Perceived Connections between Anti-Social Gateway Behaviors and School Bullying and Culture

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine and compare opinions of 8th and 9th grade teachers and students regarding the prevalence of anti-social/gateway behaviors in their classrooms, the perceived connection between these behaviors and more traditional forms of bullying, and the potential impact of school-wide anti-bullying programs specifically designed to address these behaviors. A sample of convenience from one middle school and one high school from a suburban Midwestern school district were selected to participate in this qualitative study. Researchers found that over 80% of students have witnessed or been involved in anti-social behaviors, and over 70% of students, higher among females, believed that a school-wide program would lessen the amount of more extreme forms of bullying, while over 90% of teachers agreed that such a program would lessen extreme forms of bullying. The authors conclude that proactive, building-wide plans for addressing anti-social/gateway behaviors could be reduce the amount of overt bullying and positively impact the overall culture of the school.

Keywords: anti-social behaviors, school bullying, school culture

1. Introduction

Bullying in schools, and measures to address this phenomenon, are topics which have gained substantial attention in recent years in the media, public discourse, state legislatures and, naturally, in schools themselves. Much work has been done to craft anti-bullying policies and programs in order to address these problem behaviors and to mitigate the potentially devastating effects that bullying, unchecked, can have on young people. Many states have adopted anti-bullying measures in the wake of suicides that have been committed by young people who have been bullied, and school districts and individual buildings have followed suit and enacted anti-bullying policies, reporting procedures, and education/prevention programs (Weaver, Brown, Weddle, & Aalsma, 2013; Kueny & Zirke, 2012; Winburn & Winburn, 2016).

There are two main complications in these varied attempts to prevent bullying and its tragic conclusions, however. One is that lawmakers and school officials (along with community members, parents, and students) struggle to come up with a consistent and agreed-upon definition of bullying or the behaviors that constitute it. This lack of a clear definition for what constitutes bullying complicates officials' attempts to develop anti-bullying policies and programs (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). If people can't agree upon what it is, how do we go about preventing it? A second complicating factor is the ever-evolving social scene of young people. Students live in a virtual world, where they have their own identities (and ones which are often more honest and open reflections of themselves or who they want to be/what they value than what they portray in person), social groups, and relationships. This venue is often where the psychological bullying that has largely replaced traditional physical bullying takes place or is aggravated. What remains visible to the adults who observe these students, then, are often not overt signs of bullying but anti-social behaviors (Englander, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2014).

Along with bullying in general, many authors on the topic are now considering the impact that anti-social "gateway" classroom/school behaviors may have on the psychology of victims and the connection between these and more extreme bullying experiences. These are also referred to as "relational bullying". Author Elizabeth Englander (2013), in her book *Bullying and Cyberbullying: What Every Educator Needs to Know*, states that "newer data shows us that bullying today, in the majority of cases, does not involve any physical contact" (p. 8). These gateway behaviors (eye-rolling, whispering, exclusion) are seen every day in classrooms and hallways

throughout our country and have been an almost accepted part of adolescent behavior through media presentation, reality television, and our own permissive response to such behaviors. They remain however, anti-social, and the adult world takes a less permissive attitude toward them (business and professionals and adult social interactions). Further, they have been identified as being clearly associated (by victim reports) as being precursor behaviors to more traditional physical and/or psychological bullying.

One can presume, therefore, that taking action to eliminate antisocial gateway behaviors from the classroom/school setting may have dramatic impact on the amount of traditional bullying that occurs in our schools and between students. For the purpose of research and anti-bullying program development, these behaviors also have the advantage of being easily identified and addressed by both classroom teachers and bystanders. While the connection between these behaviors and more extreme forms of bullying are beginning to be recognized, however, little to no research has been completed which either measures teacher and/or student perception of the prevalence of anti-social/gateway behavior in classrooms/schools, the perceived connection between these behaviors and more extreme forms of bullying (as described above—without a common understanding no program designed to address an issue will be effective), and/or the impact of an anti-bullying program designed to address these behaviors.

The purpose of this study, then, was to examine and compare opinions of selected 8th and 9th grade teachers and students regarding the prevalence of anti-social/gateway behaviors in their classrooms, the perceived connection between these behaviors and more traditional forms of bullying, and the potential impact of school-wide anti-bullying programs specifically designed to address these behaviors.

2. Literature Review

Research has supported the idea that bullying and the social/psychological results of this behavior remain a persistent problem in schools today (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014; Hanks, 2012). Studies suggest that 20%-25% of students report to have been the victim of traditional bullying, with significantly higher percentages reporting having been involved in verbal and social bullying (54% and 51%, respectively) (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansal, 2009). Bullying has been a persistent problem for decades, in fact, with 56% of sixth through twelfth grade students reporting having witnessed bullying and 71% reporting having known a peer who had been bullied in a 1995 study, and over 3 million students in the United States having reported being victims of bullying in 2001 (Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1995; Nansal et al., 2001). The pervasiveness of the problem caused all 50 states by 2015 to adopt anti-bullying legislation (Winburn & Winburn, 2016). The evolution of the behavior, however, contributes to making it difficult to develop meaningful anti-bullying programs in schools.

Common definitions of bullying stress the existence of repetitive action, intentionality, and power imbalance (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014; Messias, Kindrick, & Castro, 2014). With the advent of social media and the evolution of adolescent social dynamics, these defining criteria can be difficult for adults to identify in the moment. Where "traditional" bullying used to be a case of a larger (physically) student imposing his/her will on another in a show of dominance, bullying today is often psychological, communicated in a variety of ways, and happens right under the noses of adults (Englander, 2013). In light of this changing landscape, studies focused specifically on verbal and/or social (relational) bullying further highlight the frequency of such experiences for young people, and connect these to general feelings of depression as well as suicide ideation and attempts. In a study linking verbal and social bullying to student suicidal behavior and thinking, 56.7% of students reported having been involved in verbal or social bullying during the prior thirty days, with 37.8% reporting moderate involvement, with nearly 10% reporting frequent victimization. This same study identified increased suicide ideation and attempts related to the frequency of the experience (as compared to students who reported no bullying experience). These frequencies were 11% for students who reported being neither a bully nor a victim, 22% for bullies only, 29% for victims only, and 38% for bully/victims (Borowsky, Taliaferro, & McMorris, 2013).

Adults, generally, and educators, specifically, desire to do something about these behaviors and their impact. However the underground nature of this type of bullying makes it difficult to address. As such, it is important for adults to consider what actions or behaviors may be observable that could be actionable in response to this ongoing and evolving problem. Authors are beginning to identify gateway behaviors that educators need to be aware of, which happen in our presence on a daily basis, such as snickering, eye rolling, ignoring, or whispering about another student, that while, in and of themselves may not constitute bullying, can signify that such a power dynamic is forming/has formed, and should be dealt with immediately (Englander, 2013). Often times these behaviors are categorized as pieces of a larger category of social aggression. Such socially aggressive behaviors

have been indicated in studies to cause as much, or more, damage for students than physical aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Specifically, studies show this type of aggression is used by young women, and failure to recognize this as an important element of the bully culture would result in 71% of girls victimized by this type of behavior to be ignored (Crick & Nelson, 2002).

Teacher perception and participation will impact the effectiveness of any program designed to modify student behavior. Studies have shown that while teacher intervention is crucial in addressing and reducing bullying behaviors, teacher abilities are inconsistent and many teachers lack confidence in addressing bullying situation (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Further, some studies have shown up to 60% of teachers unconvinced of the need for a formal program to address bullying behavior (Stauffer, Heath, Coyne, & Ferrin, 2012). The overarching conclusion of research on the topic indicates that a consistent and ongoing approach to managing bullying behavior is required by schools in order to prevent such behaviors from burgeoning (James et al., 2006). Further, studies suggest that a comprehensive approach including training and a protocol for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel must be developed to identify both bullying behaviors and apply interventions (Carter, 2011). Therefore specific attention was paid in this study to both student and adult perceptions regarding the frequency of anti-social behaviors as well as the perceived impact of school-wide programs designed to address these behaviors.

3. Methodology

Two schools (one middle, one high) from a suburban mid-western district in the United States were selected to participate in this study. These buildings were selected to allow for a specific lens for this qualitative review. Contact was made via email with the principal of each building to request participation and approval was gained through a school district process to conduct research using students in the district. Once participation was confirmed, parents of 8th/9th grade students in the participating buildings were notified of the purpose of the research and their son/daughter's opportunity to participate through the completion of a survey during the students' advisory/homeroom period in the upcoming week. The advisory/homeroom period was selected so that students were not asked to complete the survey in a regular classroom setting/supervised by a teacher about whose classroom survey questions would be asked. Parents were also provided a copy of the youth assent form that students would receive along with the surveys, and given the option to opt their son/daughter out of participation by contacting the primary researcher. No parent/guardian elected to their child out of participation in this way. On the day of the survey (during the week of March 29, 2016), all students in the selected grade levels at each respective buildings were given a copy of the youth assent form stapled to the survey instrument and teachers read a scripted introduction to the process. Students were then to pull apart these two sheets, sign the assent form and complete the survey, or choose not to sign nor complete the survey, and then submit each paper by placing it in an envelope provided at the front of the room. This process was followed to minimize any pressure that might be felt by students to participate in completion of the survey—all students, regardless of their choice of participation, went through the same submission process for the documents. These envelopes were then collected by building administrators at each location and then picked up by the primary researcher. Teachers at the selected buildings were given their surveys in their building mailboxes and asked to turn completed surveys (with no identifying information) in an envelope located in that same mailroom if they chose to participate. The primary researcher again picked these envelopes with completed surveys up at the end of the research period.

4. Results

345 8th grade students (161 male and 184 female) and 337 9th grade students (144 male and 193 female) chose to complete the survey. This is a total of 682 students (305 male and 377 female) from a potential 856 participants. Forty six students elected not to participate. From the participants, 81.9% reported having witnessed or been involved in anti-social behaviors in their school. Approximately 13% more female students reported this experience (88.6%) than male students (75.7%) overall, and at each grade level (88.0% to 73.9% at grade 8 and 89.1% to 77.1% at grade 9, respectively). In addition, students in 9th grade reported this experience slightly more commonly than 8th grade students (3.2% higher in males, 1.1% higher in females, 2.3% higher overall).

When asked to more closely define their experiences, 14.7% of students identified themselves as victims of anti-social behaviors, 2.6% identified themselves as perpetrators, 37.7% identified themselves as having been both. The percentage of students identifying as having been victims was significantly higher in female students, who reported these roles at approximately twice the rate as their male peers (12.1% higher in grade 8 and 8.3% higher in grade 9). Female students also reported having been both victims and perpetrators at a higher rate than their male counterparts in both grades (1.7% higher in grade 8 and 4.8% higher in grade 9). 3.5% of students or fewer reported being involved in these behaviors as perpetrator alone, across all grade levels and genders.

Regarding the connection between anti-social behaviors and hurt feelings, 75.6% of students overall indicated that they had experienced or witnessed such behaviors lead to hurt feelings (73.0% of 8th grade students and 78.5% of 9th grade students). These results were significantly higher for female students (83.1% of females to 66.4% of males, overall). 84.8% of 8th grade females and 81.5% of 9th grade females indicated that they had witnessed/experienced this connection (versus 59.7% and 73.9% of male students, respectively).

With respect to anti-social behaviors leading to more extreme forms of bullying, approximately one third of students overall (33.8%) indicated that they had experienced/witnessed this connection (34.9% of 8th grade students and 32.6% of 9th grade students). Female students again reported this at a higher rate than their male counterparts, with 38.8% of 8th grade females and 38.6% of 9th grade females indicating they had experienced/witnessed anti-social behaviors lead to more extreme forms of bullying, versus 30.8% of 8th grade males and 24.6% of 9th grade male students.

Responding to the question of whether they had witnessed or experienced anti-social behaviors occurring at the same time as more extreme forms of bullying, 28.6% of students indicated that they had (28.2% of 8th grade students and 29.1% of 9th grade students). Male students reported this at a lower rate than their female peers, with 26.4% of 8th grade males and 22.9% of 9th grade males indicating that they had witnessed or experienced these behaviors occur at the same time, compared to 30.1% and 33.7% of their female counterparts, respectively.

Students were then asked to indicate whether they believed a school-wide program focused on eliminating anti-social behaviors would: 1) improve school climate, and 2) lessen the amount of more extreme forms of bullying. With regard to improved school climate, 76.6% of surveyed students indicated that they believed such a focused program would improve school climate (74.3% of 8th grade students and 79.0% of 9th grade). These results were slightly different between male and female students, with 77.0% of 8th grade females and 83.6% of 9th grade females reporting they believed such a program would improve culture, versus 71.3% and 72.7% of their male counterparts, respectively. In responding to whether or not such a program would lessen the amount of more extreme forms of bullying, 73.9% of students overall indicated that they believed it would (71.9% of 8th grade students and 75.9% of 9th). Once again, female students responded in the affirmative at higher rates that their male peers, with 76.4% of 8th grade females and 80.3% of 9th grade females indicating they believed a school-wide program focused on eliminating anti-social behaviors would lessen more extreme forms of bullying, compared to 67.1% and 70.0% of males, respectively.

Regarding teacher responses, 17 teachers responded to the survey (9 from grade 8 and 8 from grade 9). 100% of responding teachers (from both grade levels), indicated that they had witnessed anti-social behaviors occur in their school. Likewise, 100% of responding teachers indicated that they believed these anti-social behaviors lead to hurt feelings. 66.7% of 8th grade teachers reported that they had observed these anti-social behaviors lead to or be associated with more extreme forms of bullying, with 75.0% of their 9th grade counterparts reported believing this to be the case (70.7%, overall).

Teachers were also asked whether they believed that a school-wide program focused on eliminating anti-social behaviors would: 1) improve school climate, and 2) lessen the amount of more extreme forms of bullying. 71.4% of 8th grade teachers indicated that they believed such a program would improve school climate, and 100% of 9th grade teachers indicated they believed climate would improve (87.6%, overall). Likewise, 88.9% of 8th grade teachers reported that they believed a program designed to address anti-social behaviors would lessen the amount of more extreme forms of bullying, and 100% of their 9th grade peers reported they believed this would occur (94.1%, overall).

5. Analysis of Data

This research has substantiated the idea that anti-social behaviors are commonplace in schools from both the student and teacher perspective. While female students report having witnessed or experienced such behaviors at a higher rate than male students, three out of four male students confirm that they have either seen or been a part of these behaviors in school and four out of five students report this overall (male and female combined). Further, 100% of teachers surveyed confirm that these behaviors occur in their buildings. These are the behaviors that are committed in the presence of adults today and they are, thus, the behaviors that we need to consider addressing as a path to address the overall problem of adolescent bullying in schools. This is substantiated by the number of students who report victimization as a role in anti-social behaviors. Combined, over 55% of students surveyed reported that they were either the victim of these behaviors, or had been both victim and perpetrator. Of interesting note is that over twice as many students (37.7%) identified themselves as having played the role of both victim and perpetrator than those who reported having been only the victim (14.7%). These behaviors have

become part of the adolescent culture, particularly in female students, two out of five of whom reported having been both victim and perpetrator of these behaviors.

These behaviors occur, as well, with the common understanding that they lead to hurt feelings. Three out of every four students surveyed reported that they believed anti-social behaviors lead to hurt feelings. The percentage is even higher for female students, who reported this at a nearly 17% higher rate than their male counterparts. These higher rates in female students are not unexpected. Social isolation and exclusion have traditionally been a more common form of establishing the power dynamic in females, whereas males traditionally have tended toward physical dominance as a means of establishing a power dynamic. Female students act in a world where social norms do not allow for aggression to be exercised in more overt ways (Simmons, 2010; Whitson, 2012). It stands to reason, then, that female students continue to experience these types of isolating behaviors more often than male students despite recent attempts by schools to stamp out bullying behaviors. Where outward bullying behaviors that can be observed by adults have been more and more often addressed and an attempt made to eliminate them (traditions playground bullying through physical dominance), the social inclusion/exclusion behaviors (whispering, eye-rolling, giggling, talking behind one's back) continue to thrive because these don't meet the common definition of "bullying". Another perspective on these behaviors leading to hurt feelings comes from teachers, 100% of whom reported that they believed the behaviors did indeed lead to hurt feelings.

As concerning as these numbers are, so too is the fact that approximately one third of the students surveyed reported that they have known these behaviors to lead to more extreme forms of bullying, and nearly that number have known them to occur simultaneously as these more extreme forms. While these numbers do not suggest that all forms of anti-social behavior lead to more overt, aggressive forms of bullying, they do indicate a strong association between the two behaviors. Further they suggest that adult actions being taken to address and eliminate anti-social behaviors may directly impact the frequency of other forms of bullying. Two out of three teachers, themselves, reported having observed the connection between these two behaviors.

Supporting this idea of adult actions aimed at eliminating anti-social behaviors are survey responses by students and teachers to questions regarding a school-wide program targeting this problem. Over 75% of students reported that a school-wide program focused on eliminating anti-social behaviors would improve school culture, and nearly nine in ten teachers agreed. Further, nearly this same number of students believed that such a program would reduce more extreme forms of bullying and 94.1% of teachers surveyed agreed. Students and teachers themselves, then, have identified the idea of a deliberate, school-wide program focused on the elimination of anti-social behaviors as a means to the end that school districts, building administrators, parents, communities, and state legislatures have been battling. How do we protect our young people from the emotional trauma and sometimes tragic conclusions of bullying? Where can we start in trying to address what seems like a moving target and something that often occurs in the shadows rather than in the open? Perhaps we start with what we do see. If 100% of teachers report observing these behaviors, and 100% of these same teachers believe that these behaviors have a negative impact on students, should this not be a place where action should be taken?

6. Discussion

Bullying has been identified as a major contributing factor to the mental health conditions (depression, anxiety) of many young people who suffer from significantly impacted emotional well-being and social acceptance. In the most extreme cases, it can be a contributing factor in young peoples' decisions to end their own lives, but short of these extreme situations it is an experience that up to 25-30% of students report having experienced during their schooling and one which has major impacts on students' opportunity to be successful in school (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). It is therefore our responsibility, as professionals, to put into place programs and systems that deal with both the negative impact of bullying and also are educational (for staff, students, and parents) and preventative. Bullying remains, however, hard to define and even harder to address, at times, because of the ever-evolving and growing social worlds of students. These behaviors are not the typical bullying behaviors of playgrounds of the past but are enacted (often, at least in part) in a virtual world outside of the purview of adults.

One thing that remains under the watchful eye of adults, however, are our classrooms, and while outwardly physical bullying or harassment may not commonly occur any longer in these settings, the psychological set up for future bullying, those anti-social behaviors which have been termed "gateway" behaviors, do exist in our classes (Englander, 2013). Actions such as eye-rolling, whispering around/about someone or ceasing to talk when he/she is around, giggling, pointing, or isolation are all examples of anti-social behaviors which impact the culture of a school and can have negative impacts on the emotional health of a child, his/her ability to learn, and

can lead to more distressing behaviors later (Simmons, 2010). Bullying behaviors (and thereby these anti-social behaviors, as either a lead-in to more overt forms of bullying or as a means of bullying (relational) themselves) have been linked to either suicide ideation or attempts in young people (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Rivers & Noret, 2010; Rivers & Noret, 2013). Not only have studies showed a correlation between victimization from bullying, with a 29% higher frequency of young people who identified themselves as "victims" reporting suicide attempts or ideation compared to the general population, those young people who have reported themselves as having played the role of both victim and bully showed a 38% higher frequency. This is particularly alarming when over a third of the students involved in this research identified themselves as both victims and participants in the anti-social behaviors being researched. If such participation is directly linked to the future mental and physical health of our students, it is something that we must turn our attention to in a purposeful and deliberate way.

This study, therefore, should be of interest to all teachers and administrators as they review the climate and attitudes in their own buildings and craft their proactive response to the issues of bullying. It is targeted toward a population (students in 8th and 9th grade) which has reportedly experienced the highest percentage of bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014), but is one which should be viewed in a larger context to potentially inform the adult actions of all educators who work with adolescents. If, in fact, a perceived issue with anti-social behaviors exists in our classrooms, and if that issue impacts the social/emotional/academic success of students, it needs to be addressed. The results of this survey suggest that it does. With four out of five students and teachers involved in this study responding that they both believe that anti-social behaviors occur in their classrooms and that a school-wide program aimed at curbing these behaviors would improve school climate, a proactive, preventative program targeting the behaviors that we can still see (as adults) and respond to in schools only makes sense. At the very least it would be advisable for additional research be done in the area of student and teacher perceptions regarding anti-social behaviors that could inform administrators and school personnel in guiding their responses to school climate concerns and the emotional and relational health of students in their buildings. Further, if those behaviors are linked to more extreme forms of bullying, then this study can point educators in a new direction with regard to how to address the issue of more overt forms of bullying in the schools. By developing a proactive, building-wide plan for addressing anti-social/gateway behaviors, it could be concluded that a reduction in the amount of overt bullying would result and an impact in the overall culture of the school, for the better, could occur. This is our responsibility and students, at least the students participating in this research, are asking for our help.

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