

The importance of a safe and healthy school



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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For more than twenty years, researchers and educators have indicated the importance of a safe and healthy school environment in fostering academic achievement (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, & Miller, 2006). Schools are the most significant socialization force next to the family and it is in school where children form relationships which influence social and academic outcomes (Wentzel & Looney, 2007). It has been suggested in various studies that a supportive and caring school environment optimizes the academic outcomes of students (Nakamoto, 2008; Beran, 2003). Caring and supportive school environments can only occur when the socialization experiences and relationships of students feature acceptance, tolerance, and respect from both teachers and co-students.

To children, friendships are considered a significant aspect of development. As they mature and develop, children are encouraged and expected to have friends to give them a sense of acceptance and belonging. Without these peer relations, children become vulnerable to adjustment difficulties which can result to low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, and depression.

Unfortunately, not all children are able to have healthy peer relations in the course of their academic experience. The absence of peer relations or having problematic peer relations makes children susceptible to victimization.

Children who are often bullied in school are those who have few friends.

They are prone to acts of intimidation or aggression from their peers. The lack of peer support and a safe school environment results to depression, anxiety, and in extreme cases, suicide (Rigby, 2000).

Bullying as a serious national issue emerged after the Columbine shootings in 1999. Since then, bullying has become a critical public policy issue and to date, 43 states have adopted antibullying laws to protect and safeguard the rights of children from aggressive and violent acts of their peers (Anti-Defamation League [ADL], 2010). In the past, the problem of bullying was an open secret that was rarely discussed, much less addressed by school officials and the community. Educators and parents generally regarded it as a “rite of passage” which children inevitably undergo as part of the socialization process. Public officials and school authorities have lobbied for measures to promote safe and healthy school environments and there have been results from some interventions to reduce bullying. However, bullying remains a prominent issue until today. Recently, the case of the college freshman Tyler Clementi who was cyberbullied until he jumped off the

George Washington Bridge and high school student Phoebe Prince who committed suicide after being endlessly bullied by her peers in a Massachusetts public school has confirmed that the struggle to put an end to victimization in schools has a long way to go.

Bullying is a chronic problem in American schools. Nine out of 10 elementary students have been bullied by their peers, according to a simple questionnaire developed by researchers at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital (2007) and the Stanford University School of Medicine (Medical News Today, 2007). In the last 15 years, much attention has been placed on the issue of bullying in schools both in the United States and in other parts of the world. Countries like Norway, Sweden, Japan, and Australia have been at the center of attention on issues related to bullying (Green, 2007). In the United States, many believe that bullying is nothing more than a childhood ritual. School bullying is now accepted as a type of hostility that can have long-lasting mental effects for students that are both victims and perpetrators (Green, 2007). Clearly, school bullying has become a prevalent dilemma that interrupts the social relations between students, detracts from the positive quality of classroom experiences, and hinders students' opportunities to learn.

Bullying is a threat not only to a safe and healthy school environment but to children's academic outcomes as well. Ideally, schools provide a wider social context for children to develop from their early socialization experiences within the home. As a consequence, children's social and emotional experience influences their cognitive development. Moreover, schools allow students to experience and learn new things which are critical to their

intellectual development. If the school does not provide such an environment, children may experience social and intellectual difficulties (Eccles et al., 1999). What raises serious concern among the educational community is the finding that bullying may have a negative influence in academic achievement of students. Ecological models of school achievement suggest that school outcomes of children are influenced by the quality of interactions they have with peers, parents, teachers, and other individuals (Broussard & Garrison, 2004). Hence, the chronic problem of bullying may deter children from experience their full intellectual development. Children who are frequently victimized by their peers whether physically, verbally, or psychologically may suffer from learning disengagement low expectancy of success, and consequently, perform poorly on schoolwork and achievement tests.

Particularly relevant to the present study is research demonstrating significant links between school bullying and academic performance (e. g., Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Schwartz, Farver, Chang, & Lee-Shin, 2002). Students who are victimized by peers are likely to demonstrate poor academic performance (Buhs et al., 2006; Juvonen et al., 2000; Konishi & Li, 2006; Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2002; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005), as are children who bully others (Pereira, Mendonça, Neto, Valente, & Smith, 2004), consistent with arguments that children's social experiences at school impact their academic performance (see Hymel et al., 2006; Weissberg & Durlak, 2005). Not all studies have demonstrated such associations, however. Hanish and Guerra (2002) failed to find a relationship between

peer victimization and achievement and Woods and Wolke (2004) found that achievement was significantly linked to relational but not direct forms of victimization.

Since the 1970s, the public schools in America have been placed under the microscope and accountability in all areas has been demanded. Parents are familiar with issues of testing and facility safety, but an additional area that has been brought to the forefront of the nation's attention is that of student safety. One specific area of significant concern has been the issue of bullying and the implications that student behavior can have on the safety and security of all students. Teachers understand the levels of influence and recognize the power of the family, the community, and the popular culture to influence behavior. What they often do not understand is the extent or limit of their sphere of influence. When teachers are asked to identify risk factors for the development of bullying, they generally rank the family and cultural factors such as television films, and pop music as having the strongest impact on children's development of bullying behaviors. When teachers are asked to indicate which factors they can influence, they recognize for the most part, that their influence is limited to the classroom and school environment. Teachers are encouraged to focus their energy and resources on changing the areas within their sphere of influence, that is, the classroom and the school.

A number of factors have been identified as contributing to students sense of safety and belonging at school, but less research has examined the degree to which these factors actually impact school performance. The present

study examined the role of two school climate factors in terms of their effect on student achievement in math and reading.

Although informative, these studies focus only on the individual or student level, not taking into account the school level clustering of students. There is a dearth of research considering the impact of bullying at the school level in relation to academic performance. At the school level, both bullying and teacher-student relations are, in essence, aspects of school climate that reflect an overall level of tolerance for negative interpersonal interactions. As such, both represent school-level factors that can impact academic performance. To our knowledge, there are no empirical studies examining relationships between school climate, as reflected in reported bullying and teacher-student relations, and individual students' achievement. Accordingly, in the present study, we assessed the linkage between academic achievement and bullying at the school level using a multilevel analysis technique that allowed us to also consider the potential buffering effect of positive teacher-student relations.

Specifically, the present study addressed: (a) whether students' academic performance is related to the school's bullying climate (e. g., Do students in schools that have a lot of bullying demonstrate poorer academic performance?), and (b) whether student-teacher connectedness influences the bullying-achievement relationship (e. g., Do students who enjoy positive connectedness with teachers show positive academic achievement despite high levels of bullying in their schools?). Sex differences were also explored.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of bullying has existed since the beginning of time. The issue of student safety in schools as it relates to school-yard bullying, however, was brought to the forefront of the American public with the tragedies at Columbine, Jonesboro, Conyers, and Paducah. The problem continues and has been aggravated by the advent of the cyber bullying potential. Young people's lives have been impacted for their entire future by seemingly senseless childhood acts. Little research exists today on the perception of public school administrators in Missouri with regard to bullying being a problem in their school. In order to address the problem of the school-yard bully, we must first examine the attitudes and mind sets of the men and women in charge of educating and protecting our young people during the school day. Before realistic steps can be taken by administrators in combating school bullies, one must first understand and recognize that bullying is a problem. Research reveals that there are indeed physical, psychological, and emotional problems exhibited by the victims of bullying while attending school, but previous research has made a weak attempt to properly connect the emotions of the victims with the ability to learn while at school. (Kumpulainen, K., & Rasanen, E., 2000) Although bullying is an age old problem in America, gender also plays a major role in the types and characteristics of bullying at school (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Female and male adolescents have a tendency to act and react differently under the pressure of a school bully. Traditional forms of bullying still take place throughout classrooms and play grounds of American public schools, but in today's world we are now threatened with an even more powerful and

possibly more psychologically damaging form of bullying, which is commonly referred to as “ cyber bullying”.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study research is an examination of the perceptions of school staff on bullying and its impact on academic achievement. The participants of this study will include 10 elementary grade teachers and 5 guidance counselors of schools belonging to the South Georgia School District. Participants will be chosen through random sampling. Informant interviews will be the primary data gathering method to be triangulated with secondary data sources such as school records, reports, achievement tests, and other pertinent documents which may be used to verify and supplement the literature review for a more exhaustive discussion of the findings. Data will be analyzed through the qualitative content analysis method.

Research Questions

The central question addressed in this study is: How does the school staff perceive bullying and its relationship with academic achievement in elementary grade students? The following research questions guide this dissertation:

Q1. How do teachers and school psychologists of a South Georgia School District define bullying?

Q2. From the point of view of school staff, what types of bullying behaviors are prevalent in their respective schools?

Q3. How does bullying influence the academic outcomes of both bully and victim?

Q4. What are their roles and competencies in addressing bullying in the school environment?

Q5. How can teachers and administrators help address school bullying?

Limitations and Delimitations

This research narrowly evaluates the perceptions of school staff from public elementary schools within the South George School District. This research specifically addresses the factors that contribute to bullying inside the school premises, the type of bullying the teachers observed, and most importantly how bullying affected the academic performance of the victims and perpetrators.

Definition of Key Terms

School Achievement is a student's comprehension of particular information and proficiency with specific skills.

Bully refers to someone who uses physical or verbal aggression on something of a regular basis against other young people. Usually, bullies are found to be stronger, bigger, and more aggressive than their peers and victims.

Bullying refers to acts which are comprised of direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing that are initiated by one or more students against a victim. In addition to direct attacks, bullying may

also be more indirect by causing a student to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion.

Victims of bullying are typically anxious, insecure, cautious, and suffer from low self-esteem, rarely defending themselves or retaliating when confronted by students who bully them. They may lack social skills and friends, and they are often socially isolated.

Victimization

School Staff

Importance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a perception that existed or did not exist within the ranks of Missouri public school administrators and students of Missouri public schools concerning the area of bullying among adolescent-age children. If the study revealed that bullying in fact existed in public schools in Missouri, what was the impact for the victims of such acts on their academic achievement? If bullying is determined as a problem in schools, do male and female adolescents engage in bullying equally and by using the same methods? Another key component of this study is to identify what, if any, schools policies currently are in place in public schools in Missouri and the possible need to create and adopt additional policies in order to protect the victims of bullying. Although this study could be viewed as a qualitative study, the researcher has chosen to analyze the data and develop conclusions based on the responses of perceptions, academic achievement, and policies that are currently found in the questionnaires and surveys. This was a descriptive research with the

purpose of laying a foundation for further research in specific areas identified as having possible significant impact on student performance and educator-preparation programs. The goal of the study is to offer empirically researched, educated suggestions and answers regarding what and how to create and implement policies dealing with all forms of bullying. It is the intention of the researcher that this data, once analyzed and dissected, will be a meaningful tool to any school district in the state of Missouri and around the United States in the area of school policies. It is the premise of the researcher that this study will shed new light on the issues of electronic devices, their use at school, and the impact that those devices have on the learning process.