Peer Predictability: An Adolescent Strategy for Increasing a Sense of Personal Safety at School

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ABSTRACT. This action research and general system theory based qualitative inquiry examined adolescents' dependence on predicting the behavior of their peers as a strategy for enhancing their sense of safety at school and avoiding violence. A total of 95 adolescents in 9th through 12th grades from two small rural schools and one large suburban school in New York State participated in the study. Results indicated that students depend on Peer Predictability to feel safe during the school day when adults fail to predictably supervise or intervene in areas or interactions which adolescents perceive as potentially threatening. Familiarity leading to predictability allowed students to evaluate peers for the possibility of emotional or physical violence. This article presents quotes from the students that capture their unique experience.

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THE PURPOSE

The purpose of the study was to investigate adolescents' perceptions of what contributed to their feelings of safety at school and what constituted some of their strategies for enhancing a sense of security. As the primary stakeholders in the school, it was their perceptions for increasing a sense of school safety that were of most concern for this investigation. Typically, data on school safety consists of incidents of violence that come to the attention of adults, for example the Principal/School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence (US Department of Education, 1998b) and these incidents are filtered through adult perceptions. Characteristically, solutions and strategies for increasing safety at school are generated by adults without benefit of input from students.

THE PROBLEM

> *I think I would know which kids would have the potential to be violent, but you never know.* (Josh, 15)

Incidents of serious school violence ending in murder have captured the nation's attention since the multiple shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, and Santana High School, in Santee, CA. The probability of being shot at school is very low (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999), but the shootings that have occurred have seemed largely unpredictable. This unpredictability has resulted in anxiety for adolescents as well as adults (Gaughan, Cerio, & Meyers, 2001; Reddy et al., 2001).

While there has been an increase in multiple school shootings in the last ten years (Bender, Clinton, & Bender, 1999; National School Safety Center, 2000; Reddy et al., 2001), research indicates that the prevalence of its precursor, bullying and harassment, is far greater in American schools than was previously understood (AAUW, 2001; Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1999; Garbarino & deLara, in press, b; Nansel et al., 2001; Underwood, Pickett, & Worona, 2001).

Teens are bullied, intimidated, and harassed in psychological and physical ways everyday at school (AAUW, 2001; Garbarino & deLara, in press, a; Gaughan, Cerio & Meyers, 2001, Nansel et al., 2001). Research has indicated that teenagers adopt a variety of strategies to elude the perpetrators of their vic-

timization and to elude the feelings that are generated in this toxic environment. Adolescents skip school, skip specific classes, drop out of school, use alcohol and other drugs, and in some instances resort to suicide as means to escape the humiliation and intimidation they experience at school (Chandler, Nolin, & Davies, 1995; Cleary, 2000; Garbarino, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2001; National Crime Prevention Council, 2001; Pollack & Schuster, 2000; Portner, 2000; Speaker & Petersen, 2000). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents are particularly targeted and are at special risk for employing these strategies (Ryan & Futterman, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2001).

School Climate and School Size

Bullying and harassment take place within the context of school climate. Research on school climate is complicated by the lack of agreement on its constituent parts and its specific functions. Anderson (1982) describes school climate research as "the stepchild of both organizational climate research and school effects research" (p. 368). Instruments and methodologies to measure and evaluate school climate were borrowed from each of these disciplines. R. H. Moos (1979) is credited with conceptualizing a classification system of the human environment that can be applied to the educational setting. In 1979, Nwankwo defined climate as "the general we-feeling, group sub-culture or interactive life of the school" (Anderson, 1982, p. 369). Peterson and Skiba (2001) define school climate as the feelings that students and staff have about the school environment over time. They question whether staff and students feel the environment is comfortable, supportive for learning and teaching, organized, and safe.

Another way of viewing school climate is to consider school size and its impact. Barker and Gump (1964) studied the effect of school size on student behavior and attitudes towards school participation. One of the most profound outcomes of their study on school size is that students from large schools tend to feel "redundant" (p. 202). Certainly feeling redundant or unnecessary within any setting does not contribute to a healthy school climate for adolescents. Garbarino (1978, 1999) also discussed the impact of school size on the concept of climate. He describes large schools as discouraging active participation by the majority of students while leaving many students feeling "superfluous" (1980, p. 23). This is especially true for marginal students. Garbarino stressed that school crime is supported by impersonal school climate and that impersonal school climate results in inadequate observation and monitoring of students. Of particular importance, he cites the role of school size as "an excellent illustration of the processes by which alienation, apathy, and anomie (and their behavioral correlates) arise as psychological adaptations to a socially inadequate setting" (1978, p. 125).

Other research also suggests that sociological and organizational variables contribute to school safety and violent incidents. In particular, large and impersonal school settings (Alexander & Curtis, 1995; Olweus, 1993), a climate with a deficit of caring by adults (Kyle, 1999; Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001; Nodding, 1992; Peterson & Skiba, 2000) and poor school social climate (Astor, 1998; Noguera, 1995; Strike & Soltis, 1985) have all been correlated with forms of school violence.

In 1982 Anderson indicated that "understanding the influence of (school) climate will improve the understanding and prediction of student behavior" (p. 371). However, research that delves into the climate of the school in the context of adolescents' perceptions of safety is still scarce.

On the Role of Peers in Bullying and School Violence

Peers play a critical role in all aspects of bullying that occur at school (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; deLara, 2000; Fatum & Hoyle, 1996; Garbarino & deLara, in press, a; Goldstein & Kodluboy, 1998; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997; Lashbrook, 2000; Olweus, 1993; Smith et al., 1999). Conformity, for example, is actually highly prized among adolescents; consequently teens modify their behavior in conformity with their peers in order to fit in and not be targeted by bullies (Eamon, 2001; Lashbrook, 2000). In addition to conforming to specific social mores, students rely on their close friendships to protect them from instances of bullying (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). A form of social control, linked to peer groups, is exerted and maintained through bullying, according to a longitudinal study by Pellegrini and Bartini (2000). Peer influences, such as taunting, being picked on, being made to feel like an outcast, were cited by adolescents in national polls as causative factors in the shootings at Columbine (Gaughan et al., 2001; Lashbrook, 2000). In addition, research indicates that the role of onlookers or bystanders who witness bullying is an important factor in both the prevalence and prevention of bullying and harassment (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Center for Children, 2001; deLara, 2000; Garbarino & deLara, in press, a; US Department of Education, 1998a).

Although research has begun to document the extent of bullying and harassment that is typical in US schools (AAUW, 2001; Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999; Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1999; Hyman & Perone, 1998; Nansel et al., 2001) few studies directly involve students' perceptions of this pervasive phenomenon. Indeed, most research in this area is quantitative and leaves little room for student commentary. This fact should call into question the nature of the statistics currently being reported on school bullying and other victimization. One exception is a study of "unowned spaces and times" conducted by Astor,

Meyer, and Behre (1999) in which they elicited student feedback about violence in various locations in their high schools. While they were able to determine locales, times, and contributing factors such as lack of teacher presence, they concluded that further research is needed to systematically explore why violence occurs at school. An important suggestion and observation from their study was that "students are rarely asked to elaborate" (p. 7) on factors implicated in violent interactions.

Many adolescents do not feel safe at school (AAUW, 2001; Aronson, 2000; Garbarino & deLara, in press, a, b; Gaughan, Cerio, & Meyers, 2001) and they try to anticipate *where* on the campus possible bullying or harassment may occur and *who* may be a threat to them (deLara, 2000).

METHOD

Participants

A total of 95 adolescents (51 girls and 44 boys) in grades 9 through 12 from two rural secondary schools and one suburban school participated in the study. Both rural schools had an enrollment of approximately 500 students each. The suburban school enrollment was approximately 1,500. The students were from similar socio-economic backgrounds. They ranged in age from 13 to 18 years old. Adolescents from minority ethnic or racial groups represented only 9% of all participants. Of that percentage, 5% were Asian or Asian-American, 3% were African-American, and 1% Hispanic. All other participants were Caucasian. Though not randomly selected, the students were chosen to represent all achievement levels in order to ensure representing all the voices of the adolescents in the schools. It is important to point out that adults–parents, teachers, and administrators–in all three communities consider these schools to be safe schools.

Procedure

In this action research based inquiry, the students were full partners in the data collection and contributed to the interpretation of the data during the focus group and individual interview phases. Confidentiality was strictly observed and all requirements by the Human Subjects Review Committee of the university were met.

Data for the study were collected during focus groups and individual interviews. Written consent was obtained from parents or guardians for all participants. Four focus groups were convened. Three were held at one rural school and one was conducted at the other rural high school. No group was convened from

the suburban high school. At the first rural school, one focus group was comprised of "average" academic achievers (n = 26), one group consisted of "high" academic achievers (n = 15), and one group represented "at-risk" students (n = 8). In the second rural school, only one focus group was possible. Ten students from the "average" achievers were the members of that group.

Individual interviews were conducted at all three schools. A similar distribution of high, average, and at-risk students was utilized. Twelve individual interviews were held in each rural school and ten interviews were conducted with the suburban high school students. Interviews were 45 minutes in duration. There was an almost even distribution of male and female students (52% female and 48% male) who participated as research partners in this inquiry. A semi-structured interview format was used for the individual interviews and the focus groups.

Methodology

Action research and a general system theory framework were utilized in approaching the study. The nature of action research is as a cogenerative learning process in which local and expert knowledge are brought together (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Consequently, action research is gaining popularity in public school education due to its underlying philosophy of democracy and empowerment.

RESULTS

Students reported that they felt unsafe at various times during the school day due to bullying or harassing behaviors by some of their peers. Further, they felt unsafe as a result of what they perceived to be the lack of adult awareness of the extent of verbal and physical bullying. The majority of students from all three schools stated that adult supervision and intervention was lacking in the schools. Despite adolescents' need to try out what is new and different, when it comes to school, adolescents prefer a safe and predictable school environment. Teenagers are concerned about whether they can count on their friends or their teachers to step in when they are being threatened. Lack of predictability in the environment and of the other students was as much a threat as visible, physical danger to the students in this study. Students were particularly uncomfortable with the behavior of some specific groups of their peers described below.

One of the mechanisms that the adolescents developed to enhance their sense of safety was what I have called Peer Predictability. Effective peer predictability seems to have three basic components: small school size, familiarity or recogni-

tion by sight, and familiarity of behavioral range, patterns, and reactions. During the course of the school day, adolescents attempted to "size up" each other as potentially harmful or helpful. Those attending the small schools had the advantage in terms of familiarity; they knew virtually all other students in the building. Knowing the other students led to familiarity with the range of thinking and behaviors that typified each student. Once a spectrum of thinking and behaving was understood by the teenagers, then they felt they could fairly well predict the actions of their peers in all ways that were important, especially any that pertained to safety. The first element in the equation of peer predictability for the students was school size with all of its implications for enhancing familiarity.

Small School Size

Adolescents who attended both the large and the small schools reflected on the advantages and disadvantages for both. While there were noticeable disadvantages for teenagers in attending the small schools–"Nothing can happen here that everybody doesn't know about in five minutes"–this same element was a major plus for the equation of peer predictability.

In the small schools, adolescents not only had the opportunity for sight recognition of their peers, but also the chance to interact with most students. Even a modest amount of interaction time together, for example in a gym class twice a week, allowed students to compile data about one another. From this data bank, they drew conclusions and expectations about a peer's "normal" range of behavior. The range of latitude seemed to be fairly wide. A person may typically "lose it," according to adolescents, once a week by throwing books in class and swearing at a teacher. But when taken to the next step of overturning a desk, for example, the peer predictability barometer changed. This change in the barometer and in the peer predictability equation signaled a warning to the students. In the case of another peer whose usual behavior is cheerful and engaging, being atypically quiet and uncommunicative could be unsettling for other students. According to the adolescents in the study, at that point, some begin to wonder what is wrong, some may ask, some will begin to assess this peer's risk for harm to himself or others.

All of the students from the rural schools were convinced that small schools were safer schools. The students from the small high schools (500 students) compared their schools to nearby high schools that were double and triple the size of their own. For the students in the "at-risk" focus group, attending one of the nearby large schools was compared to being in a war zone. Approximately three-quarters of the students from the large suburban school thought small schools were safer. But all felt they would feel more secure if they knew more people at their own school. Attending a small school allowed for knowing all the

students and teachers. When asked "What makes you feel safe at school?" the following responses were typical:

> *My school being small makes me feel safe. There is no crime rate.* (Leah, age 16)

> *Small schools are a safe environment. They shouldn't be big. This school is getting bigger. The big schools, that's a problem. No one knows who anybody is.* (Crystal, age 17)

> *Our school is pretty big . . . you walk through the halls and every once in a while you see somebody you know.* (Aaron, age 16)

> *I like them small (schools) but not too small where everybody knows everything that goes on. This is the size I like (500 students). This is the size of all the schools I've been in. You have your really close friends, then the friends you hang out with, and then the friends you occasionally say hi too. You know everybody but not to tell everything to.* (Steve, age 16)

Unsupervised or under-supervised spaces were unsettling for the students. All of the students, from both small schools and the large suburban school cited the hallways, locker rooms, and restrooms as problematic in terms of their potential for bullying and harassment. Many used the strategy of avoiding the restrooms all day to feel safe. Others employed peer predictability while in the restrooms and locker rooms to enhance their sense of security. While a small high school allows for fewer unsafe or unowned spaces, it was not a guarantee to these students that they would be safe. A small school theoretically allows for greater adult awareness, supervision, intervention, and caring than a student can expect at a large school. Here are some typical responses regarding the notion of size and its impact on feelings of security:

> *I think the teachers at this school are really good. In big schools, there are so many kids and so little teachers. In this school all the teachers have a special bond with the students . . . we're like friends. In the bigger schools, there is just no way. You can't even remember all their names. Everybody feels close to everybody here. If somebody's going to fight, everybody's affected by it. Here everybody's close and together and knows everybody. In large schools; it's crazy. They have so many halls of lockers. I would be lost there.* (Samantha, age 15)

> *You're going to feel a lot safer if you can like know at least that, that kid who sits in the back of the class, he knows your name, I mean.* (Jenna, age 15)

> *For the first three years I was at this school (1500 students), I was scared all of the time. It's so big when you're a freshman you get lost just going to your classes. You get lost all the time. Now that I'm a senior, it's better. But I still don't know half the kids here. I don't like that feeling. Some of the kids look mean and they have an attitude. I don't know them so I don't know if they really are mean or not.* (Suzanne, age 17)

> *You've been with these people and you're able to know them especially in this kind of a school where it's so small. And you know the teachers now and after a year you know the people and that makes you feel safer.* (Thomas, age 14)

> *If you know somebody, you know how they are . . . and if something happens you know how they're going to react to it. But like with the other kids that you don't know, you could say something and they could just go off and beat you up.* (Crystal, age 17)

The quote above by Crystal supports the concept of the impact of predictability through familiarity. She says, "if you know somebody, you know how they *are*." She emphasized that the advantage to this knowing is that you can be prepared for "how they are going to react" in the future. This is a huge advantage in adolescent society. She stressed that in *not* knowing someone, a teenager runs the risk of saying the wrong thing. This could eventuate in being "beat up." The small size of the school promoted her ability to know the other students well enough to predict their behaviors and, therefore, feel safe.

The theme of speculating about feeling unsafe compared to other class sizes, other schools, or potentially their own expanded school in the future, showed up repeatedly in the data. As students pointed out, a small school basically enabled them to evaluate the people around them for potential types of interactions. When schools extend past some point of critical mass, the students' ability to discriminate among people and groups seemed to be challenged. Courtney, a high-achieving student, Lizzie, an average student, and Rob from the "at-risk" focus group commented on this:

> *The new renovation–it's going to double the size of the campus. I think a lot of people think that's unsafe because it's like you get so many more people. It's getting so much bigger. You feel so much less familiar with the people in your grade the bigger it gets. That's the problem with large schools–feeling unsafe because people don't really know each other and stuff.* (Courtney, age 16)

> *If I went to a big school, I would be a little more scared. I'm not the kind of person who likes to be around a whole lot of people like that. There's more things likely to happen in a big school like that.* (Lizzie, age 15)

> *Like Columbine, they had a graduating class of what . . . like a thousand or something like that? That's huge! How do you know who anybody really is?* (Tim, age 15)

In the perceptions of the majority of the students interviewed a small school meant a safe school, while a larger school equated to greater likelihood for bullying, harassment, and serious violence. Interestingly, prior to the shootings at Columbine High School, all instances of serious or lethal violence in high schools reported by the media had been in small schools in rural areas (Bender, Clinton, & Bender, 1999; National Alliance for Safe Schools, 1999)

The students' collective belief, and the experience of the rural students, was that small schools allowed students to get to know almost everyone. Knowing everyone led to their sense of being able to predict who was likely to act violently and who was not. This, in turn, allowed them to perceive their environment as secure or not. The following examples demonstrate this principle of familiarity that led to predictability:

> *I feel safe when I'm around people that I know–even if I don't like them, I know how they are, so that makes me feel safe. You have to know somebody. That's how I am; I have to know somebody, to trust, to be safe. To feel safe around anybody, I have to know them.* (Maryann, age 17)

> *I think feeling safe is . . . being familiar with people. Knowing what kinds of people are in the school.* Knowing what kinds of things they've done in the past or probably would do (*emphasis added*). *After Columbine one of the teachers said he wouldn't suspect anything would happen at our school but it wouldn't be a huge surprise if it did. All schools are equally targeted right now I guess.* (Brittany, age 16)

> *You don't just go up to other people and talk to them . . . you don't know what they're going to do. We'll talk with other kids on a field trip if we have to. We always stick together, my friends and me.* (Adam, age 15)

> *I've got to know what to expect to feel safe. When I went to a large high school, I wanted a bulletproof vest. But then everybody was like, Hi! Who are you?!–all friendly.* (Stacey, age 14)

These comments indicate that the students believed familiarity led to predictability, a critical component of their sense of safety. Virtually all of the students in the focus groups concurred that being in a small school helped them to feel se-

cure while at school. Three quarters of the students interviewed individually from all schools spoke of the importance of being familiar with other students, familiar with their behavioral patterns, and the importance of being able to predict one another's behavior.

Of exceptional concern to adolescents were peers that were once trusted or at least were categorized as predictable within a particular range of activity, who had moved out of that range. If a peer was no longer predictable, this called into question an individual student's ability to keep him or herself safe. It essentially challenged his or her ability to truly evaluate a peer. One student euphemistically called this "disturbing." Two examples of precipitants for this uncomfortable and insecure feeling are related here:

> *A 16-year-old boy urinated in a Pepsi bottle and gave it to a girl. The school suspended him. She sued the school. That is kind of disturbing to some of us. I kind of knew the person (the boy). You don't know who you can trust, sometimes. That person's trust fades away from you and you don't know what to do about it. It leaves a nagging feeling.* (Terri, age 16)

> *Last year there was a fight. I was in the middle of it . . . there was a girl coming down the hallway after this other girl . . . and these were decent people that I wouldn't have suspected this from . . . and she grabbed her and started yelling obscene things at her. I was caught in the middle. She slammed her into the lockers. I was kind of surprised and kind of scared that that type of person would do something like that.* (Tamara, age 15)

It was disconcerting or "disturbing" to these adolescents to find out that someone thought to be "decent" instigated or participated in a reckless and abusive incident. Afterwards, everything that had been considered good judgment about that person had to be reconsidered. A whole new set of cues has to be culled from the person in the environment. A new degree of vigilance must be brought to bear in connection with a person who could, formerly, be trusted to be non-threatening.

PROBLEMATIC PEERS

In both individual interviews and during focus groups, the students asserted that there were certain adolescents who were inclined towards igniting trouble in the school or on the buses. Many students thought categorically, and for these students all trouble was caused by the goths, the kids who are different, the hicks and scrubs, the druggies, the athletes, or the bullies. There was a fair amount of overlap in some of the categories. It was possible to be a druggie and a hick, or a

hick and an athlete. Not all the students subscribed to categorizing their peers and a few took the position that there were no distinct groups with any labels of any kind at their schools.

Of all the groups, the hicks and the druggies were the ones mentioned that engendered the greatest amount of fear. The common denominator for the two groups was their perceived unpredictability. The unpredictable behavior of the druggies was based on the fact that when high, students no longer behaved like their usual, familiar selves. Further, druggies were apt to engage in interactions related to extracting money for drugs from others. The money was obtained through aggressive means according to the students. Students feared the hicks because they were perceived to have the easiest access to guns. Moreover, they were the least averse to verbally harassing others.

Of interest was the inclusion of teachers as a group that made the school unsafe. Students wanted, and thought they needed, the monitoring of teachers and other adults on the premises. In addition, there were teachers at school who made adolescents feel insecure by virtue of some of their observable "scary" behaviors or due to a reputation for past bad and inappropriate student-teacher interactions.

All of the following responses were produced for the question: "What makes you feel unsafe at school?"

Goths

Anyone who appeared quite different from the norm, like students who dressed all in black and wore chains (goths) were feared–unless or until an adolescent could get to know them. The struggle adolescents had about their colleagues who either dressed like goths (in all black, with chains, and upside down crosses) or who declared themselves to actually be goths (which implies a range of specific behaviors) is highlighted by the quotations that follow:

> *Yeah, people that are like different, different from me, scare me. Like the Goths, they think they're normal; they dress in black like Marilyn Manson and stuff like that. They kind of freak me out. Some of them are nice. Like there's a girl in my grade, she dresses like that but she's a sweetheart. She's really nice. The people I know that dress like that don't scare me, but the people I don't know that are bigger than me that dress like that kind of freak me out. I think they dress like that to be different. Being average is boring, I hate that.* (Mandy, age 14)

> *When the whole "Trench Coat Mafia" thing happened at Littleton, then I'm coming to school and it's like "Oh my God" there's people wearing the trench coats and everything. Then I realized, I know these people. And I didn't think they would do something like that, but you never know. Some of*

them are different and they have the right to be different, but I don't see why they have to be all dressed in black, with upside down crosses and stuff like that–that kind of worries me a little. (Simone, age 15)

They're not just Goths . . . they also do their schoolwork. They just dress differently. (Tom, age 16)

Kids Who Are Different

"Kids who are different" as defined by the students were minority teenagers, students with disabilities, adolescents who dressed differently from most, students who themselves felt different, or students who were perceived as different based on the amount of bullying they received.

All students reported that "autistic kids" and other "handicapped kids" were the worst targets of bullying, followed by teenagers who were or appeared to be gay. Kids with "mental problems" or who are "slow or dim" were targeted for harassment. In focus group discussions the students felt guilty, and said these children should not be bullied because they had "an unfair disadvantage." Boys particularly were clear in saying that these students should not be victimized, but the boys were unsure that it could ever actually stop. Much of the victimizing for disabled children took place in the cafeterias, partially because this was typically a place where the level of adult supervision was often low.

"Getting picked on" was something the adolescents thought was inevitable. They could not see any way around it, though the majority said it made them feel bad much of the time. They seemed to feel badly that they could not envision any way of changing this pattern. They felt powerless and, at the same time, they were very aware of its place in the Columbine incident. They described how constantly being picking on could lead to "just snapping" one day. They said that picking on others "can make you feel good" momentarily because it gives you a sense of "power." They also expressed a sense of sadness that some kids got picked on every day even though they were "so annoying" they "bring it on themselves."

Some of the weird people at school make me feel unsafe. I think they might get ideas like the kids in Littleton or someplace else. (Caitlin, age 15)

I feel safe but I don't think I would if I was black or some other minority. (Jessica, age 14)

Rednecks picking fights make me feel unsafe at school. They are jerks. (Paul, age 16)

The poor kids make me feel unsafe, seriously. Not all of them. They don't like me cause they think I think I am better than them. Some kids say they will beat ya up but they won't. Some will though; that's the problem. (Steven, age 15)

The kids that talk about violence, and seem to enjoy it make me feel unsafe. They talk about video games, and it sort of freaks me out why they enjoy bloody and weird stuff. (Latoya, age 16)

Well any of the minorities . . . a lot of times I think they feel different, they feel that people don't like them. Like with Columbine, those kids were different and so maybe that's what made them do what they did. (Sara, age 15)

Maybe those kids who feel different are the ones we have to worry about. (Daryl, age 15)

Adolescents who were looking for attention, feeling neglected, or trying to be "cool" were often responsible for a good portion of the trouble-making at their schools in the estimation of several of the students.

There's some people who think they're "all that" and like to show off. Some people are back stabbers and get in fights once a month. There's this girl like that. She would never be my friend. (Janelle, age 15)

Yeah I think there's a population of the kids who feel neglected so, . . . and those are the kids who do those violent acts. They are kids who say, you know, "No one paid attention to me; I was neglected. Be my friend." (Kristen, age 15)

There's a group of kids that are different. It's not that there are so many of them. People tease them and they get all worked up over nothing. They get into a frenzy. They get violent with people over nothing. I think it's because it's their attitude . . . something that's troubling them at home or at school. It's their attitude. They're trying to be cool or trying to be that kind of a person. (Casey, age 16)

Well, my group, they want to fight. If someone's messing with me or my friends, they'll be like, "do you want to fight about it?" They try to start something. For something to do. This school is so boring. (Megan, age 14)

There is definitely the section of people who like to start something. Who like to see people be put down. (Molly, age 15)

Druggies

The druggies (adolescents who use and/or deal drugs), in particular, made about half of the students feel uncomfortable and unsafe during the school day. There was no difference between rural students' attitudes and the suburban students' attitudes about drugs at school as it pertained to feeling safe while there. The suburban school students, for the most part, seemed to show an attitude of greater acceptance of the fact of drug use, but still did not condone its use on the school premises. Unfortunately, the President's Goals 2000: Educate America Act signed into law on March 31, 1994, has failed in at least one major tenet thus far. Goal Six states, "Every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning" (Bonser, McGregor, & Oster, 2000, pp. 257-258). Drugs and alcohol are still available on high school campuses. One may be familiar with who the druggies were, but their behavior was unpredictable because they were either high or hassling over money for drugs ("Drugs are bad business; people get killed over drugs."). Students were ambivalent about what, exactly, the school should do about someone who was in attendance under the influence.

> *Like druggies. They think they're so much better than everybody else. They think they can go and just trash talk everybody and then like if somebody trash talks them, they get all offensive and say "I'm going to beat you up" and stuff. It's stupid. Bad things happen around drugs. People get killed on the streets cause of drugs and stuff. Some people are just mean. I think mostly it happens around people who are doing drugs. (Warren, age 15)*

> *I think if a kid comes into school high, maybe they should do something about that. I think the teachers are like our friends and they don't want to go and tell on us, you know. I don't like sitting next to somebody in class who's all doped up, high . . . saying stupid junk, disturbing the class. It's just stupid. Even the kids who do drugs just once in a while, laugh at them and mess with them. (Crystal, age 17)*

> *My sister said there is a kid in her gym class who comes in high everyday. Some teachers don't do anything about it. They don't care. If that could be helped a little bit that would be good. There isn't any other problems that are as big as the problem of drugs and alcohol.* (Courtney, age 16)

> *Some kids are pretty weird and they do some weird stuff. It's the boys who do drugs and stuff. Some, how they dress and how they look is scary looking. They always dress in black and have those chains and stuff. They talk about hate.* (Lizzie, age 15)

> *Mostly the people who are into drugs make you feel unsafe. They think they're all big and macho and the boss. Like it's the kids who use drugs. They're like pushing each other, "You owe me money." And people usually don't hang out with them anymore. They come to school high all high and everything. They're being all stupid.* (Melissa, age 16)

Drug use at school and bargaining about drugs at school were all factors that impinged on the adolescents' sense of safety in the building and on the school grounds. Half of those interviewed individually discussed concerns over drug use and druggies on the school grounds. Teenagers were concerned that adults in the community did not have adequate knowledge of the extent of drug use by the students. The fact that adults lacked awareness of the true extent of the problem made them feel unsafe at school as well as outside of school.

> *I don't think that people in the district have any idea how big the drug problem is. The students when they go to parties and houses . . . you see so many people that you wouldn't suspect of being drug abusers. There is a lot of marijuana. A lot of cigarettes and alcohol. The use of marijuana is very widespread.* (Gabrielle, age 16)

This sentiment is an exemplar of those made by students from all three schools. Their sense is that adults lack true awareness of the extent of drug use by teens in their communities. This lack of awareness on the part of adults, in and of itself, increases adolescents' sense of insecurity at school.

Hicks and Scrubs

Hicks and scrubs were basically the same adolescents, according to students in the focus groups and individual meetings. Many described hicks as "not knowing how to dress right" and living in the country. However, if a student knew how to "dress" appropriately and also lived in the country he or she would not necessarily be a hick. Consequently, a student who lived in a suburban or urban area could be considered a hick or scrub.

The hicks or scrubs were as feared as the druggies in all three schools. The hicks were perceived to have the easiest access to guns. Further, they were the least averse group to saying outlandish, rude, and harassing remarks. The hicks and scrubs participated in fights and were often considered bullies. The members of the third focus group, comprised of the hicks or at-risk students, readily admitted to be being bullies. Perhaps these perceptions combined with easy access to guns provided the fear base experienced by students towards the hicks. Students made the following comments as they struggled to put into words their conceptu-

alization of the hicks as unpredictable and, therefore, potentially violent both emotionally and physically.

> *The hicks say these things to you just to be out to impress their friends. They'll just be really rude and really obnoxious, you know.* (Nadji, age 15)

> *The hicks, I would say, do it the most–are rude and obnoxious. They're more open about it.* (Justine, age 17)

> *I am afraid that one of these days since we live in a hick town that one of the hicks is going to go postal and kill me.* (Ed, age 16)

> *People who are annoying or they could be poor or just not know how to dress very well, they don't wear the right clothes. They're the scrubs. They try to be something they're not.* (Marianne, age 15)

> *Their parents (the hicks) were hippies and they live way out in the country and they live on a farm. The parents have jobs like postal workers or farmers. Then there's the lower class people in that group.* (Nicole, age 16)

> *Scrubs, trailer trash kids, are unpredictable.* (Tyrone, age 15)

One girl pointed out that hicks were responsible for past school shootings. Indeed, prior to Columbine, all instances of mass shootings at schools that received extensive media attention had been in rural areas (Bender, Clinton, & Bender, 1999). Consequently, this may have supported her perceptions as she applied them to her own school.

> *I think a reason that the hicks kind of scare us somewhat is because in the multiple school shootings that have taken place, there's been 5 kids who have had that kind of background and they're like hicks in our school. So I think that's why we're more terrified of them then.* (Camille, age 16)

Athletes

According to the majority of adolescents in this study, athletes sometimes engaged in threatening and bullying behaviors. Athletes targeted freshman, in particular, for bullying and harassment. Students shared these comments:

> *I can think of one kid who is always causing stuff. He's an athlete. I'm friends with him; he's good to me. I don't have a problem with him. He picks on the younger kids, especially the freshman.* (Josh, age 15)

> *The boys who play sports–the athletes–make fun of the other boys, the weird ones. And the athletes hate them (the weird boys) for what they do. It's really strange.* (Lizzie, an athlete, age 15)

Athletes at Columbine High School were implicated by the school shooters, Harris and Klebold, as responsible for the teasing and taunting that eventually led to their plan for revenge (Gibbs & Roche, 1999; Portner, 2000).

PROBLEMATIC AREAS

In one rural school, one-third of the students reported that adults were not aware of potential problems occurring in the hallways. In the other rural school, over one-half said adults were unaware of problems happening in their halls. In the same school, almost three-quarters of the students were concerned that adults had no idea of the problems occurring in the restrooms such as fights, intimidation, and drug use. The students at the large suburban school were unanimous in concluding that adults were not aware of problematic interactions in their hallways until after a fight was in progress. They were also unified in declaring the restrooms were totally unsupervised and unprotected areas.

The responses in this section reflect the importance of knowing the people around and being able to predict their behavior. For many students the hallways represented a particularly problematic section of the school. Half of the students thought their peers were disrespectful towards one another in the halls. The comments below express other aspects of feelings of insecurity while in the halls:

> *When I'm walking through a hall, when older people I don't know are there, I don't feel safe.* (Leah, age 15)

> *The number of people in the hallways makes me feel unsafe. You get lost and can't be seen.* (Katie, age 15)

The cafeteria was a problem for many students. While students eagerly looked forward to lunch and break times to see their friends, scuffles and other outbreaks of aggressive behavior occurred in the cafeterias. They happened often enough that some students were willing to re-think adult supervision in the cafeteria in order to feel safer while there. Three-quarters of all students requested more adult presence and intervention in problematic interactions in the cafeteria. All students believed that there were not enough adults "on duty" during lunch periods.

> *There's fights in the cafeteria, and teachers don't even notice till afterwards.* (Jennifer, age 16)

> *The teachers just stand there in the front of the cafeteria. They can't hear what's going on in a whole room full of children. Sometimes they're not even there for the whole period.* (Greg, age 15)

> *There's only one teacher in our lunch period of five hundred kids. I see a fair amount of bullying at my school. There is this one small kid who always gets picked on during lunch by a couple of bullies. I think they are all juniors. One of the bullies will go up to the kid with his fist in the air until the little kid flinches and then the bully starts laughing. It's a regular thing. How do you feel when you see it happening? Like I'd like to do something. But there is kind of like a social norm to* ***not*** *do anything. If it was anything more than verbal (bullying) and empty threats, then I would do something. I'd say something.* (Peter, age 18)

Being inappropriately touched and having physical boundaries transgressed was an issue students worried about. Several of the students cited the locker rooms and bathrooms as difficult places for them during the school day. Interestingly, both male and female students in the group contexts easily discussed admissions of physical abuse, such as being punched, while only female students readily made disclosures over concerns about sexual harassment.

The school grounds had potential for being unsafe in the perception of one third of all students. Students from the at-risk group were the least troubled about safety problems on the campus outside. The factors that students cited as contributors included inadequate lighting, lack of adult supervision on the grounds, students using drugs, and unfamiliar students on the property. Students also commented about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This circumstance and the consequences that could result triggered student concerns over unpredictability of teachers and other adults.

> *Being somewhere where someone is doing something wrong makes me feel unsafe because I don't want to deal with their consequences for just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.* (Jacob, age 17)

The question of fairness, though a developmental issue that arises around the age of ten years, is still prominent for this age group (Atwater, 1992).

Jake, a seventeen-year-old senior at the large suburban high school, told this story about why predictability was important to him:

> *It is important to know the other kids around you. For example, there are some kids who do crazy things in the Quad. Like they climb up in trees and throw pinecones at other kids. They do it every year. And I'm glad I know that they always do it. Because then I don't have to worry about them doing some other more crazy thing. This is just what they do. If you know them, then you know the limitations of their craziness. You can predict it.*
>
> *I always look around when I go into the bathrooms. I try to never have to go in there–for a lot of reasons. One time when I was a freshman, I heard that*

a kid who was involved in a gang somehow got thrown through a plate glass window. It was either in the bathroom or right near it. Ever since then I have been wary of the bathroom, know what I mean? I always want to know who is in there and where they are in the bathroom if I am in there. You just need to know to take care of yourself, to protect yourself if need be.

One of my teachers said there were some kids in the building that she didn't know. When that happens, I get heightened. I get a little nervous if there are people around that I haven't seen before. Not adults that look like teachers, but sometimes the scruffy looking ones who are supposed to be security, I guess, or other kids that I haven't seen before and that I don't know.

The School Bus

Taking the bus to and from school is fraught with difficulties for many school children (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000; Goldstein & Kodluboy, 1998). Many students in this inquiry were subjected directly to abusive behavior on the bus and others were subjected as observers. Of all the domains in the study, the bus was consistently problematic for the majority of the students. While some students had peaceful trips to school, many others arrived at school after an experience filled with conflict. Research to determine the effects on student behavior at school following the treatment they receive or witness during transportation to the building is needed. Questions to be addressed in future research include: How aware are school personnel that students are arriving at school distressed? What are the consequences that may carry over to the school day? The quotes below were typical:

The behavior on the buses is very disturbing. (Samantha, age 17)

I'm one of the older students so I feel pretty safe. When I was younger though our bus was pretty bad. The older students were always swearing and stuff and fighting. There were a lot of fights on my bus. They still fight, but it's different now. (Josh, age 15)

There's lots of fights on my bus. I used to be afraid when I was younger. People talked a lot of crap. One girl used to give me a lot of trouble. She starts crap with everybody. But I'm one of the oldest ones now, so there's nothing to be afraid of on my bus. But on other buses, definitely. Is this verbal fighting or physically fighting? Both. No, I don't have a problem with anybody on my bus anymore. I just ignore the stuff. (Molly, age 16)

Even though there was still fighting going on while Molly rode the bus, she said she was no longer fearful nor did she feel unsafe as a result of the conflicts

witnessed there, both physical and verbal. The questions become: Has she learned how to take care of herself with this girl? Is she no longer afraid because the girl is *predictable*? As in, "She starts crap with everybody."

CONCLUSION

Peer predictability was a principle component for safety for the adolescents in this study. Whether it was the "different kids," the "poor kids," the "hicks," or even the teachers, the common factor among them that provoked anxiety for students was that their behavior was unpredictable. Similarly, various areas of the school contributed to an overall atmosphere of insecurity for some students because activities could and did take place in these areas that were not fully predictable and to which adult response was not fully predictable. Through observation of people in the environment and of interactions between various dyad and subgroups, adolescents evaluated the range of behavior for an individual or a particular group. They felt they were able to gauge probable threatening behavior as well as positive interactions. If their peers' behavior was predictable, even within a gross range, the students reported feeling more comfortable because as incidents erupted during the day they knew how to categorize such occurrences in terms of potential threat. The students said, "When you know someone, you know how to think." The ability to predict the behavior of others was crucial to a sense of security for the students interviewed. Certain individuals as well as certain groups within the school had higher predictability for bad behavior or aggressive interactions according to the students.

"Scary" behavior by adults surfaced as a theme in all four focus groups, and in one-quarter of the individual interviews. Consequently, the predictability of adults was important to adolescents. However, it was not as critical to them as being able to predict the behavior of their own peers. It was from their peers that they expected the greatest potential of serious threatening or dangerous behavior. It was from the adults that they expected the least likelihood of protection.

Adolescents bully and shame their peers who are "different." Scott (1995) advises that organizations will utilize "shaming and shunning activities" by various actors in the system to maintain culturally proscribed rules (p. 35). He concludes the norms and values of an organization must be preserved, even at great cost, and are upheld by people within the system who are assigned such roles.

Bullying, shaming, and shunning is useful in adolescent society as a means of forcing compliance with social norms and increasing predictability of peer behavior. When a peer's behavior is predictable, when it can be counted on to be in a certain range, that peer is more trustworthy. As a result, his peers can feel safer around him.

Peer predictability consists of several critical elements. Being able to identify a person by sight, knowing a peer's typical range of behaviors, being able to discern if someone is in a bad or down mood, and being able to sort through the variations in tone of voice–what is friendly versus what is hurtful–are all parts of the discernment process contributing to peer predictability.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Effective peer predictability, according to the findings in this study, consists of small school size, the ability to recognize peers by sight, and recognition of the range of a peer's typical behaviors. The most significant implication from this work is that in the absence of the provision of safety by adults, it was the ability to predict one another that allowed teenagers to conduct their workday with some amount of emotional ease.

Since peer predictability was critical for adolescents to feel secure, one implication is school administrators should actively work to increase the likelihood of groups of students interacting with one another over the course of the school year. The chance to interact with peers from a dissimilar group apparently decreased adolescent fear and judgment of others. If students could see that someone from a different group was "not so bad" then they were much less liable to avoid, tease, ridicule or bully that person and more likely to consider him or her a friend. It is up to school administrators to provide those opportunities for all students.

A significant implication from these findings is that more supervision is needed in common areas such as the cafeteria, the hallways, and the restrooms. Importantly, adolescents cited more adult awareness, supervision and intervention as means to facilitate feeling safer at school.

When the need by students for peer predictability is viewed from a general systems perspective (Dowling, 1994), there are the following conclusions. Peer predictability was critical to adolescents because they felt they could not count on the adults in the setting to provide the level of safety needed. As in any system where those who are in charge abrogate their responsibilities, other participants in the system will do what they can to fill in the gaps. In this case, adolescents elected to attempt to protect themselves at school primarily by continual monitoring and evaluation of their peers. Because school personnel were not predictable in their means or times of intervention for an orderly environment, students provided this for themselves by observing, categorizing, and eventually predicting the attitudes and behaviors of their classmates. This mechanism of peer predictability provided a large measure of safety and security to the teenagers in the schools. Further from a systems perspective, it can be said that the children were "overfunctioning" (Boss, Doughtery, & LaRossa, 1993; Bowen, 1978, 1989;

Nichols, 1984) in the school for the adults who are "underfunctioning." It is primarily the responsibility of school administrators, teachers, and all other adults associated with the schooling of children to create and maintain a safe and secure environment for them to learn and grow. Until adults assume full responsibility for a safe school environment, adolescents will continue to depend on peer predictability. Adolescents can make an important contribution at their schools, but it is not their job to ensure emotional and physical safety.

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