Relationships Between Teacher Support, Informal Social Control and Students' Perceptions of Safety

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Abstract

Background: Despite the efforts of schools and their communities to impose new policies to protect their students, students continue to report high levels of concerns about being attacked in certain school settings (Lenzi, et. al., 2017). Unlike looking at risk factors in past studies, this study was to focus on protective correlates. Informal social control is defined as teachers intervening in cases such as bullying or assault. It is hypothesized that higher levels of teacher support and informal social control leads to higher perceptions of safety in students.

Methods: 316 sixth grade students (52.9% female) were included in the study. Their ages ranged from 11 to 13 years (M= 11.66, SD= 0.51). These students were from a large public middle school in the United States. The study measured perception of safety and scales of teacher support and informal social control. Bivariate correlations and multivariate regression were conducted to identify the significance of the relationships between teacher support/informal social control and student safety perceptions.

Results: Teacher support and informal social control were both positively correlated with the perceptions of student's safety. Though regression analyses, Teacher support (B= 0.26, p< .01) and informal social control (B=0.15, p<.01) were both associated with the perceptions and feelings of safety in the students.

Discussion: These results highlight the importance of new policies that give teachers the tools and knowledge to help and protect students both at school and within their communities. Further exploration is needed to continue to make students feel safe and accepted during their education.

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INTRODUCTION

Students' perceptions of school safety during middle school is particularly important to their mental health and overall academic performance (Joyce, 2019).

- At the individual level and at the aggregate level, students report higher feelings of safety when they also perceive higher levels of teacher support and informal social control (i.e., perceptions that teachers/staff would intervene if a conflict or violent situation took place). This relationship is found when examining the perspectives of both the students and the teachers (Lenzi, et. al., 2017). For example, both student and teacher perceptions of higher levels of safety are associated with academic achievement, better mental/physical health, and lower risk behaviors (Lenzi, et. al., 2017).

- Teacher support and informal social control may be more strongly associated with safety than formal social control (e.g., security cameras, metal detectors, and surveillance measures), as formal social control has shown to lower informal social control and relationships with teachers and other adults at the schools; (Lenzi, et. al., 2017). This may be due to a perceived lack of trust and community.

- Also, the lack of connection between teachers and students is associated with decreased levels of safety perceptions in schools with higher levels of formal social control (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012). These associations are stronger when participants include people of color and people of lower socioeconomic status (SES).
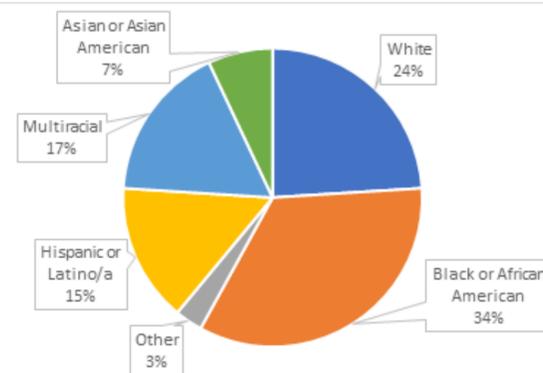
The Current Study

The current study analyzes how both teacher support and informal social control influences students' perceptions of safety in school and in their communities. This adds to existing literature by supporting the finding that there is a significant correlation between these variables. It is hypothesized higher levels of teacher support and informal social control leads to students' stronger feelings of safety.

METHOD

Participants

316 sixth-grade students (52.9% female) were included in the study. Their ages ranged from 11 to 13 years (M= 11.66, SD= 0.51). 21.2% of students indicated a Spanish/Hispanic/Latino/a ethnicity. These students were from a large, suburban public middle school in the United States.

Procedures

The study measured students' perceptions of safety from the "School Informal Social Control" Scale (Williams & Guerra, 2007) and perceptions of teacher support (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003).

Researchers went to a local middle school to survey the students in their classes. An institutional review board approved study procedures, which included obtaining passive parental consent and written student assent.

While students completed their survey, researchers handed out snacks. They were then asked to sit quietly until all the students finished. All survey information was collected on electronic tablets.

Data Analysis

Bivariate correlations and multivariate regression were conducted to identify the significance of the relationships between teacher support/informal social control and student safety perceptions.

RESULTS

Teacher support and informal social control were both positively correlated with the perceptions of students' safety.

Through regression analyses, students' perceptions of teacher support (B= 0.26, p< .01) and informal social control (B=0.15, p<.01) were both associated with the perceptions and feelings of students' safety.

	Safety		
	B	β	p
Teacher Support	0.256	0.234	0.000 or <.01
Informal Social Control	0.146	0.194	0.003 or <.01

DISCUSSION

Middle School and Current Policies: Argument for Change

It appears this middle school's current policy briefly focuses on time spent on safety and supporting students by suggesting the students are responsible - how "they" (the students) can create a better academic environment. The school lined up a team of professionals with titles collectively containing every letter of the alphabet, which is great, except those credentials mean nothing to the students. It could be argued there is a critical need for how teachers and students can get involved. Teachers need to lead by example, inserting themselves even in the least significant of cases. It is reasonable to suggest that teachers who care to intervene in cases, such as teasing, would be willing to stop a fight. *How are the teachers and staff showing they are supporting their students? How are they building and representing their community?*

CONCLUSIONS

While the research area is relatively new, there is significant statistical data showing teacher support and informal social control are key components to students' perception of safety.

Student safety has been considered a top priority as policies have been made, but it can be argued these policies have focused too heavily on formal social control. *A school can have the highest level of security, but if the students do not feel safe or connected to their teachers and school staff, their mental health and academic success may suffer.*

- This study supports previous findings by confirming results of higher levels of perceived safety when influenced by higher levels of teacher support. This study also adds to the literature by examining both teacher support and informal social control in relation to student safety among middle school students.

- Most of the studies done, including this one, were limited in the number of participants. There was also a lack of an examination in how SES impacts perceptions as well. The concept of safety is also subjective, as it is attempted to be quantified by translating it to an ordinal scale in most studies.

It is recommended to conduct more larger-scale studies, particularly noting the differences in perceptions by factors such as geography, socioeconomics, access to health care, language barriers, etc. Identifying consistency or problem areas can lead to better policies to be put into place to protect students.

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