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Bullying: Understanding Attitudes toward Bullying and Perceptions of School Social Climate

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Main Questions

What are students' attitudes toward bullying? Do those attitudes differ when students are involved in bullying? If students are involved in bullying, do they have different perceptions of school climate compared to those students not involved in bullying? Lastly, are students' attitudes toward bullying related to their perception of school climate?

Background

Bullying has increasingly been recognized as a problem of national and international concern and the increased media attention on school violence (e.g., Columbine and Jonesboro shootings), has brought a spotlight to the phenomenon of bullying and victimization within schools. The increased focus on bullying has also contributed to our understanding of how bullying looks today.

- The old definition of bullying has expanded beyond physical aggression and the old adage of boys will be boys to include such behaviors as relational aggression, verbal harassment, and cyberbullying.

- Research continues to explore factors that might serve to create environments conducive to bullying and the factors that help to eradicate this ever-evolving problem (1).

According to the United States National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics, "school climate" has become a variable that is increasingly being evaluated in the wake of the focus on school violence and safety in schools (2). Research that has examined school climate at the classroom level has found that classroom characteristics, such as student-teacher relationships and peer cooperation, play an important role in mediating peer aggression (3). A common theme in understanding school climate within the context of bullying relates to social interactions, which include peer interactions and student-teacher interactions within the school environment.

- It is important to note that when we examine school climate, we are actually measuring the student's perception of school climate, which can be influenced by current or past experiences that occurred

within that environment.

Another variable that warrants further exploration is student attitudes toward bullying.

- Studies have generally shown that, students who reported more positive attitudes about aggression were more likely to engage in aggressive behavior, such as bullying (4, 5).

- Generally speaking, if students report higher levels of pro-bullying attitudes, it is possible that they perceive a school environment that is supportive of bullying.

We explored student attitudes towards bullying and student perceptions of school social climate in an effort to obtain information that would lead to a better understanding of the bullying phenomenon and factors that promote a healthy learning environment and deter anti-social behavior. To this end, we asked 347 students in grades six through nine (ranging from ages 11 to 15), from three different Midwestern schools to complete surveys about bullying and school climate. The students were participants in a longitudinal study about bullying.

What We Found

- Not surprisingly, we found that bullies and bully-victims (students who both bully others and are bullied themselves) reported the most pro-bullying attitudes, indicating that they supported bullying behavior.
- Those students who were victimized by others and those who witnessed the bullying (bystanders) were the least supportive of bullying.
- In examining school climate, those students who were not involved in bullying tended to report the most positive views of the environment compared to those students involved in bullying.
    - Students involved in bullying were not significantly different from each other, though bullies and bully-victims tended to report the least favorable view of school climate.
- As perceptions of positive school climate increased, pro-bullying attitudes decreased. Those students who reported pro-bullying attitudes tended to have a more negative view of school climate, which is the same pattern that has been found in other research from this longitudinal study (6, 7). A conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that student perceptions of school climate may be an indicator of the effectiveness of a school's response to bullying.

Implications and Take Home Points for Teachers and Schools

First, it is important that schools conduct self-assessments to determine the prevalence of bullying in that environment and to identify those students who are most likely to be involved in or to witness bullying. This can also provide information about the effectiveness of school policies and staff responses to bullying. Students in our research often reported that they were unaware of the school policy on bullying and that they were unsure of staff responses to bullying. This is not unique to our findings; other research (8) has demonstrated similar findings. When a teacher does not intervene to stop victimization, he or she is communicating the acceptability of bullying to students. Students who perceive a school (or classroom) climate that is tolerant of bullying behavior are less likely to report being bullied (8). Second, interventions delivered at the individual, classroom, and school level would be beneficial to students and to staff. Listed below are some suggestions for intervention strategies that can be used to address bullying at all three levels to address school climate concerns, attitudes towards bullying, and other areas of concern in relation to bullying.

For Individuals:

- Take all reports of bullying seriously and intervene quickly.

- Model pro-social (e.g., cooperation, perspective-taking, and empathy) behaviors for bullies and bully-victims.
- Considering that bullying can lead to social, emotional, and psychological problems (9), individualized counseling services for students involved in bullying can be beneficial. Specifically, students can be provided with assertiveness training, social-skills interventions, or referrals for community counseling services to address more significant concerns such as internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety (10).

For Classrooms:

- Educate students about bullying and the effects of bullying and discuss ways that students can appropriately handle bullying situations whether they are the victim or a bystander (i.e., they witness a bullying incident) to demonstrate a climate that does not tolerate bullying (10, 11).
- Create a warm and inclusive classroom climate that demonstrates a commitment to anti-bullying policies. This has been shown to reduce pro-bullying attitudes among peers (10). Research has also demonstrated that positive interactions between students and teachers have been found to decrease involvement in bullying; whereas negative interactions have been shown to actually increase the likelihood for involvement in bullying behaviors (12).
- Create an open-door policy for all students and clearly identify adults to whom bullying incidents should be reported and follow-up with students after a bullying incident has been reported so that students know that action has been taken.
- Develop a student code of conduct (or rules against bullying) and clearly discuss this with students at the classroom and school levels (11). Use incentives such as classroom competitions to encourage adherence to the code of conduct (e.g., teachers and staff can nominate students who demonstrate behavior in accordance with the code of conduct).

For Schools:

- Conduct a school-wide assessment to gather information from students about their perception of school social climate (e.g., is bullying tolerated, are teachers and staff supportive of students) as well as their knowledge of the bullying policy. Make a commitment to conduct these assessments annually, preferably in the early spring after peer groups have solidified.
- Promote facts, not myths, about bullying by providing information to students and staff about bullying and the effects of bullying.
- Involve parents and guardians in the intervention process to help create a common attitude amongst all adults in the students' lives (10, 11). For example, hold an informational PTA meeting, invite them to participate in school (or classroom) presentations about bullying, or invite them to act as hall monitors.

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Biographical Information

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Links and Suggestions for Further Reading

- Website: Target Bullying Survey & Intervention System: Ecologically Based Assessment & Intervention for Schools. This website provides a wealth of information about bullying and is found at www.targetbully.com.

- Book: Bullying in American schools: A social-ecological perspective on prevention and intervention. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Edited by D. L. Espelage & S. M. Swearer (2004).

- Book: Breaking the culture of bullying and disrespect, grades K-8: Best practices and successful strategies. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Authored by M. Beaudoin & M. Taylor (2004).