Preventing School Bullying: Should Schools Prioritize an Authoritative School Discipline Approach Over Security Measures?

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A common response to school violence features the use of secu rity measures to deter serious and violent incidents. However, a second approach, based on school climate theory, suggests that schools exhibiting authoritative school discipline (i.e., high struc ture and support) might more effectively reduce school disorder. We tested these approaches on less serious, but more frequent, incidents of student victimization physical, verbal, and rela tional bullying using a nationally representative sample of 12 to 18 year olds. We found that students in schools with positive school climates, as based on authoritative discipline theory, were significantly less likely to report bullying victimization. The security measures approach had no association with physical and verbal bullying and only a marginal association on relational bullying.

KEYWORDS bullying, student victimization, school violence, authoritative school discipline, school climate, security measures

Schools across the nation adopted zero tolerance policies related to weapons, drugs, gangs, and violence after a series of school shootings and violent incidents swept media headlines in the mid 1990s. Along with these policies came a number of school safety measures aimed to protect students from serious violent or substance related incidents (Juvonen, 2001; Reddy et al., 2001; Schreck, Miller, & Gibson, 2003). Schools increasingly adopted law enforcement strategies rather than educational models to combat school violence (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000; Hyman & Perone, 1998). This resulted with some schools more closely resembling detention centers than safe learning environments (Reyes, 2006), a process which developed concurrently with a host of other negative experiences among students (Casella, 2001; Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik, 2009; Reyes, 2006; Simon, 2007). State legislators are once again making these policies a top priority fol

lowing several recent school shooting incidents. Over 450 additional bills related to school safety have been filed between 2012 and 2013. As of December 6, 2013, 84 proposals have been introduced that create the option for or require armed staff members, 101 bills vow to increase police in schools, and 74 bills propose to ease gun restrictions (Shah & Ujifusa, 2013). An additional 76 bills are related to upgrading school security measures. In contrast, a total of 81 bills were proposed that related to improving school climate and increasing supportive services for students.

School security measures are geared towards serious or violent offenses, though the success of these policies and subsequent safety measures in reducing school victimization is debatable (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998; Schreck et al., 2003; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba et al., 2008). Moreover, their influence on the more frequent low level victimizations, such as bullying, may be even less effectual. Bullying is largely unregulated by official security measures, though it can have severe consequences that are commonly related to some of the more violent incidents (Flannery, Wester, & Singer, 2004; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Vossekuil, 2002). Rather than rely on additional security measures to deter school victimization, as the influx of recent legislative proposals suggests, it might be more effective to prioritize a school environment based on order, fairness, certainty of punishment, and positive teacher student relationships, particularly for bullying victimization. Students are most likely to feel unsafe in schools where bullying prevails (Brown, 2006; Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Safer, 1986; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009), and this oftentimes results in school or classroom avoidance (Arnette & Walsleben, 1998; Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Meyer Adams & Conner, 2008; Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2010) and accompanying psychosocial problems (Peleg Oren, Cardenas, Comerford, & Galea, 2010). It is therefore important for schools to address bullying and provide safe environments for all students.

This article investigates the effectiveness of student victimization pre ventive measures on three forms of bullying. The three types of bullying physical, verbal, and relational are defined according to the revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996b) and other early work that cate gorized bullying (Smith & Sharp, 1994). We first analyze the relation between security measures and bullying victimization in school. Then, we test the association of the school climate approach, specifically focusing on aspects of authoritative discipline theory (i.e., school structure and support), with school bullying and compare these results with those of the secure building strategy.

Predictors and Problems of Bullying

Bullying is an acute and complicated problem that disrupts student learning and negatively affects the perception of school as a safe social environment. Olweus (1996a) defines bullying in the following way:

A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students Negative actions can be carried out by physical contact, by words, or in other ways, such as making faces or mean gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group. (p. 265)

Bullying generally includes a physical or psychological imbalance of power between the victim and the bully (Espelage et al., 2013; Olweus, 1993), and both bullies and victims are likely to suffer from serious short and long term repercussions.

There are various correlates of bullying, which range from individ ual and family characteristics to peer, classroom, and school characteristics (Espelage & Swearer, 2011). Studies have found differences in the types and effects of school bullying victimization by gender, race and ethnicity, age (Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2010; Meyer Adams & Conner, 2008; Nansel et al., 2001; Ttofi & Farrington, 2008; Underwood & Rosen, 2011; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009), and socioeconomic background (Burrow & Apel, 2008). Male, middle school (compared to high school), and lower socioeconomic background students have reported a higher amount of bullying victimiza tion. The association between race and bullying victimization has not been clear cut. This may be due to cultural differences in understanding bullying behaviors and the subsequent underreporting by some student populations. There are also differences between students in standard and special edu cation programs and those with different types of disabilities. Students with disabilities, in general, have been found to be victimized at a higher rate than students without disabilities (Rose, Espelage, Aragon, & Elliott, 2011), but the severity of the disability is also predictive of significantly higher bullying vic timization rates (Rose, 2011). The number of friends a student has, and the intensity of the relationship, serves as protective factors against bullying vic timization. Students with supportive peer groups have been associated with lower reports of bullying and other victimization (Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005; Espelage & Holt, 2001; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007). There are also school and classroom elements that can foster bullying and other aggressive behaviors, such as poor teacher student relationships and inconsistent or inappropriate responses to student behavior (Doll, Song, Champion, & Jones, 2011).

Although bullying usually consists of lower level incidents of aggression or harassment, the consequences of repeated victimization can be quite seri ous and long lasting (Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014). Victims of bullying commonly report undesirable physical and/or psychological effects (Ttofi & Farrington, 2008). For instance, youths who experience frequent bullying are more likely to report symptoms related to depression and suici dal ideation (Pranjic & Bajraktarevic , 2010), loneliness (Nansel et al., 2001), anxiety and low self esteem (Bouman et al., 2013; Smith, Polenik, Nakasita, & Jones, 2012), lower attachment to school (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Robers, Kemp, Truman, & Snyder, 2013), and myriad other anti social and problem behaviors (Ttofi, Farrington, L osel, & Loeber, 2011). Furthermore, youth who engage in both bullying behaviors and victim ization exhibit the poorest psychosocial functioning (Haynie et al., 2001; Nansel et al., 2001; Peleg Oren et al., 2010). If the effects of bullying are left unacknowledged and untreated, these cases might end tragically through self harm or violent retaliation (Brunstein Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Levin & Madfis, 2009). A preemptive strategy for reducing school violence is to address bullying issues before they become a serious threat to school safety.

Deterrence Through Security Measures

Schools nationwide quickly adopted costly security measures and strict poli cies in response to several highly publicized school shootings (Addington, 2009; Reddy et al., 2001; Welsh, 2000) and a growing fear of crime (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Lawrence & Mueller, 2003; Simon, 2007). Contrary to what these policies portend, violent student victimization is a rare occurrence. In 2009, 3% of students reported theft victimization and only 1% reported violent victimization (Robers et al., 2010). Still, over the last decade, there has been an increase in the percentage of public schools reporting the use of numerous safety and security measures (Addington, 2009; Robers et al., 2010). Around 70% of students ages 12 to 18 reported the presence of security guards and/or police officers, and 11% reported the use of metal detectors at school (Robers, Kemp, Truman, & Snyder, 2011).

In addition to catching or preventing unlawful behavior (e.g., weapon carrying or drug related crimes), school security measures act as deter rent mechanisms to protect students from serious and violent incidents. As nearly every school adopted some form of security measure (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001), research developed to analyze how well these mea sures work. However, there is little research on how effectively these security measures protect students from less serious incidents. If these measures work to deter violence and aggression in schools, then it is plausible that they could also prevent school bullying. Students may perceive security mea sures as part of a no nonsense message put forth by the school; thus, some students might avoid all forms of aggressive behavior. The presence of these numerous procedures and programs, however, can be intimidating for students, and the justification for incorporating them diminishes without evidence that they reduce school violence.

Physical surveillance measures such as weapons deterrence (e.g., metal detectors, locker or bag searches), campus security, or police officers aim to prevent the most extreme forms of violence, but they may be accompanied by unintended consequences. In some cases, even if security measures have been shown to increase physical safety (Garver & Noguera, 2012), they are also associated with greater conflict between school per sonnel and students (Garcia, 2003; Garver & Noguera, 2012). Schreck et al. (2003), however, did not find that additional security measures had any sort of increased safety benefits. In their study on victimization among middle and high school students, they reported that the presence of these mea sures (e.g., guards, metal detectors, locked doors, supervision in the hallway, etc.) failed to reduce the likelihood of both theft and violent victimization.