Bullying and School Climate

Effective bullying prevention programs involve the whole school and focus not only on reducing incidents of bullying, but also on promoting a positive school climate. School climate (or school ethos) refers to the pervasive atmosphere in the school community. It is determined by the quality of relationships among and between staff and students, social norms for behavior, discipline practices, inclusiveness, and the degree to which feelings of belonging, engagement and pride in the school are experienced by all students and staff members. The school climate reflects dominant community values about what students should learn and how they should learn.

Key Research Findings

- Research indicates a reliable association between a positive school climate (i.e., warm relationships and consistently applied high standards for behavior) and low levels of bullying and aggression.[1,2]
- Despite their widespread use, there is no empirical evidence linking Zero Tolerance policies and punitive discipline strategies with increases in school safety or reductions in bullying or other acts of violence. Indeed, there is emerging evidence that student suspensions and expulsions from school discriminate against minority students and that they engender feelings of mistrust and a negative school climate.[3,4]
- Children involved in bullying often have poor relationships with their teachers, including little or no mutual warmth, caring, or generally positive feelings.[5]
- Whole school bullying prevention programs may be more successful in a school climate founded on the principles of restorative justice than in a school climate founded on punitive policies. In a restorative justice climate, misbehavior is understood as a violation of relationships, not rules; thus repair of relationships and support (rather than isolation through suspension or expulsion) of the wrongdoer is likely to reduce bullying.[6]
- A key element of restorative justice is the necessity to set right the wrongs that have been committed. This is a critical step to restoring relationships and re-integrating the wrongdoer into the community. This necessarily requires input from those hurt by the misdeeds. Amends can be made in many ways with the key consideration being that the wrongdoer and those who were victimized or affected all feel that sanctions encourage healing.[7]
- Evaluation of a school-wide conflict resolution program built on restorative principles indicated positive outcomes: students displayed more adaptive conflict resolution skills and respect for others, and participated at higher rates in the activities of the community.[8]
- An evaluation of a restorative justice pilot program implemented in elementary and middle schools revealed reductions over time in behavioral referrals to the principals' offices and in school suspensions. Stakeholders were personally satisfied using the restorative approach to deal with bullying and conflict. Additionally, formal peace conferences (or circles) led by adults became less frequent over the three-year evaluation, as students and teachers integrated restorative principles into their daily interactions with one another.[9]
- A study of 13,921 high school students revealed that a school climate that valued diversity and inclusion was a significant protective factor, (that is, it reduced the risk) for depression and drug use among lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning youth.[10]
- A substantial volume of research shows that sustained, school-wide Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are effective in building students' social competence. Of

theoretical relevance to bullying prevention is the enhancement of empathy, communication, assertiveness and coping skills. SEL programs contribute to a positive school climate, and reflect school policies that prioritize the development of each student's capacity for healthy relationships and citizenship in addition to academic success.[11,12,13]

- Research shows that empathy is positively related to prosocial behavior (e.g., comforting and helping others) and negatively related to aggression. Preliminary research suggests that empathy training may be an important component in addressing bullying problems.[14]

Key Themes

- A positive school climate comprises a necessary context for effective school wide bullying prevention programs.
- The restorative justice framework has encouraging preliminary results, but more research is required before final conclusions on the effectiveness of the approach in reducing bullying and other forms of violence can be made.
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is an important aspect of a positive school climate, as such a learning program builds relationship skills in children and youth, and communicates the importance of social competence to the entire school community.

Implications

Education
- School administrators need enhanced training in the implementation of effective, educational discipline practices.
- Empirically supported Social Emotional Learning Programs should be implemented in all schools.

Assessment
- As well as conducting regular surveys on bullying and victimization, schools should regularly assess critical aspects of school climate (e.g., perceptions of safety, the quality of relationships between teachers and students, student engagement in school activities, and feelings of inclusion and belonging).
- More research is needed to explore the impacts of restorative justice approaches, different kinds of discipline policies, and Social Emotional Learning programs as they relate to bullying and victimization.

Prevention and Intervention
- Efforts to enhance school climate are critical to the success of school bullying and violence prevention programs.
- A restorative justice framework is a promising approach to intervention for children and youth who bully.

Policy
- Zero Tolerance Policies do not reduce school bullying, and there is evidence that their application (i.e., school suspensions and expulsions) discriminate against minority students.
- The creation of positive school climates should be a policy priority.

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[6] See note 2 above.

[7] See note 2 above.

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