Reducing School Violence: 
School-Based Curricular Programs and School Climate

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In this brief review, two different, though interrelated approaches to the reduction of school violence are described and critiqued. The first, and more traditional approach, involves the establishment of classroom-based educational and therapeutic programs that focus on the interpersonal skills, attitudes, emotional literacy, and risk and protective factors that are associated with aggressive behavior and attitudes. These school-based curricular programs (SBCPs) promote prosocial behavior and endeavor to help students maintain peer relationships and conflicts without resorting to aggressive or violent behavior. The second approach endeavors to improve components of a school’s social and interpersonal climate that are associated with aggressive and violent behavior. These components include the quality of relationships among students, staff, and administrators; norms, attitudes, and beliefs among students, staff, and administrators; perceptions and enforcement of disciplinary rules and policies; the organizational structure of schools and their capacity to address school violence; and school connectedness or bonding (Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Welsh, 2000).

WHAT IS MEANT BY SCHOOL VIOLENCE?

In terms of a school’s jurisdiction and liability, school violence is violence that occurs on school grounds, on school-supported transportation, and at school-sponsored activities. Nevertheless, violence committed on school grounds often derives from conflicts that emerge in the community (as well as vice versa). This phenomenon blurs the distinction between school and community violence and suggests that school personnel need to possess knowledge of the community in which a school is situated and that members of the community should become involved in school-based violence prevention initiatives. The “what” of school violence is more complicated and multidimensional (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Violence is generally defined as an intentional form of behavior in which one person threatens, attempts to harm, or does harm another person. Aggression is generally defined as a form of low-level violence that includes verbal, physical, or gestural behavior that is intended to cause minor physical harm, psychological distress, intimidation, or to induce fear in another (Greene, 2005). Aggression can also be indirect or relational, as in instances in which a student is ostracized, isolated, or is the object of nasty rumors. Moreover, students are increasingly disseminating negative, compromising, or humiliating messages through electronic means (cyberbullying, the newest form of adolescent aggression).

Some researchers argue that the disproportionate imposition of negative sanctions upon certain classes of students for the same conduct, as has been found with zero-tolerance policies, is also a form of school violence in that such practices unjustly penalize some students more than others (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Similarly, some have argued that institutional forms of racism and sexual oppression (as reflected in behavior, attitudes, curricula, and textbooks), an unwelcoming school atmosphere (often conceptualized as an aspect of school climate), as well as the consequences of unequal distribution of school funding, are structural or systemic forms of school-related violence (Greene, 2006). These forms of violence, however, are rarely tracked, monitored, or addressed by school violence programs. The “who” of school violence is most frequently conceptualized as student-on-student aggression or violence; ignoring the many other permutations of violence among teachers, staff, administrators, and students; for example, teacher-to-student bullying or coercion (Twemlow & Fonagy, 2005). Most SBCPs are focused on direct forms of aggression among students (fighting, hitting, pushing, verbal intimidation, and threats); excluding the indirect forms of aggression noted above. Correspondingly, as detailed below, these programs are nearly always assessed in terms of the extent to which direct aggressive behavior or known predictors of aggressive behavior (risk factors) are lessened or reduced.

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SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULAR PROGRAMS

Hundreds of school-based curricular programs are available on the market and described in the professional literature. Programs vary in terms of theoretical foundation, target audience, duration, and intensity, and by the training required to implement them (Fagan & Mihalic, 2003; Greene, 2005). Some programs focus on the ways in which students frame, perceive, or conceptualize the nature and appropriateness of aggressive and violent behavior (cognitive behavioral approaches), some focus on how students learn and unlearn such behaviors (social learning or coaching approaches), some utilize traditional pedagogical methods to teach social skills, some focus on rewarding positive behavior (behavioral programs), some focus on helping students better understand feelings and emotions (social-emotional literacy approaches), and some adopt more traditional therapeutic or counseling approaches.

The vast majority of SBCPs target elementary and middle school students and are designed as universal programs in which all students in a school or grade level participate. One such program is Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) (Greenberg, Kusche, & Mihalic, 1998). This elementary school program focuses on the promotion of social and emotional competencies. It covers five basic conceptual domains: self-control, emotional understanding, positive self-esteem, relationships, and interpersonal problem solving. One hundred thirty-one sequenced and integrated lesson plans covering each of the five domains are taught during a five-year period. Like many SBCPs, PATHS utilizes a variety of pedagogical approaches including role plays, modeling behavior, student projects, rehearsal strategies, lectures, and classroom discussion and reflection.

Like all classroom curricula, SBCPs require teacher training. Sometimes training is limited to a manual but increasingly programs are requiring face-to-face training and telephone consultation to ensure that the program is implemented as intended.
and designed. However, this form of teacher training is not generally oriented to helping teachers communicate and build trust and credibility with their students, which are aspects of a school’s climate that are clearly associated with peer aggression. Some programs have additional components such as parent coaching and counseling, home visitation, and individual case management. These programs are targeted to students who exhibit known risk factors (selected programs) or students who have engaged in aggressive or violent behavior (indicated programs). FAST Track is an example of a selected program that includes, in addition to classroom activities, parent training, home visitation, case management, and academic tutoring (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999). While FAST Track and other selected and indicated SBCPs generally do not address the quality of teacher-student relationships, they are designed to improve the quality of relationships among students and their parents or guardians.

Evaluations of SBCPs

Over the past two decades, a large body of research has demonstrated that many school-based curricular programs, if implemented properly, significantly reduce aggressive and disruptive behavior among students in the school setting (Hahn et al., 2007; Mytton et al., 2002; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). Hahn and his colleagues (Hahn et al., 2007), in their review of the evaluation research literature on universal SBCPs, found that 15% fewer students who participate in such programs engage in aggressive behavior in comparison to similar groups of students who do not participate in such programs (an 18% reduction in elementary school programs, a 7% reduction in middle schools, and a 29% reduction in high schools). Wilson and Lipsey’s (2007) analysis of the SBCP evaluation literature revealed reductions in aggressive behavior in the 25% range.

No single type of universal SBCP appears to be more effective than others (e.g., cognitive behavioral programs, social skills programs, behavioral, and counseling programs) and generally the programs were equally effective in different types of communities and with different types of populations. However, Wilson and Lipsey (2007) found that SBCPs generally had greater impact in reducing aggressive behavior among low- versus middle-income students.

Wilson and Lipsey (2007) also included selected and indicated programs in their review of the research literature on school-based violence prevention programs. They found that indicated programs were more effective in reducing aggressive behavior than selected programs, in other words, the more aggressive the students the higher the impact of the program. In addition, they found that behavioral learning strategies were significantly more effective than other types of programs for selected and indicated programs, though, all types of programs that were subject to rigorous evaluation significantly reduced levels of aggression and disruptive behavior. Mytton and colleagues (2002) reviewed the research literature for SBCPs that were exclusively focused on students at high risk for violent or aggressive behavior. They also found an overall significant positive impact of these programs in reducing aggressive behavior. Their analysis, however, yielded a slightly lower level of aggression and violence reduction than did Wilson and Lipsey’s review (2007).

Need for Further Study

Wilson and Lipsey (2007) found that programs that were implemented without the direct involvement of the research team that developed the program were as effective in reducing aggressive behavior as programs that did have direct program developer involvement. While the number of studies without program developer involvement was relatively small, this finding suggests that, with proper training and instruction, school administrators can implement these programs with fidelity and can achieve positive outcomes (see also Fagan & Mihalic, 2003). Nevertheless, Wilson and Lipsey’s sample, as indicated above, was confined to programs that were subject to a relatively rigorous program evaluation. In other words, the sample of programs was far from representative of typical situations in which a school implements a program without direct involvement of the program developers.

Indeed, D. Gottfredson and G. Gottfredson (2002), in their examination of implementation fidelity within a national probability sample of schools (without corresponding experimental outcome evaluations), discovered that implementation quality was generally quite low. Given the research literature showing that outcomes of SBCPs are compromised when implemented with poor fidelity, the question of whether schools can routinely achieve the excellent results revealed in the research literature remains open (D. Gottfredson, 2001).

Another important factor in examining the impact of SBCPs is whether the obtained positive outcomes are sustainable over time. Generally, the follow-up period assessed in published studies is relatively short: the vast majority of studies have used a follow-up period of less than one school year. Consequently, there is no systemic data on the long-term impact of such programs (D. Gottfredson, 2007). This represents a serious gap in our understanding of SBCPs.

In addition, very few of the SBCP evaluations have utilized measures of more serious forms of violence or crimes against persons, such as shootings, aggravated assaults, or robberies (D. Gottfredson, 2007). This is due in part to the relative rarity of such behaviors and thus the requirement of very large sample sizes to detect a program impact on these behaviors. We have long known that early and chronic expression of aggressive behavior, particularly when expressed in multiple domains, predicts subsequent violent behavior. Whether short-term reductions in aggressive behavior lead to long-term reductions in more serious forms of violence remains a compelling theory but lacks direct empirical support.

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLIMATE ON SCHOOL VIOLENCE

A robust research literature suggests that many of the components that comprise school climate—cultural norms in the schools, quality of interpersonal relationships, school policies, and student, staff, and administrator feelings and beliefs about their schools—are significantly related to levels of victimization and offending in schools (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Moreover, because classroom climate often varies within a school, it is important to examine the impact of interpersonal climate at the classroom as well as schoolwide level (Sprott, 2004).

Several researchers have demonstrated that “school connectedness” (feelings of positive attachment to one’s school, peers, teachers)
is a protective factor for reducing youth violence in general, school violence in particular, and externalizing behavior (Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2003). Furthermore, data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health reveal that four aspects of school climate predict school connectedness: positive classroom management, participation in extracurricular activities, tolerant discipline policies, and school size (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). These findings suggest that altering these elements will enhance school connectedness. Whether such changes will also result in reductions in peer-to-peer and other forms of school-based aggression and violence remains untested.

With regard to discipline policies, several researchers have found significant associations between the clarity, consistency, and fairness of school rules and violence perpetration and victimization. In schools in which students believe that their school’s rules and discipline structure are clear, fair, and consistently applied, levels of violence and aggression are generally low (Payne et al., 2003; Welsh, 2000). Similarly, Gottfredson and colleagues, in their large scale study of school violence in American schools, found that school climate and discipline practices were the primary distinguishing factors between low and high disorder schools (G. Gottfredson et al., 2000). High disorder schools in which students frequently disrupt classroom activities were characterized by inconsistent use of discipline practices, unclear or low expectations for students, use of zero-tolerance policies, and communication problems among students and staff.

Battistich and Hom (1997) found that “school belonging,” comprised of a combined measure of interpersonal relationships and student autonomy and influence, predicted delinquency and victimization among fifth and sixth grade students. Similarly, Walsh (2000) found that respect for students was associated with lower levels of student aggression for both perpetration and victimization.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SBCPs AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

A modest research literature suggests that SBCPs are better implemented in schools that have a relatively positive school climate (Ozer, 2006). That school climate affects the implementation quality of school-based programs is suggested by studies revealing that the implementation of such programs is affected by school organization, key-stakeholder buy-in, expertise implementing programs generally, and staff turnover (Greene, 2005; Hunter, Elias, & Norris, 2001). Given that the quality of SBCP implementation is significantly associated with greater reductions in aggressive behavior, school climate appears to moderate the effectiveness of SBCPs (G. Gottfredson et al., 2000; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007).

SCHOOL CLIMATE CHANGE PROGRAMS

In contrast to the burgeoning experimental literature of SBCPs, few experimental studies have been conducted that directly evaluate the impact of school climate change efforts on aggressive behavior and the few studies that have been conducted reveal modest to moderate effects (Cook et al., 2000; Greene, 2005). The evaluation of Comer’s School Development Program represents the true experimental test of a climate change program (Cook et al., 2000). This program focuses specifically on changing a school’s interpersonal climate through the work of three teams: a School Planning and Management Team, a Social Support Team, and a Parent Team. Each team supports the basic goals of implementing cooperative learning and problem solving and building trust among adults and students in the school. Given the focus on the social environment of the school, climate change from the perspective of staff and students, as well as resultant academic and social outcomes, are assessed. The evaluation of the Comer School Development Program by Cook and colleagues revealed a positive impact on some measures of school climate as well as reductions in acting out behavior (Cook et al., 2000).

Similarly, The Child Development Program is designed to promote caring and supporting relationships among students, staff, and parents. It focuses on the norms of social justice and responsibility, emphasizes a strengths-based approach to students, and engages students with adults in program decision-making (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004). The evaluation of this program revealed reductions in student victimization and student misconduct as well as improvements in two aspects of school climate: students’ bonding to school and improvements in teacher-student relationships.

Additional programs target multiple domains of the social ecology (teachers, administrators, school policies, family, and community members) but most of these programs focus on unidirectional influences on the child, without significantly addressing bi-directional relationships among students and the adult authorities in the school. For example the Olweus’ Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus & Limber, 1999) is often cited as an evidence-based program that adopts a school climate approach. Nevertheless, key components of school climate—including coercive and aggressive behaviors by adults, student connectedness to school, and the inconsistent or unfair administration of discipline policies (though shaming as a discipline policy is discouraged)—are not addressed in this program. Consequently, this program cannot be considered a true school climate change program.

DISCUSSION

Tremendous progress has been made over the past two decades in establishing effective school-based violence prevention programs. Nevertheless, programs designed to stem violence in schools have largely focused on reducing student-to-student aggressive behavior through curricular programs (SBCPs), essentially ignoring interpersonal relationships between students and adults in schools, student bonding to schools, disproportionalities in the application of student discipline, and related organizational factors that comprise school climate. And while selected and indicated school-based
curricular programs also include family interventions, their focus has remained on reductions in student-to-student aggression. In addition, SBCPs implicitly or explicitly adopt a “deficit” model, in that the programs are designed to provide social skills training or related skills because students lack such skills. In contrast, the predominant orientation in neighborhood-based youth programming (and incorporated in The Child Development Project described above) is “positive youth development,” in which a student’s interests and strengths are pursued and through such pursuits fundamental capacities and skills are developed (Wilson-Simmons, 2007). In these programs, youth are given an active role in the program operations and in some cases even in governance. While SBCPs often include exercises and student projects that rely on the use and discovery of interpersonal skills, an overall enhanced focus on positive skills and interests may yield better results and also may improve the quality of relationships between students and the teachers who oversee such activities. Indeed, the promising results from positive behavioral supports initiatives, supports this shift to an enhanced positive youth development approach (Sprague & Horner, 2006).

We know, as summarized above, that SBCPs must be implemented with fidelity in order to achieve the results attained in efficacy studies. We also know through numerous large scale studies and qualitative case studies that a number of key climate-related factors affect a school’s capacity to implement programs effectively. These include strong leadership, political will, prior success in implementing programs, trust among teachers and students, emotional support of students, commitment to the program, participation in training, and ongoing assessment (G. Gottfredson et al., 2000; Greene, 2005; Sprott, 2004). A positive climate improves not only the implementation of SBCPs but such factors should act in a synergistic fashion with SBCPs so that the impact of such programs are more robust. Still, this statement requires experimental verification.

School climate approaches to school violence, in contrast to SBCPs, focus on the quality of interpersonal relationships among multiple stakeholders in the school, including teachers, staff, administrators, parents, sometimes community members, and, of course, students. The focus is on the phenomenological interpersonal world of each stakeholder as well as the organizational structure and policies of the schools. Climate change programs focus on aggressive and respectful behavior among all parties, not just the students. As such, climate approaches have the potential to effect more substantial changes not only in aggressive behavior among students but in reducing direct and indirect forms of aggression and in promoting respectful interpersonal relationships among all key stakeholders, improving the organizational structure of schools, and improving the policies and the enforcement of policies as they affect all stakeholders.

Increasingly, advocates and academics are signaling the need to focus on broad spectrum climate analyses and actions. SBCPs have their place, but they are only one part of the puzzle. A growing body of research has consistently shown that schools in which students feel welcome, schools to which students feel positively connected and engaged, and schools in which students perceive their school’s rules and policies are fair and consistently enforced, are likely to have lower levels of aggression and violence and higher rates of respectful behavior among all key stakeholders. Furthermore, in such schools, SBCPs may well be more effective.

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The problem, of course, is that effective strategies have not been developed to change the school climate in ways that are robust and replicable. The task of changing school environments is difficult and daunting (Osher et al., 2004). With respect to strategies to change school climate, we are where we were 20 years ago with respect to SBCPs. Some programs have been developed, but we are really at an early stage in our understanding of how these programs work and in determining how effective they are. A number of ideas have been suggested as frameworks for changing school climates (e.g., a human rights orientation, schoolwide strategic planning processes, positive behavior supports, restorative justice, and reconciliation and non-violence principles), but these ideas need to be operationalized into testable and replicable programs (Greene, 2006; Skiba, Ritter, Simmons, Peterson, & Miller, 2006).

As Osher and colleagues (2004) have stated: “A focus on individual students alone will not produce safe and successful schools” (p. 22). In short, a significantly enhanced body of research is needed on climate change that will help schools navigate the complex terrain of school climate change as a means to reduce aggressive behavior, increase prosocial and respectful behavior in our schools, and improve the implementation and effectiveness of school-based curricular programs.

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