduct. Implications, study limitations, and recommendations for research and policy are discussed.

Keywords: disability; discrimination; school bullying; school harassment; special education

The issue of disability harassment in schools remains low "on the radar screen" for many official policy makers in education even though many students with disabilities continue to experience the long-standing problem of harassment (Holzbauer, 2004; Holzbauer & Berven, 1996). Anecdotal accounts have been portrayed in various media, for example, radio (National Public Radio, 2002), a popular check-out-counter magazine ("Up Front: Disarming the Rage," 2001), and a film available in DVD (*Pumpkin*; Barber & Abrams, 2002). Approximately 25 years ago, Wright (1983) provided several poignant anecdotal accounts of ridicule and unrelenting jeers of vulnerable students with a variety of physical disabilities by their schoolmates. Holzbauer and Berven included an account from the front page of a regional newspaper ("Better Than a Gift," 1993): Amy Hagadorn, a 9-year-old girl at the time with cerebral palsy that resulted in a limp and speech impairment, wrote a letter to Santa Claus sponsored by a local radio station in Indiana. "Kids laugh at me because of the way I walk and run and talk. I just want one day where no one laughs at me or makes fun of me." Some of her classmates mocked her, especially during physical education class and recess. In a book chapter on gender equity in special education, Linn and Rousso (2001) reported hearing repeated stories from adolescents with disabilities of being teased, stared at, cornered, hit, and ostracized by peers and sometimes by adults as a result of

their disability status and because of their placement in special education classes. The discussion of disability harassment often emerged unsolicited and with great passion. It was rare to find any young person with a disability who did not have a story of disability harassment to tell.

Review of the Literature on Policy Implications

Olweus (1994) stated that many students are the recipients of bullying for long periods of time, often for many years. The repetition of this kind of targeting has pernicious effects on students with special education needs who have a greater likelihood of being harassed than their peers without disabilities (Thompson, Whitney, & Smith, 1994). The special education literature has examined a variety of specific disability groups that are at risk of experiencing bully-harassment in school settings. These groups include visual impairment, cerebral palsy, speech impairment, intellectual disability, learning disability, and emotional disturbance (Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003; Mishna, 2003; Morrison, Furlong, & Smith, 1994; Nabuzoka, 2003; Sweeting & West, 2001;

Author's Note: The author expresses his appreciation to Joyce E. Demant for her assistance in the distribution and collection of the questionnaires and Jeremiah P. Holzbauer for his extensive help in recording the data.

Yude, Goodman, & McConachie, 1998). The disability groups represent a physical genesis/mental-behavioral continuum of disability from which Weiner, Perry, and Magnusson (1988) conducted an attributional analysis across this continuum of the reactions by students without disabilities to various types of disability stigma. Based on the study's results, stigma can be viewed as the gateway to disability harassment (R. J. Driscoll, personal communication, September 28, 2004).

A growing concern in special education is that hostile school situations harbor a bothersome number of students who are likely to prey on children and adolescents with disabilities (Flynt & Morton, 2004). In referring to children with disabilities, Wright (1983) declared, "The power of ridicule to defeat the recipient is so great that even a single such attack in childhood can leave emotional scars" (p. 333). Elementary school-age children appear to be especially vulnerable due to this early stage in their psychosocial development (Twemlow, Sacco, & Williams, 1996). In the view of Olweus (1994), it is a fundamental right for any student in elementary and secondary school to be spared the oppression and repeated humiliation that can result from any type of bully-harassment. Accordingly, whether harassment occurs with children, adolescents, or adults and whether it is based on disability, gender, race, or some other characteristics, Randall (1997) and Smith (2000) maintain that a systematic abuse of power by the harasser drives the dynamics due to "the harm-doer's tendency to denigrate" others, especially in the case of vulnerable students in special education (Katz, Glass, Lucido, & Farber, 1977, p. 419).

Policies on Generic School Bullying

A special issue on bullying in *School Psychology Review* (2003) highlights present research efforts on bullying in American schools and how this research can inform prevention planning. In one article in the special issue on state laws and policies to address bullying in schools, Limber and Small (2003) indicated that 15 states already have laws on bullying. They also devised model policy recommendations for state legislators, administrators of state departments of education, and local school district policy makers. Under the recommendation for local school districts, they suggested that policy makers promote research-based comprehensive bullying prevention programs, seek out training for all staff on bullying and bullying prevention, and coordinate bullying prevention activities with existing violence prevention programs within schools.

A well-designed research study in the special issue, which is one of a few outcome studies of a bullying prevention program at the elementary school level, included modification of the school ecology, education of students, and training of teachers (Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003). All of the more than 500 student-participants completed a pre- and post-anonymous survey 1 year apart on aggression and victimization. Among the younger children, a 40% reduction in the mean self-reported aggression and a 19% reduction in the mean self-reported victimization were found. Among the children in third through fifth grade, a 23% reduction in the mean victimization was observed but no significant differences in aggression were found. In contrast, however, Woods and Wolke (2003) in another study (not in the special issue) attempted to determine whether the content of anti-bullying policies is indicative of the prevalence of direct and relational bullying in 39 elementary schools in England with a total sample of 2,377 students. In other words, do schools with a more detailed anti-bullying policy have lower rates of bullying? No correlation between the content and quality of bullying policies and the prevalence of direct bullying behavior was found. In fact, schools with the most detailed and comprehensive anti-bullying policies had a higher incidence of relational bullying and victimization behavior. In short, school anti-bullying policies per se may provide little guidance in regard to the actual amount of direct bullying behavior in schools.

A State Policy on Harassment for Protected Classes of Students in Schools

Because this research study was conducted in Wisconsin, it is fitting to summarize the state's written policy on school-related student harassment for protected classes. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WI DPI, 1999) issued a bulletin in which it legally mandates that all school districts adopt pupil nondiscrimination policies to prohibit pupil harassment and develop discrimination complaint procedures. It was then widely disseminated to state public school district administrators. The bulletin has a pupil harassment section of an expanded list of legally protected groups that covers four types of disabilities (physical, mental, emotional, and learning) along with these other groups: gender, sexual orientation, race/national, origin/ancestry, religion/creed, and pregnancy/marital status. It also included sections on an extensive explanation of what is harassment, specific examples of harassment for each protected class, school district obligations, and ideas for prevention. A direct quote from the bulletin states:

School district policies and procedures must ensure compliance with the prohibition against pupil discrimination and harassment. This suggests that districts should also take affirmative, or proactive, steps to prevent pupil harassment. (WI DPI, 1999, p. 9)

Federal Government Policy on Disability Harassment of Students

On the 10th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), the respective assistant secretaries for the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services within the U.S. Department of Education wrote a joint memorandum on harassment based on disability that included guidelines on establishing an official policy. The letter of Cantu and Heumann (2000) was reportedly sent to public school principals and superintendents across the nation. The assistant secretaries stressed the seriousness of their concerns:

Disability harassment can have a profound impact on students, raise safety concerns, and erode efforts to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to the myriad benefits that an education offers. Indeed, harassment can seriously interfere with the ability of students with disabilities to receive the education critical to their advancement. (p. 1)

As a fundamental step, they indicated in the section on prevention that educational institutions must develop and disseminate an official policy statement prohibiting discrimination based on disability. A clear policy serves a preventative purpose by notifying students of disciplinary action. The assistant secretaries conclude that students cannot learn in an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, or ridicule. Harassment can inflict severe harm for students with disabilities. Teachers and administrators must take emphatic action. Because disability harassment is preventable and cannot be tolerated, they should address the issue of disability harassment not just when but *before* incidents occur.

Two Specific Policy Concerns Related to Disability Harassment in Schools

First, a specific problem of school-related harassment of students in special education could be of particular concern for professionals in the fields of special education and vocational rehabilitation. Disability harassment of students in special education may have a significant impact in their transition from school to work. The following risk factors include not attending school, not seeking employment, and

dropping out of the workforce if they experience harassment again early on in their work history (Holzbauer, 2004). Because public schools have to provide a free and appropriate education and are now legally responsible to guarantee that students with disabilities can learn in settings that are free of discrimination, disability harassment could seriously affect these students' ability to be in a position to seek and retain employment as adults.

Second, because the rights of students with disabilities to be free of harassment are covered under Title II of the ADA (1990), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEIA; Cantu & Heumann, 2000; Holzbauer & Berven, 1996; Weber, 2002), another significant problem is the legal ramifications based on complaints filed by parents of students with disabilities. Data reports from the OCR (2002), a federal agency within the U.S. Department of Education, indicate a trend of greater frequency of formal complaints of disability harassment. The OCR disability harassment complaints of students with disabilities have steadily been increasing in relation to a fairly constant total of all disability complaints in general for fiscal years 1998 (4.5%) through 2002 (7.3%) filed for elementary and secondary schools (see Table 1). According to Holzbauer (2004), the formal complaints of disability harassment filed with the OCR are "just the tip of the iceberg" (p. 6). Even though federal courts have been reluctant to award punitive damages in certain special education discrimination cases under Section 504 and IDEIA (Weber, 2002), the ADA may offer parents of students with disabilities a better formal avenue for redress (Jordan Rea & Davis-Dorsey, 2004; Katsiyannis & Herbst, 2004; Weber, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The actual prevalence of disability harassment of students in special education directly reported by them is currently unknown. The purpose of the study was to initiate a research-based investigation of observed occurrences of harassment of students with disabilities in public schools and to explore potential policy implications of such conduct. To accomplish that goal, the frequency of observed harassment was compiled by having a sample of teachers in special education respond to specific types of harassment conduct that they had directly observed. More specifically, the following research question was addressed: What is the frequency of direct observations by special education personnel of incidents of harassment of students with disabilities in school-related situations?

Table 1
OCR Complaints Based on Disability Harassment in Comparison to Total Disability Discrimination in Elementary and Secondary Schools for Fiscal Years 1998–2002 by Frequency and Percentage

Year	OCR Complaint Receipts			
	Disability Harassment		Total Disability	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1998	97	4.5	2,172	100.0
1999	90	4.0	2,276	100.0
2000	127	5.6	2,277	100.0
2001	156	7.0	2,235	100.0
2002	172	7.3	2,361	100.0

Note: OCR = Office of Civil Rights.

Method

Sample

Espelage and Swearer (2003) indicated that direct behavioral observations of children and adolescents in natural school settings are an ideal manner of collecting data on bullying frequency. Therefore, a sample was selected that consisted of special education personnel from a large, urban, public school system in Wisconsin. The participants attended a professional development special education transition workshop that was sponsored jointly by the teacher's union and the local public school district. They were asked to volunteer as participants for this study and to complete the Questionnaire on School-Related Experiences (QSRE). Out of 100 survey questionnaires that were originally distributed at the beginning of the workshop, 93 were returned. Because three of the participants filled out their surveys in an incomplete manner and were unusable, the final sample of special education personnel for the study is $N = 90$, providing a very high response rate.

The following characteristics of the sample taken from the QSRE included their present work status, grade levels of the schools in which the participants worked, gender, and ethnic background. Eighty-seven participants indicated their present work status as special education teacher, two indicated their status as an educational assistant within the special education classroom, and one participant wrote in occupational therapist on the survey for present work status.

To be comprehensive and inclusive within the grade levels of the elementary and secondary schools in which the participants worked, the participants were asked to

Table 2
School Grade Levels of Personnel in Special Education by Frequency and Percentage

Grade Levels	Frequency	Percentage
K-5 (6)	11	12.2
K-8	8	8.9
6-8	19	21.1
9-12	44	48.9
K-12	8	8.9
Total	90	100.0

choose one of the following: K-5 (6), K-8, 6-8, 9-12, and K-12. Table 2 provides this information by frequency and percentage.

The gender breakdown consisted of 72 female and 18 male participants. Finally, the ethnic background of the sample included nine African Americans/Blacks, one American Indian, three Asians/Pacific Islanders, three Hispanics/Latinos/Latinas, and 72 Whites/European Americans. Two participants failed to indicate their ethnic background.

Survey-Questionnaire Development

A survey instrument to determine the occurrence of disability harassment in the workplace already exists. Holzbauer (2002) developed the Questionnaire on Work-Related Experiences (QWRE). In an attempt to develop a set of items to describe specific types of work-related disability harassment, numerous harassment-related terms and types of conduct were considered. Sources of the specific types of identified harassment were derived from a review of the professional literature on disability, bully-harassment in school and work situations, court cases, and legal guidelines. First, terms were divided into categories of spoken words, gestures, exclusion, and physical aggression to facilitate organization following the guidance developed by the WI DPI (1999). Next, a dictionary definition of each term was analyzed according to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1999) to determine if the term fit into the overall definition of the work-related definition of disability harassment that was used by Holzbauer (2002, pp. 5-6). Items were then written in a clear behavioral format so as to apply to a potential work-related situation that resulted because of the individual respondent's disability. The following definition is an adaptation of Holzbauer that addresses school-related, rather than work-related, disability harassment of students in special education:

School-related harassment on the basis of disability consists of verbal, gesturing, exclusionary, and aggressive conduct that conveys denigration, hostility, or aversion toward a student in special education because of that person's disability. Such conduct can result in (a) creating offensive, intimidating, and hostile school ecology; (b) interfering with school performance; and (c) adversely affecting educational opportunities of a student with a disability.

The development of QSRE is an adaptation of the QWRE with 15 specific items that correspond directly with the terms and types of harassment conduct of the original questionnaire items of disability harassment except for a change in the situation, that is, school, not the workplace. One item (taunting) was inadvertently missed. Another item (constructive discharge) was deleted because it is strictly work related and could not be adapted for school-related situations. An example of a respective item (ostracism) from both the QWRE (Holzbauer, 2002, p. 164) and the QSRE (see the appendix) are provided here to illustrate the corresponding consistency:

- Because of your disability, excluded you on purpose from any work-related group activities that took place within or outside of your actual job location.
- Because of their disability, excluded them on purpose from any school-related group functions that took place within or outside of their actual school location.

Three other examples of disability harassment items in the QSRE follow that were observed by teachers in special education, which have virtually no difference from the self-report items in workplace harassment situations in the QWRE. Any students that

- attempted to mimic common behaviors, mannerisms, or speech patterns that are related to their disability or the disabilities of others.
- called students with disabilities degrading names related to their disability, such as "crip," "mental," "retard," or "spaz."
- teased them or performed pranks in a way that highlighted their disability for the purpose of entertainment.

Participants were directed to check one of four response choices: never, once, a few times, and many times for each item of school-related disability harassment (see the appendix for all 15 items in the QSRE with the inclusion of the terms in brackets to assist the reader after each specific harassment item).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed within the context of the research question (Fink, 1995; Hays, 1994). To facilitate

the interpretation of the data for the research question, the following four categories were initially defined to quantify the occurrence of observed school-related disability harassment for the 15 QSRE items:

1. *No observations* is defined as responses of "never" on every item describing different types of harassment.
2. *One isolated observation* is defined as a response of "once" to at least one of the items, with no responses of "a few times" or "many times."
3. *A few observations* is defined as a response of "a few times" to at least one of the items, with no responses of "many times."
4. *Many observations* is defined as a response of "many times" to at least one of the items.

Although the frequency of the category "no observations" was very low, the investigator decided to retain the category. Because the category "one observation" was singularly low, it was added to the "a few observations" category. The category "many observations" stayed without any change. Thus, three categories remained into which all participants could be classified: no observations, a few observations, and many observations.

To investigate the occurrence of school-related disability harassment observed by teachers in special education, the researcher calculated percentages of responses to each of the 15 individual harassment items to describe specific types of harassment. In addition, percentages of the participants that fit into the three categories were determined based on their responses to the 15 items.

Results

Participants were asked to report their observed experiences of specific types of conduct representing school-related disability harassment for the previous 2-year period. Data were then compiled on specific types of conduct observed and on the occurrence of harassment in general across all specific types.

Specific Types of Observed Disability Harassment in Schools

Items describing each type of observed harassment that emphasized a disability relationship (e.g., "because of their disability . . .") were written in a behavioral format, applying to school-related situations. Responses to the 15 items on the QSRE are summarized in Table 3. Types of observed conduct are ordered in the table according to the frequency of "never" responses, from the lowest to the highest. Therefore, the types of conduct appearing at the top of the list in the table are those that were most frequently reported (the smallest number of

Table 3

Specific Types of Disability Harassment Observed by Special Education Personnel Based on the 15 Items in the QSRE in Rank Order That Included Four Response Choices by Frequency and Percentage

Types of Harassment	Frequency of Observed Harassment							
	Never		Once		A Few Times		Many Times	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Slurs (2)	10	11.1	6	6.7	47	52.2	27	30.0
Epithets (1)	12	13.3	3	3.3	46	51.1	29	32.2
Mockery (4)	18	20.7	5	5.7	43	49.4	21	24.1
Mimicking (7)	19	21.1	4	4.4	44	48.9	23	25.6
Staring (9)	24	27.0	9	10.1	36	40.4	20	22.5
Patronizing aversion (6)	37	42.0	6	6.8	35	39.8	10	11.4
Ridicule (10)	39	44.3	9	10.2	56	29.5	14	15.9
Tormenting (8)	47	52.2	6	6.7	25	27.8	12	13.3
Intimidation (3)	47	52.8	5	5.6	27	30.3	10	11.2
Theft/vandalism (5)	49	54.4	6	6.7	27	30.0	8	8.9
Ostracism (13)	49	55.1	7	7.9	22	24.7	11	12.4
Retaliatory threats (15)	58	64.4	9	10.1	18	20.0	5	5.6
Physical aggression (14)	59	65.6	10	11.1	15	16.7	6	6.7
Exploitation (11)	60	69.0	6	6.9	16	18.4	5	5.7
Media denigration (12)	70	77.8	10	11.1	9	10.0	1	1.1

Note: The types of harassment are numbered in parentheses by order of appearance on the Questionnaire on School-Related Experiences (QSRE; see the appendix).

"never" responses). Totals for individual types of conduct vary from 87 to 90 because a few respondents failed to respond to all of the specific harassment items.

The results indicate that slurs in the QSRE ranked the highest, with 80 (88.9%) of all participants indicating that they had observed this type of conduct in their schools at least once during the previous 2 years, with 74 (82.2%) reporting having observed types of slurs a few times and many times. Ranked second, 75 (83.3%) of the participants observed epithets as occurring a few times and many times, which is slightly higher than slurs. The mean of 68.3% (more than two thirds) of the three highest ranked types of observed harassment conduct after slurs, that is, epithets, mockery, and mimicking, was reported to occur a few times and many times. Although all types of observed specific harassment conduct were reported to have occurred, more than 55% of the participants chose staring, patronizing aversion, and ridicule along with at least 45% that chose tormenting, intimidation, theft/vandalism, and ostracism. In addition, more than 30% of the respondents reported observing retaliatory threats, physical aggression, and exploitation one or more times. Last, even the lowest ranked type of harassment, media denigration, was reported to be observed by 22.2% of the participants. The types of observed harassment that the responding participants most frequently indicated as occurring "many times" in descending rank

order, respectively, were epithets, slurs, mimicking, mockery, and staring, which ranged from 29 (32.2%) to 20 (22.5%).

Slurs (the use of degrading words in general, not necessarily directed at a specific individual student) had the highest overall frequency of occurrence among the 15 specific types of conduct. Although slurs may not be directed at a particular student with a disability, they still comprise a powerful indirect message to young people who overhear them. The next three types of conduct, epithets, mockery, and mimicking, are considered to be unambiguous forms of disability harassment directed at targeted students with disabilities. The fifth- and sixth-ranked items, staring and patronizing aversion (the expression of pity), would seem to represent indirect types of conduct with some possible subjective interpretation involved by the observers. These types of conduct are in contrast to the more active and direct attacks of ridicule, tormenting, intimidation, and theft/vandalism that follow in order in addition to the lower ordered types of harassment of retaliatory threats and physical aggression.

Overall Observations of Disability Harassment in Schools

Frequencies and percentages of participants falling into each of the three defined categories of overall

Table 4
Overall Observation of Disability Harassment in School Settings by Special Education Personnel by Frequency and Percentage

Observations	<i>N</i>	%
No observation	3	3.3
A few observations	37	41.1
Many observations	50	55.6
Total	90	100.0

observations of disability harassment are presented in Table 4. As indicated in the table, participants were divided among the three categories on their overall observations of harassment. Of the 90 participants in the sample, 3.3% fell in the "no observation" category; 41.1% fell in the "a few times" category; and 55.6% fell in the "many times" category. Thus, 96.7% of the total sample reported that they had observed more than one occurrence of the 15 specific types of harassment conduct within a school setting during the previous 2-year period. Because the term "harassment" could be misunderstood, it was excluded from the QSRE so as not to bias the results. It is also important to emphasize that these overall results are based on the perceptions of the participant-observers, who could have underreported or overreported the actual occurrence of the various types of disability harassment conduct (Fowler, 1995).

Discussion

The actual prevalence of school-based disability harassment of students in special education, as reported directly by special education personnel, remains unknown. However, the overall findings of the study that 96.7% of a sample of teachers in special education observed harassment of their students would likely indicate a very common occurrence of disability harassment in schools and should lead to important disability policy concerns and further research.

Implications

School administrators and educators should be informed by these results that simply having a specific and detailed policy in place in their schools regarding harassment of students in special education might not be enough to prevent frequent incidents of disability harassment and its overall occurrence. As seen in the literature, it appears that much more needs to be done as in the cases of generic bullying in schools that may even include

model legislative policies (Limber & Small, 2003). In fact, Woods and Wolke (2003) demonstrated that schools with the most comprehensive anti-bullying policies had a higher incidence of bullying and targeting conduct. There also may be a disparity between a state's written policy that "must ensure compliance with the prohibition against pupil discrimination and harassment" (WI DPI, 1999, p. 9) of students with disabilities in its schools (in addition to the other legally protected classes of students) and the findings of this study. On the federal level, Cantu and Heumann (2000) provide not only guidelines on establishing an official policy on school harassment based on disability, which is an important and necessary first step, but also list several practical measures as ways to prevent and eliminate disability harassment in schools. However, to what degree have these measures actually been implemented in all elementary and secondary public schools in the nation as directed by them? Two other policy implications focus on the effects of school-related disability harassment. In the fields of special education and vocational rehabilitation, the harassment of students in special education would have a harmful impact on their transition from school to work (Holzbauer, 2004). Another serious implication relates to the trend of higher numbers of litigious complaints by parents of students with disabilities regarding the harassment of their children. These are documented in federal court cases (Weber, 2002, 2007) and based on data from the federal education agency for civil rights (OCR, 2002). Krall (1998) also warns school officials to avoid legal exposure to complaints of harassment based on students in various other protected classes.

Limitations

There were obvious limitations to the study: (a) The researcher used a "convenience sample" of participants who were involved in a paid workshop on a Saturday morning sponsored by a large, local school district and its teachers union. (b) Another limitation is the lack of a representative sample from other kinds of public school districts within Wisconsin or from other states in different regions of the country that may or may not have addressed pupil nondiscrimination in a similar manner as Wisconsin. (c) The 15 specific disability harassment items on the QSRE may have had a personal and emotional impact on some of the participants and, accordingly, as third-party reporters, their "objective" responses may be open to question. (d) Because the study was analyzed by using descriptive statistics, no statistical significance from the findings can be inferred or associations made.

Recommendations

This is an initial study of observed disability harassment in a large, urban school district. To get a truer picture from a research perspective, similar studies should investigate the extent of observed occurrences of this phenomenon in other school districts in Wisconsin as well as in other school districts around the country by using the QSRE or other carefully developed questionnaires. Quantitative survey studies also should be conducted that report school experiences of harassment by students with disabilities themselves through the use of the QSRE, which can be easily adapted for self-reporting of direct school harassment experiences. Other types of research should explore direct harassment experiences of students in special education through qualitative design methods, such as focus group studies (Holzbauer, 2007).

From a policy perspective, considering the likelihood of confirming the common occurrence of disability harassment in schools based on anecdotal accounts, higher numbers of federal complaints, litigation cases in federal courts, and research findings of current and future studies on this topic, the recommendations of Cantu and Heumann (2000) should be implemented, if not already done, by public school administrators. They list specific measures as ways to both prevent and greatly reduce disability harassment in schools:

1. Create an awareness of disability concerns and sensitivity to disability harassment in the school environment.
2. Encourage parents, students, and school personnel to report disability harassment when they become aware of it.
3. Publicize widely anti-harassment statements and procedures for handling discrimination complaints.
4. Provide appropriate, up-to-date, and timely training for staff and students to recognize and handle potential harassment.
5. Counsel both persons who have been harmed by harassment and persons who have been responsible for the harassment of others.
6. Implement monitoring programs to follow up on resolved issues of disability harassment.
7. Assess regularly and modify existing disability harassment policies to ensure effectiveness.

There is no research to date that indicates that the implementation of these policy suggestions would make a difference in the actual occurrence of disability harassment in school situations. However, future research studies should examine whether these policies can demonstrate a significant difference in the prevention of and the response to incidents of school-related disability harassment when they occur (also see Limber & Small, 2003).

Conclusions

The preliminary data in the present study suggest that the direct observations of special education personnel of school-related harassment may be an extraordinarily common experience for many students with disabilities. The findings point to the need for further research studies and effective policies, which are actually implemented at the local school level, to combat the occurrence of this apparent pernicious situation. It is imperative that an awareness of disability harassment by all educational professionals and a willingness on their part to assist these vulnerable targets of harassment will reach the same level of validation, prevention, and intervention that has been taking place for other legally protected classes, such as recipients of racial and sexual harassment in school situations. Students with disabilities deserve no less.

Appendix

Questionnaire on School-Related Experiences

How often have you observed any students that acted in the following ways toward students in special education BECAUSE OF THEIR DISABILITY? Consider *only* school-related conduct within the past 2 years.

ANY STUDENTS THAT:

- (1) Called students with disabilities degrading names related to their disability, such as "crip," "mental," "retard," or "spaz" [Epithets]
- (2) Used degrading words about people with disabilities *in general* (not necessarily directed at students in special education), such as those indicated in the above item [Slurs]
- (3) Because of their disability, made gestures that frighten them or showed them contempt, such as shaking a fist, finger-pointing, or spitting at them [Intimidation]
- (4) Told jokes about behaviors, mannerisms, or speech patterns related to their disability [Mockery]
- (5) Because of their disability, stole, damaged, or destroyed their personal possessions or things they needed for school [Theft/Vandalism]
- (6) Expressed condescending pity toward them because of their disability, which implied that they were inferior [Patronizing Aversion]
- (7) Attempted to mimic common behaviors, mannerisms, or speech patterns that are related to their disability or the disabilities of others [Mimicking]
- (8) Because of their disability, made any of their activities around school more difficult, for example, by blocking their path, bumping into them, or attempting to trip them [Tormenting]
- (9) Stared at them in a way that seemed to be related to their disability and made them feel uncomfortable [Staring]

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

- (10) Teased them or performed pranks in a way that highlighted their disability for the purpose of entertainment [Ridicule]
- (11) Because of their disability, withheld from them special assistance that was required [Exploitation]
- (12) Displayed various kinds of media, such as cartoons, e-mail or written messages, magazines, posters, or videos, that put down or made fun of people with disabilities [Media Denigration]
- (13) Because of their disability, excluded them on purpose from any school-related group functions that took place within or outside of their actual school location [Ostracism]
- (14) Because of their disability, physically attacked them, for example, by hitting, kicking, punching, or slapping [Physical Aggression]
- (15) Threatened students with disabilities about reporting any of the above kinds of conduct to school personnel or to outside adult authorities [Retaliatory Threats]

Note: Defined terms and types of harassment have been added in brackets to the Questionnaire on School-Related Experiences (QSRE) after each corresponding item of observable harassment conduct.

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