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Gender Differences and Similarities in Perceptions and Experiences of  
Secondary Public School Safety

Bryan Kent Young

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Educational Specialist in School Psychology

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August 2010

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## ABSTRACT

### Gender Differences and Similarities in Perceptions and Experiences of

### Secondary Public School Safety

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This study is a description of male and female secondary students' experiences of safety in public schools. Gender differences in reported victimization and perceptions of school safety have been noted. The National Center for Educational Statistics ([NCES], 2006) reported that boys were the victims of violent acts in the schools more often than girls. Many studies have reported different results relating to how safe students perceive their schools to be (Addington et al., 2002; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997). This study considered gender differences and similarities in students' perceptions of school safety.

The study utilized a qualitative research approach to describe students' experiences. Focus groups composed of secondary public school students discussed their perceptions and experiences of school safety. The focus groups were divided into three categories: mixed genders, all male, and all female. The data were analyzed by gender to provide descriptions of what might contribute to students' perceptions, experiences, and feelings in school. Students reported feelings of safety and danger in the schools from the following sources: peers, teachers and staff, and environmental context. Within these three categories the following themes were identified: (a) peers included friends, groups, and weapons; (b) teachers and staff included supervision and student-teacher relationships; and (c) environmental context included hallways and cameras/officers.

Gender differences were noted in students' comments describing their experiences related to safety in the schools. Boys reported looking toward teachers and peers for protection from physical harm. Girls reported using relationships with friends and school faculty members as a source of emotional security and comfort. Similarities across gender were noted in students' perceptions regarding the need for extra security measures and the need for more trusting relationships with teachers and peers. Based on students' comments and considering gender differences, the effectiveness of school safety measures may be increased if administration considered the needs of each gender.

Keywords: gender, school safety, qualitative research, adolescent

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to those students who participated in this research and shared their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. I would like to thank Ellie Young for her patience and long suffering while I searched for my motivation every six months. I am grateful for her guidance and inspired leadership throughout this entire process. She has been a delight to work with and not cranky in the least, thank you. I owe a huge thank you to Suzanne Jacobson for allowing me to attend her prospectus defense, which inspired this whole thesis. I really appreciate her support and knowledge as we collected and shared this data. I would like to thank Brittney Warburton, for helping me to moderate the focus groups and providing a feminine perspective as we asked the questions. Thank you, Aaron Jackson, for his knowledge of qualitative research and reminding me of my assumptions and biases, which are many. Thank you, Melissa Allen Heath, for contributing sources and editing; she is a well of knowledge that never seems to dry up. Thank you, Lane Fisher, for providing me with a constant voice in the back of my head that I needed to get this done. Thank you to all other graduate students, staff, and faculty in the Counseling Psychology & Special Education department for teaching and helping. I need to thank Amy Ostvig, for her amazing editing skills. I thank my mother and father and the rest of my family for the love of learning they instilled in me. Thank you to my wife, Aleta, who provided me with constant love and support throughout this process. I love her very much and am sorry for the many hours I disappeared into the library neglecting my family duties. I want to thank my daughter, Holland, for being the best distraction a dad could ask for. And finally my Heavenly Father for the constant inspiration He provided me with as I became overwhelmed with this project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Perceptions of School Safety.....	2
Gender Differences in Schools.....	2
Teacher Attention.....	3
Disproportion in Special Education Placement.....	4
Academic Performance.....	4
Aggressive Behaviors.....	5
Bullying.....	6
Purpose of Study.....	7
Literature Review.....	8
Construct of Gender.....	8
Gender Differences in Schools.....	9
Teacher Attention.....	9
Disproportion in Special Education Placement.....	10
Academics Performance.....	11
Aggressive Behaviors.....	12
Bullying and Violence.....	14
Violence Prevention and Intervention Programs.....	15
Students' Perceptions of School Safety.....	16
Summary.....	17
Method.....	19
Research Paradigm.....	19
Assumptions of the Researcher.....	19
Participants.....	20
Setting.....	21
Procedures.....	22
Data Collection.....	24
Data Analysis.....	24
Results.....	26
Identified Sources of Safety.....	26
Peers.....	26
Friends.....	26
Groups.....	28
Weapons.....	30
Teachers and Staff.....	32
Supervision.....	32
Student/Teacher Relationships.....	34
Environmental Context.....	36
Hallways.....	36
Cameras and Officers.....	38
Summary.....	40
Discussion.....	41
Highlights of Findings.....	41
Physical Safety.....	42

Emotional Safety.....	43
Implications for Practice.....	44
Implications for Future Research.....	46
Limitations.....	47
Summary.....	48
References.....	50

## Introduction

School safety has become a popular topic in the media and research literature in the past decade. Media members have depicted schools as war zones that are not safe for American children (Anderman, 2002; Knickerbocker, 1999; Toppo, 2003). Researchers have suggested that Americans live in a “culture of fear” where irrational panic is created and supported by society’s values (Furedi, 2002). The worry of violence has resulted in more school safety measures (DeBates & Bell, 2006; Cohen, 2005; Granberg-Rademacker, Bumgarner, & Johnson, 2007). Many school districts have implemented increased and heightened security measures such as metal detectors, video surveillance technology, armed security guards, and strict codes of conduct (Ferraraccio, 1999; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Noaks & Noaks, 2000; Ryan-Arredondo et al., 2001; Schreck, Miller, & Gibson, 2003). While these safety measures have been in place, school violence has been steadily decreasing (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006). However, this does not confirm that students feel safe at school.

Though school violence has generally been on the decline (NCES, 2006), this does not necessarily imply that students feel safe at school. Lack of school safety is defined as any threat to a student’s well being that results from another person’s actions (Kitsantas, Ware, Martinez-Arias, 2004). This could include such actions as physical or verbal aggression, neglect (from educators or school personnel), or psychological harm. These threats to students’ well-being can make it hard for learning to be the main focus of a student’s experience. Gaining a better understanding of how students view the safety of their school may be a meaningful way to create safe schools where students and faculty focus on learning outcomes (Kitsantas et al., 2004). If

students do not feel safe then the psychological distress may have a negative impact on their education.

### **Perceptions of School Safety**

Quantitative survey results, such as the Indicators of School Quality (ISQ) (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006), provide data suggesting that some students self-report feeling unsafe, specifically in secondary public schools (Chandler, 1993; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 2006). The Center for the School of the Future at Utah State University created the ISQ as a way for school administrators to measure the success of their efforts in school improvement. It is typically administered on a yearly basis to teachers, parents, students, and other school staff as a way to track their perceptions of the effectiveness and progress in their school (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006). The questions on the ISQ are designed to gauge the perceptions of the school community regarding various characteristics of their schools.

It is troubling that despite efforts (i.e., implementing a school-wide Positive Behavior Support [PBSI] model) made to improve school safety, students still reported feeling unsafe in some of the schools where the ISQ was administered and PBS implemented. The results of the ISQ data analyses raise several questions. This study seeks to look at gender differences and similarities in student perceptions of school safety.

### **Gender Differences in Schools**

Gender affects how students experience school just as it does most aspects of life. The question of the implications of gender differences in school has been raised many times over the years (Beaman, 2006; Buckley, Storino, & Sebastiani, 2003; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Harmon, Stockton, & Contrucci, 1992; Marsh, Martin, & Cheng, 2008; Sadker & Zittleman,



2005). Gender differences heighten as students enter into adolescence and teenage years (Lezczynski & Strough, 2008). Research has highlighted how school can be a very different place based on a student's gender. The following are some aspects of education for which gender differences have implications.

**Teacher attention.** Differential teacher attention for males and females has been the focus of several studies. Brophy and Good (1970) observed that “boys have more interactions with the teacher than girls” (pp. 372–373). A meta-analysis by Kelly (1988) found that boys received more attention from their teachers and also more criticism. In class, girls were more likely to volunteer by raising their hands, but were only called on 44% of the time as compared to boys who were called on 56% of the time. These observations were found to be consistent across the gender of the teacher, age of the student, subject being taught, country of origin, and social economic status (SES) of the student.

Renowned feminist scholar Dale Spender tried to teach a lesson giving equal time to boys and girls; however, when she reviewed her taped lessons she found that on average only 38% of her interactions were spent with girls (Swann & Graddol, 1988). Swann and Graddol argued that by making eye-contact, particularly just prior to questioning, the teacher was effectively inviting the student to respond, and that gaze direction systematically favored boys. They argued that teachers spent more time looking at the boys to monitor the boys' behavior. They claimed, moreover, that “girls seem to have learnt [sic] to expect a lower participation level than boys, and boys seem to have learned that their fair share is a larger one” (Swann & Graddol, 1988, p.63). These gender-focused studies highlight the possibility that male and female students may experience school differently, and these differences may also be apparent in how males and females experience school safety.

**Disproportion in special education placement.** The issue of disproportionate placement of the genders in special education is one that has garnered much attention in recent years. Considering the ratios regarding special education placement, males have outnumbered females at all levels of special education since the 1970s; the ratios range from 1.5:1 to 3.5:1 (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). This clear documentation that boys are over represented in special education settings, raises concern over whether girls are not getting the help they need due to bias in special education assessment (U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

Research has shown that this disproportion may be based on physical differences not simple biases in assessment. Some have hypothesized that because boys mature physically, mentally, and emotionally more slowly than girls they may be at higher risk for experiencing an educational disability (Halpern, 1992; Harmon, Stockton, & Contrucci, 1992). Boys are also more likely than girls to have complications during and before birth, which may lead to a higher risk for having or developing an educational disability (Eme, 1984). Because males have only one X chromosome they are more susceptible to abnormalities on the X chromosome that lead to, or are associated with, mental retardation (Hagerman, 1997; Nass, 1993; Robinson & Linden, 1993).

**Academic performance.** The gender differences are noticeable in many different areas of education. Females are reported to have higher levels of academic performance and school completion (Doren & Benz, 2001; Harvey, 2003; Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990; Wagner et al., 1991). In comparison to girls, boys are five time more likely to drop out of preschool. Boys tend to do less homework and get lower grades (Tyre, 2008). As stated above, boys are disproportionately represented in special education (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Harmon,

Stockton, & Contrucci, 1992) and are more likely to be identified as having attention or behavior problems (Galambos, Leadbeater, & Barker, 2004; Kann & Hanna, 2000). There are other academic areas where boys continue to fall behind as well. In high school, with the exception of sports, boys are becoming less involved in extracurricular activities (Tyre, 2008). Also, fewer males attend college. Currently, in the U.S. there are 2.5 million more female college undergraduates than male undergraduates—a gap that grows by 100,000 every year (Tyre, 2008). In contrast to females dominating the positive educational statistics, boys dominate in the areas of school failure, aggression, and disability status. These differences may also be reflected in how boys and girls experience aspects of school safety.

**Aggressive behaviors.** Boys tend to receive greater attention for aggressive behavior while girls are generally perceived as passive and nice (Crick, Werner, Casas, O'Brien, Nelson, Grotzger et al., 1999). Physical aggression is often pictured as a male phenomenon, with boys being both the aggressors and the targets of most violence (Crick & Nelson, 2002). Most aggression interventions tend to focus on physical aggression among boys while girls' aggression can go unnoticed (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001).

Recently, considerable research has focused on relational aggression as opposed to physical violence (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Isernhagen & Harris, 2003; Peterson & Ray, 2006; Young, Boye, & Nelson 2006). Relational aggression is expressed in many forms, ranging from name calling to severe social exclusion. As the relational aggression research moves forward, there is an increased understanding that girls experience relational and social aggression at school in ways that are not as readily identifiable because girls' behaviors are less overt. Both males and females are involved in relational aggression as victims as well as perpetrators (Isernhagen & Harris, 2003). Inconsistent results from the research are evident when

considering patterns of gender in relational aggression (Crick et al., 1999; Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002). Many of these studies have found little to no gender differences in relational aggression. Although, historically, males have been perceived as the most common bullies in the school; the research on relational aggression highlights that both boys and girls experience a variety of bullying, as both targets and perpetrators (Young et al., 2006)

**Bullying.** Bullying occurs in both male and female populations when a person is subjected, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions from one or more persons. The bully or groups of bullies also possess more physical or social power than the victim (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 1993). Bullying occurs across all stages of development. It may start with simple childish violence, but as verbal skills increase in later childhood and into early adolescence, bullying may include relational aggression as well. With adults, bullying can be manifested as sexual harassment (Turkel, 2007). Often times, however, bullying is not limited to one form per age group (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Nansel et al., 2001). No matter how bullying looks, most forms of bullying have similar goals: gaining control, seeking revenge, creating envy, or inflicting emotional distress (Turkel, 2007).

It can be misleading to think that bullying is limited to boys or girls, or just young children. Although both males and females are victims and perpetrators of aggression both socially and physically (Molnar, Roberts, Browne, Gardner, & Buka, 2005), males are often viewed as the source of most aggression and bullying in the schools (Barquet, 1999). However, as seen in the research, bullying in all its forms is not limited to boys (Crick et al., 1999; Crick et al., 2002).

NCES (2006) indicates that boys reported being the victims of violence and criminal activities in the schools more often than girls. However, studies such as Bryden and Fletcher

(2007) reported that females felt more unsafe, as compared to males, in an educational setting. Some would argue that females are more often the victims of non-physical aggression (Isernhagen & Harris, 2003). Possibly this may account for the discrepancy in safety reporting; due to the fact that females could feel unsafe without directly being the victims of physical violence.

### **Purpose of Study**

Research supports that aggression and victimization are experienced differently among male and female students (Bryden & Fletcher, 2007; Isernhagen & Harris, 2003; Leff, Kupersmidt, & Power, 2003; Turkel, 2007). Studies have shown that females are often the victims of violence in the schools (Barquet, 1999; Stein, Tolman, Porche, & Spencer, 2002). Molnar and her associates (2005) indicated that girls are also increasingly the perpetrators of school violence as well. Males, as previously indicated, are often portrayed as aggressive antagonizers in the schools. Male bullies most often target other boys who are weak, shy, or do not fit the stereotypical male gender role (Basow, Cahill, Phelan, Longshore, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2007; Litz, 2005). Whether they are the victim or the perpetrator, both boys and girls can experience unsafe moments at school (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & Sawyer, 2008). If girls and boys experience feeling safe differently then it would be appropriate to consider that the interventions in the school may need to target a variety of issues in order to meet the needs of all students. These issues lead to questions that are the focus of this research. Hence, this is the specific question that will guide this proposed research: What are the differences and similarities in how male and female eighth grade students perceive and experience school safety?

## Literature Review

Gender and how it affects the schooling process is an intriguing aspect of educational research. The next section highlights the research that has been done in the areas of gender and education. More specifically, it will focus on the area of gender and perceptions of school safety. Reviewing the available literature in this field creates a context for framing the research questions for this study.

### Construct of Gender

The term *gender* is often used interchangeably with *sex*. Most academic researchers, however, have developed a very distinct difference between the two. Sex is generally defined as a biological feature, broken into two categories, male and female. Gender is a set of ideologies that often accompany one's sex (Stein et al., 2002). One's biological sex holds little meaning by itself. Most of the meaning that is drawn from our sex comes from social and cultural contexts. The social meaning behind our sex is often defined as one's gender, "the social construct of sex" (Biklen & Pollard, 1993, p. 1). Much of the research that has been done on gender has been guided by social-cognitive theory and gender schema theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Leszcynski & Strough, 2008; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Martin & Ruble, 2004; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). These theories state that gender is a function of socialization and cognitive development. These theories view gender as a stable trait that does not change over time.

Research has shown that adolescence is a key time for establishing gender identity (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Physical changes due to puberty can trigger social, emotional, and psychological changes (Galambos, Almeida, & Peterson, 1990). During adolescence there can be a heightened acceptance of traditional gender expectations (Leszcynki & Strough, 2008).

From the sixth to the eighth grade boys become less approving of male-female equality and girls

become more approving of the equity between the genders (Galambos et al., 1990). Other researchers argue that adolescence can be a great time of gender flexibility (Alfieri, Ruble, & Higgins, 1996; Nelson & Keith, 1990). These researchers argue that as children transition from elementary school to secondary education they are more likely to question traditional roles.

As a child grows and develops they strive to discover and establish their identity. Part of finding one's identity is considering the gender roles that one must fulfill. As adolescents increase their self-awareness they are influenced by their perception of gender. This influence contributes to the way in which they view the world. This study seeks to look at how gender affects children's viewpoints, specifically considering school safety.

### **Gender Differences in Schools**

As children move through childhood toward adolescence, gender differences and similarities are evident. Children continue to learn gender roles when they enter school and are treated differently as they do (Beaman, Wheldal, & Kemp, 2006; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Paechter, 2003; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2008). Many studies have examined the differences that the males and females experience in school settings: Teachers tend to give more attention to boys (Beaman et al., 2006), boys are more likely to receive special education (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005), girls are more likely to be social at school (Rueger et al., 2008). The differences in how males and females are treated and the type of education they receive may help explain how boys and girls have different viewpoints about educational experiences, including feelings of being safe at school.

**Teacher attention.** Early in educational and gender research, Brophy and Good (1970) observed that “boys have more interactions with the teacher than girls” (pp. 372–373). This early observation sparked interest in educational research. In the 1980s, Kelly (1988) performed

a meta-analysis that found that boys received more attention from their teachers, but also more criticism. Results also indicated that girls were more likely to volunteer in class; however, they actually made only 44% of the comments in class. These results were consistent across different studies that examined the gender of the teacher, age of the student, subject being taught, country of origin, and SES. Even when the teacher was made aware of this bias, it still continued (Spender, 1982). Swann and Graddol (1988) found that boys tended to expect their teachers' increased attention. They also found that girls were accustomed to receiving less attention in the classroom.

Several studies found that although boys received more attention, it was not always positive attention (Kelly, 1988; Younger, Warrington, & Williams, 1999). These same studies also found that girls often received more academic based attention. In one study by Younger et al. (1999) it was found that up to 90% of all reprimands were directed at boys. This further supports the claim that boys receive more attention and that it is not necessarily positive attention. Younger and Warrington's (1996) study found that boys received less positive teachers' support for learning. In a later study, Younger found that 70% of academic questions asked were asked by female students (Younger et al., 1999). Teachers often depict girls as the ideal student (Myhill, 2002). Overall these studies show that males and females tend to be receiving different kinds of attention; boys are generally receiving more, as well as more negative attention. Receiving different amounts of attention in the classroom may affect how a student experiences the school and the quality of education that they receive.

**Disproportion in special education placement.** The issues of gender and education also intersect when special education services are considered. Males have been placed in special education more often than females, at all levels, since the 1970s (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005).



The levels of disproportion are evidenced by a male to female ratio that can range from as small as 1.5:1 to as much as 3.5:1 (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). Some studies make the claim that disproportion in special education has a direct correlation with the bias in classroom attention (Beaman et al., 2006; Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). Some research supports this claim by showing that teachers are more likely to refer students who draw more attention (Anderson, 1997; Mirkin, Marsden, & Deno, 1982; Ysseldyke et al., 1983).

It is possible that some of the special education disproportion is based on physical differences as well. Boys tend to mature physically, mentally, and emotionally slower than girls (Halpern, 1992; Harmon, Stockton, & Contrucci, 1992). Boys have higher mortality rates both prenatally and postnatally; boys are also more likely to have complications during and before birth (Eme, 1984) that can lead to mental and other delays in development. Also, because males have only one X chromosome they are more vulnerable to sex-linked genetic abnormalities that lead to or are associated with mental retardation (Hagerman, 1997; Nass, 1993; Robinson & Linden, 1993). With boys receiving more negative attention and more specialized education they may be experiencing their education differently than their female peers.

**Academic performance.** In direct contrast, as a greater proportion of males fill special education rooms, a greater proportion of females have higher levels of academic performance and have higher rates of school completion (Doren & Benz, 1998, 2001; Harvey, 2003; Valdes et al., 1990; Wagner et al., 1991). In a recently published book, Tyre (2008) brought to light many academic differences between the genders. Boys are five times more likely to be removed from preschool than girls. Boys tend to do less homework resulting in more C's and D's. Although male participation in high school sports continues to be high, boys are becoming less involved in other extracurricular activities. Also, fewer males are going on to college. Currently, there are

2.5 million more female college undergraduates than male undergraduates—a gap that grows by 100,000 every year (Tyre, 2008). Although girls once lagged behind boys in areas like math and science, they have now caught up in those areas while boys continue to lag behind in areas like social studies and English (Kommer, 2006; Sommers, 2000).

The school-based differences in gender are not limited to areas of academics. In areas of discipline and behavior boys are also behind their female counterparts. Boys are more likely to drop out of school, be sent to the principal's office, and be suspended or expelled (Kommer, 2006). Boys are more likely to be identified as having attention or behavior problems (Galambos, Leadbeater, & Barker, 2004; Kann & Hanna, 2000). With girls tending to perform better academically and boys being punished more frequently, it is quite likely that educational experiences may be perceived differently by male and female students.

**Aggressive behaviors.** Research has shown that males and females use aggression differently in the schools (Artz, 1998; Flannery, 1997; Sondheimer, 2001; Turkel, 2007; Weiler, 1999). Boys tend to receive greater attention for aggressive behavior; many of the aggressive acts in schools, such as physical fights, bullying and carrying a weapon, are carried out by and targeted at males (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Weiler, 1999). Girls, on the other hand, are generally perceived as passive and nice (Crick et al., 1999; Turkel, 2007). Historically, most aggression interventions focus on male physical aggression (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001) while girls' aggression has received notably less attention. Research shows that relational aggression and social aggression are becoming more popular targets of school safety efforts (Crick, 1996; Warren et al., 2006; Werner & Nixon, 2005; Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004).

Violent crimes committed by girls differ significantly from those committed by boys. Boys are two to three times more likely to carry weapons. The girls who do carry weapons are

more likely to use knives than guns. Boys will more often use guns, which are more deadly. Girls are more likely than boys to murder someone in the heat of passion, as a result of a conflict. Girls are also more likely to murder and fight with family members than classmates (Girls Incorporated, 1996). Girls are also far less likely to be arrested, especially for violent crimes (Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999; Weiler, 1999), a fact that may not reflect the actual level of violent crimes committed by girls. Reviews of youth programs showed that less than 3% of delinquency programs served girls only (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998; Weiler, 1999).

Research has revealed that for some types of aggression, women may be just as aggressive as men (Archer, 2004; Archer & Coyne, 2005). Recently research has focused on a more indirect form of aggression as opposed to direct physical violence (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Isernhagen & Harris, 2003; Peterson & Ray, 2006, Young et al., 2006). This form of aggression has several different names: relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), indirect aggression (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988), and social aggression (Underwood, 2003). For the purpose of consistency this paper will refer to these indirect aggressive acts as relational aggression. The behaviors associated with relational aggression are manifested in a number of ways, from name calling to severe social exclusion. Both males and females are involved in relational bullying both as victims and perpetrators (Coyne, Archer, Eslea, & Liechty, 2008; Isernhagen & Harris, 2003; Young et al., 2006).

In summary, aggression, in all its forms, is not just limited to boys. Although both males and females are victims and perpetrators of aggression, both socially and physically (Molnar et al., 2005), bullying is more often seen as a male phenomenon (Barquet, 1999; Conye et al., 2008). Conye et al. even found that children not only perceive boys using antagonistic behaviors more, they also feel that boys are more justified in their aggressive actions. However, research is

finding that boys are not alone in aggressive behaviors (Crick, et al., 1999; Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002).

**Bullying and violence.** Bulling as a form of violence and aggression in the schools is a very popular issue in the current research. Aggression in the schools, whether physical or relational, is often referred to as bullying. Bullying has been defined as being repeatedly subjected over time, to negative actions from one or more peers. There also exists an imbalance of power between the bully or group of bullies and the victims (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 1993). Bullying may be considered as a continuum of development: from childish violence or teasing, to other forms of relational or physical aggression in teens (Turler, 2007). No matter how bullying looks at various developmental stages, it usually has the same goal: revenge, envy, emotional distress or desire for control (Turler, 2007).

It is also important to note that according to research, today's youth do not perceive most acts of aggression and fighting as violence (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001). When a child is victimized by bullies and then strikes back with violence, many students self-report the victim's reaction as self-defense, not violence. Thus reactive violence may be perceived as a justifiable means of conflict resolution for students (Fatum & Hoyle, 1996).

This justified violence may lead to increased problems with safety. Many perpetrators of targeted school shootings reported feeling bullied, persecuted, or injured by other students prior to the attack (Fein et al., 2002). The fact that a history of bullying led these individuals to extreme acts of violence does not mean that all victims of bullying will retaliate with school shootings. In fact research has shown that 60% of reported violent school crimes occur in only 4% of the nation's high schools (Cantor & Wright, 2001). A 2005 study found that approximately 28% of students had been bullied at school during the past six months and 8% had

been bullied almost daily (Bear & Blank, 2008). Considering these statistics, only about 25% of students who are bullied will report being bullied at school (Fein et al., 2002), but this does not mean that these students feel safe in school. Whether the threat is extreme violence, persistent bullying, or simply the fear of one or both of these the research reports that children do not feel safe in their schools (Fein et al., 2002).

### **Violence Prevention and Intervention Programs**

With students using aggressive and violent behavior to bully peers, many programs have been developed to prevent or address school-based bullying (Berson, Berson, & Ferron 2002; Kadel, Watkins, Follman, & Hammond, 1999; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Stockdale et. al, 2002; Warren et. al, 2006). Many of the programs that have been implemented can be very invasive such as metal detectors, video surveillance technology, armed security guards, strict codes of conduct, and zero tolerance polices (Ferraraccio, 1999; Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Noaks & Noaks, 2000; Ryan-Arredondo et al., 2001; Schreck, Miller, & Gibson, 2003).

Recent reports indicate that school violence is not increasing; it is decreasing (NCES, 2006). For example, from 1992 to 2004, National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) reports of violent crime at school declined from 48 per 1000, to 22 per 1000 students (DeVoe, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2005; Dinkes, Cataldi, Kena, & Baum, 2006). Despite declining incidence of school violence in recent years students continue to report feeling unsafe in school (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006).

It is difficult to determine if or how these programs and security measures have contributed to lowering the violence in schools. However, a meta-analysis of bullying intervention literature from the last 25 years found that these programs only produce modest positive outcomes at best. The interventions are more likely to influence knowledge, attitudes,

and self-perceptions rather than actual bullying behaviors (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008). A school can implement many school safety programs or anti-bullying campaigns, but these efforts may not establish or increase students' sense of safety.

### **Students' Perceptions of School Safety**

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2006) reported that boys were the victims of violence and criminal activities in the schools more often than girls. However, Bryden, and Fletcher (2007) found that females at small universities felt unsafe more frequently than their male counterparts. Similar trends may be found in secondary schools. Some would argue that females are more often the victims of non-physical aggression (Isernhagen & Harris, 2003) and this could account for the discrepancy in safety reporting. Others feel that the discrepancy could be due to sexual victimization that is more frequently reported by women than men (Bryden & Fletcher, 2007; Sondheimer, 2001; Weiler, 1999).

Many studies have found differing results relating to how safe students perceive their schools to be. One study found that high school students were not concerned with school safety and they felt that school administration was often times overreacting by implementing violence prevention programs (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997). However, students who were interviewed after the April 1999 shootings at Columbine High School were more likely to report fear of harm or attack at school than those interviewed before the incident (Addington et al., 2002). Another study which looked at middle school (grades 6–8) students found that the school environment variables (school climate, discipline code fairness, and school safety actions) strongly influenced students' perceptions of school safety (Kitsantas, Ware, & Martinez-Arias, 2004). A study, which looked at elementary students, found that bullying and safety in the schools were of greater concern to the students than their parents and teachers

(Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). A 2000, telephone survey found that 90% of parents thought their children were very safe or somewhat safe at school (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2000). Research seems to reflect that feelings about school climate and connectedness are more relevant to students' perceptions of school safety than serious violence (Skiba et al., 2004).

However, research shows that perceptions of school safety can differ from school to school and from one community to another. Three elements that have been identified to contribute to a safe school environment are: (a) goals, a strong emphasis on academic mission in the school; (b) rules and procedures, clear disciplinary standards that are firmly, fairly, and consistently enforced; and (c) a caring climate that guides interpersonal relationships in the school (Aleem & Moles, 1993). Research has shown the connection between school factors (positive school climate, discipline code, fairness, and security actions taken by the school) and the student's perception of safety (Farmer, 1999). Students that self-report higher levels of feeling safe in school tend to go to schools that incorporate these factors; and the students who feel less safe attend schools that do not incorporate these factors (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). This study seeks to look at gender as another factor related to students' perceived school safety.

### **Summary**

The literature has shown that males and females experience many things differently in the schools (Beaman, Wheldal, & Kemp, 2006; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Paechter, 2003; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2008), ranging from how much attention teachers give them (Beaman et al., 2006) to the kind of services they receive (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). These differing experiences lead to differing results, with boys being more likely to drop out of high school and

girls being more likely to go on to college (Doren & Benz, 1998, 2001; Harvey, 2003; Tyre, 2008; Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990; Wagner et al., 1991).

Recent research also shows that males and females express bullying and aggressive behaviors differently, as well (Artz, 1998; Flannery, 1997; Sondheimer, 2001; Turkel, 2007; Weiler, 1999). Males are more often the violent aggressive perpetrators (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Weiler, 1999). Girls are more likely to express their aggression through social and indirect means (Archer, 2004; Archer & Coyne, 2005; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Isernhagen & Harris, 2003; Peterson & Ray, 2006, Young et al., 2006). Boys are more often the victims of bullying and school violence (NCES, 2006). However, one study shows that females are more likely to report feeling unsafe in a university setting (Bryden & Fletcher, 2007). Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of research that considers how secondary male and female students differentially report aspects of school safety. With research supporting that males and females experience aggression differently, little to no research has investigated gender differences in perceived school safety.

Despite many school safety programs (Berson et. al, 2002; Kadel et. al, 1999; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Stockdale et. al, 2002; Warren et al., 2006), many students still report feeling unsafe at their schools (Addington et al., 2002; Kitsantas et al., 2004; Skiba et al., 2004; Stockdale et al., 2002). Research is needed to increase understanding regarding the differences and similarities in male and female students' experiences with and perceptions of school safety. This study will look at gender differences and similarities in how students experience safety at school.



## **Method**

This study builds upon current research in the areas of gender, bullying, and school safety by describing how students report feeling about safety in the school setting and identifying gender differences and similarities. Insight was gained into how the students feel about school safety and a detailed account was given of their experiences. Using a qualitative research model we are able to get an in-depth look at the personal experiences and perceptions of the students involved. The data for this study was collected for the use of another project, but was analyzed to answer a different research question for this project. The data was collected using focus groups as a way to collect several students' qualitative opinions at one time.

### **Research Paradigm**

Qualitative research views human behavior as fluid, dynamic, situational, social, contextual, and personal (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The purpose of this research study incorporated these assumptions. The qualitative nature of this study makes it ideal to summarize students' perceptions and experiences because it uses quotes directly from the students rather than relying on numbers and statistics to describe their experiences. The purpose of this study is not to prove or disprove an existing hypothesis. Rather, the purpose of this study is to gather and report on the observational differences and similarities of the experiences of male and female students. This adds to the previous research with a rich and deep description of the students' experiences. The depth of these data allows researchers the opportunity to formulate additional research question for future studies.

### **Assumptions of the Researcher**

The thoughts, assumptions, and biases of the author of this study impacted every aspect of this research. As a married male with five older sisters and working in a predominately

female occupation, the author has certain innate biases concerning gender issues. The author of this study may be inclined toward a more effeminate perspective than the average male researcher due to these life experiences. Additionally, previous experiences of working with students and their families in the schools as a school psychologist intern also influenced the decision making process and informed subsequent data analysis. The author of this study's personal experiences, as a college educated male in his mid-twenties who received public education in a suburban environment in the Eastern United States, result in a personal view of the world that affected every aspect of this study. The personal experiences of the author may not align with the experiences of the students who made the comments, but certain universal aspects of the subject matter may override personal biases.

Assumptions abounded concerning this research: that the genders would have some form of variance in their responses; students' perceptions of school would impact their feelings of safety in school; moderators' behaviors and communication style would minimally influence students' responses; group think would not eliminate individual thoughts and opinions; and students would provide rich descriptions. These assumptions both limited and expanded data collection and analysis. Inexperience in researching, data collection and analysis, and moderating burdened this study with cumbersome revisions of time consuming non-efficiency, but that is to be expected. The author of this study acknowledged some degree of personal biases and relied on other reviewers to help identify unnoticed biases.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included randomly selected eighth grade students from two junior high schools (grades 7–9) in the Western United States. The students from the respective schools participated in one of eight total focus groups. From both schools there were a total of

50 students who participated: 23 students from School A in 4 focus groups and 27 students from School B in 4 focus groups. The size of each focus group ranged from 4 to 8 participants. There were a total of 23 boys and 27 girls at both schools: 8 boys and 15 girls at school A, and 15 boys and 12 girls at school B. No demographic information was taken about the specific students (age, race, SES, ect.) other than grade and sex.

### **Setting**

Schools A and B were in neighboring communities of the same school district. School A is a junior high school located in a suburban city with a population of about 14,500 people. As of the 2006–2007 school year, there were approximately 1050 students in grades 7 through 9 were registered with 42 teachers listed on school records. The ethnic composition of the student population at School A included 86.1% Caucasians, 10.6% Hispanic/Latinos, 1.2% Native Americans, 1% Pacific Islander, .8% Asian, and .4% African American. The percent of students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch was 38.9%. The gender make-up of the student population at School A was 51.5% male and 48.5% female (Utah State Office of Education, 2008).

School B is a junior high school located on the outer edge of a middle-sized city with an approximate population of 21,500 people. As of the 2007–2008 school year, there were approximately 839 students in grades 7 through 9 with 44 teachers. The ethnic breakdown of the student population was as follows: 85.7% Caucasian, 12.2% Hispanic/Latino, .8% Native American, .6% Pacific Islander, .5% Asian, and .2% African American. A total of 34.9% of students qualified to receive free or reduced lunch. The gender make-up of the student population at School B was 51% male and 49% female (Utah State Office of Education, 2008).

## Procedures

Graduate research assistants enrolled in Brigham Young University's School Psychology Program collected the data from the focus groups. Focus groups facilitate students' communication, encouraging students to speak more freely than in a one-on-one interview with an unknown adult. Focus groups allow the students to feel comfortable with their peers and to build on each other's ideas (Kvale, 1996). The data was recorded using video recording devices and was transcribed by research team members. Transcriptions of the focus groups will be analyzed to identify the holistic patterns and themes that exist among males and females.

To be most effective, empirical research suggests focus groups consist of seven individuals (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Each focus group was organized with an ideal size of a maximum of ten total students to account for students who did not attend. The focus groups consisted of eight groups ranging from 4 to 7 students. The students from each participating school were assigned to one of three kinds of focus groups: focus groups comprising of male and female students, focus groups of male students, and focus groups of female students. Across both schools there were four focus groups of female and male students, two focus groups of male students and two focus groups of female students. This organization was done to highlight possible gender differences and similarities among students and lessen social pressures that might affect student response in the mixed or single gender groups with out making an assumption to where the students would feel most comfortable.

The focus groups took place at the two respective schools; a specific room was selected in collaboration with the school principal. Sign up sheets of specific times for focus groups were presented to random students via letters from the school principal sent to students' parents or guardians. Only eighth grade students received invitations. The students who received the

letters were picked randomly from the schools' eighth grade populations. A total of 400 letters, 200 letters per school, were mailed to students' home addresses. Included with the sign up sheets was a letter of consent and assent, to be signed both by the students' parent or guardian and the student. The letter was written in both English and Spanish, to better accommodate families with limited English proficiency. Students were asked to participate based on their availability and the availability of the researchers. The focus groups took place in April of the 2007–2008 school year. Each focus group lasted about 45 minutes.

Class time was not used to conduct focus groups. All groups were conducted immediately after school. The groups began with a graduate assistant introducing herself to the group and explaining that each student was there to express their ideas about their school. The graduate student then sat in the back of the room, observing and taking notes. Two additional graduate students, including the primary author of this study and another member of the research team, served as moderators for each focus group. With both female and male moderators leading each group it was hoped that students would be able to relate to either the male or female moderator. To establish a safe atmosphere and to encourage students to express themselves, the moderators began each focus group by first reading the following statement: "We are going to talk about what you think about your school and how you feel in school. We would like everyone to feel comfortable sharing their ideas and have the chance to talk when they want to; so let's try not to interrupt each other." The moderator then read each question, pausing between questions so that students in the focus groups might respond.

In each focus group moderators asked the following open-ended questions:

1. What do you think about your school?
2. How do you feel in school?

3. Why would kids feel safe in your school?
4. Why would kids feel unsafe in your school?
5. Can you think of a time when you felt safe in school? If so, would you describe it?
6. Can you think of a time when you felt unsafe in school? If so, would you describe it?
7. Is there something that would help you to feel safer in school?
8. Could you do some things to feel safer at school?
9. Could adults and other school personnel do some things to help you feel safer in school?

The rationale for the focus group questions was consistent with the research question of this study: What are students' perceptions (ideas, experiences, reflections) on school safety?

These questions served as a framework for the discussion in the focus groups, but the researchers were open to impromptu comments and follow up questions initiated by participants.

### **Data Collection**

This qualitative research study utilized the transcriptions from the eight focus groups. The data from the focus groups were used to assist in answering the research question, to analyze gender differences and similarities of student perceptions of school safety. Each focus group was videotaped and audio recorded to assist in data analysis and collection.

### **Data Analysis**

The data from the focus groups were analyzed in a qualitative process that included transcription, coding, and analysis. The author of the thesis and members of the research team analyzed the transcripts obtained from the focus groups. Based on the Hermeneutic Theory (Kvale, 1996), the author holistically identified patterns and themes that emerged from the data. Hermeneutics is the study of the interpretation of a text to obtain a valid and common

understanding of the meaning of a certain text. (Kvale, 1996). The holistic hermeneutic research method encouraged an in-depth view of the overall themes of the data.

The primary researcher reviewed and analyzed the themes, patterns, connections, and relationships in terms of gender differences and similarities in order to answer the research question. Quotes and ideas from the transcriptions of the focus groups were grouped into categories. Another member of the research team reviewed the resulting interpretations of the focus group data. The research team evaluated and revised the resulting conclusions for discrepancies.

Using the hermeneutic research method the transcripts of the eight focus groups were read many times in a back and forth process known as the hermeneutic circle. Reading the transcripts the first time identified general themes that developed global meanings. The transcripts were then reread looking for more specific meanings that were drawn from the experiences of boys and girls in the eighth grade. The experiences of these specific students were then connected to the global themes.

## Results

The following consists of summaries and direct quotes from the focus groups. The students are not identified by name rather they were each assigned a number based on the order they entered the room. Further clarification was added to some numbers to identify the students from different focus groups. For example, FS2.1 is a female student from one focus group while FS2.2 is a female student from another focus group. All teacher and staff names were changed throughout the text. The quotes used in this section are exactly what the students said during focus groups. They were not edited for content or readability so as to convey the developmental context of the students.

### Identified Sources of Safety

Three major sources of safety were identified from the discussion in the focus groups. Students reported feelings of safety and danger in the schools from the following sources: Peers, Teachers and Staff, and Environmental Context. Within these three categories the following themes were identified: (Peers) Friends, Groups, and Weapons; (Teachers and Staff) Supervision and Student-Teacher relationships; and (Environmental Context) Hallways and Cameras and Officers.

**Peers.** Peers were a source of fear and safety for both male and female students. Many students mentioned turning to friends for safety and security. Groups of other peers, however, who behaved differently from the students and their friends, caused students to feel unsafe. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding these two themes related to their peers:

**Friends.** Having friends is something that helps youth have fun and feel comfortable at school. Friends are people to talk to when you are having a bad day. Friends can also serve as a



source of protection for other students. The more friends a student has, the more people that student knows and trusts, the safer the student feels. Friends are trusted allies that help both male and female students feel secure while at school.

The girls mentioned that friends helped them to feel more comfortable in class, in the hallways and outside of the school. When a female student is with her friends she has more fun and feels safer due to the positive environment that friends help create. Female students reported not feeling in danger and not worrying about being bullied when their friends were around.

The male students mentioned that having older, physically larger friends helped them to feel safer at school. The idea of allying with bigger students for protection was mentioned several times by the boys. The boys also talked about the idea of pay back among friends. If a student helps out a friend, they expect that the friend will help them in return.

#### **Girls:**

- FS3: For the most part, I feel comfortable in school because I'm always around my friends. We hang out and talk.
- FS1: With your friends. You're having fun, yet you feel safe.
- FS2.1: Yeah 'cause you're probably going to feel more comfortable in a class that you have friends with so you can talk to them, if you have a problem or someone's annoying you and you want to talk about it, you can talk to them.
- FS6: When you're talking and laughing with friends, it's a really positive atmosphere and you feel safe.
- FS7: Even, like, just being with your friends, you feel safer than if you're walking on your own. Yeah, if you're by yourself you feel scared, but if you're with a group of friends you feel happy and protected.
- FS2.2: And so, it's a lot easier and you feel a lot safer in a class that you have with your friends. So, or when you're walking through the halls, or in the gangster hall, and you've got your friend next to you you're not as afraid.

FS4: I was standing outside the school, talking to some guys and the conversation kind of got weird. But then other kids came around, so I didn't feel in danger once other students were around, because we knew each other.

FS3: Kind of be friends with everyone, so that you don't have problems with anyone. So you don't have to worry about being bullied or something.

**Boys:**

MS2.1: I know most of them [9<sup>th</sup> graders] 'cause...I know [Student X]. He's the one known as the Nazi, 'cause he attacked some kids. I know him and he knows me so...

MS4.1: Fights usually get resolved because everyone has friends for protection.

MS2.2: You have to shove to get through that area. I had a friend help me once. There was a big group of kids you couldn't get through. And I have this friend who's big and he's all buff and stuff and he's like, "Walk behind me!" He let me get to my class.

MS4.2: It's a lot better with friends. When you're with friends, no one is going to try and hurt you. So, I feel safer with friends.

MS6: Well, if your friend is having trouble, then you could help, and then someone else could help you. So maybe start with yourself to uh...help others.

MS2.1: I think that the school is small, so you get to know people fast and you know people from your childhood, so they probably won't do anything.

MS2.2: Well, I think this school is okay because there are a lot of kids that stick up for a lot of kids.

**Groups.** Students feel uncomfortable when "scary" or unknown peers gather together.

Labeled groups such as Goths, Emos, Punks, and Gangsters seem to garner fear among the students that participated in the focus groups. There was a sense of uncertainty surrounding those groups. That uncertainty about the behavior of groups in which one is not a member seemed to cause fear in students. Another issue that created fear in these students was that of difference. One young woman adeptly explained, "It's kind of scary to be around people that are different."

The female students mentioned not feeling comfortable around strange groups of peers. How other students dressed and what they said and seemed to make these female students feel uncomfortable. Even actions such as pretend fighting and swearing caused these female students to feel unsafe. However, many of the female students reported that if you got to know students who behaved differently then the fear subsided.

The boys had similar sentiments as the girls. They also expressed fear of certain social groups. The boys mainly focused their fearful comments on the actions of these other students such as fighting, cutting their wrists, and staring at other students. These things made the male students feel unsafe at school. The boys also expressed the idea that getting to know peers from different social groups can help alleviate the fear of those students.

#### **Girls:**

- FS5.1: Yeah, I agree with that. But, sometimes you're not comfortable with people. Like with some people, I feel afraid of them. They're scary. This one girl had chains down to her knees.
- FS2: I don't know, they just look scary and they're scary to me. Yeah, and then there's like all the skater and gangster kids, you know over there. So you've got to be kind of careful. They'll grab each other and fling each other across the hallway and into lockers. You know they're playing, but you don't exactly feel safe standing next to them when they're doing that.
- FS4: Groups, cliques, there's people that are mean to other people and make you scared. The way they act. They like pretend to fight with people and stuff. Also they're so different and in contrast from everyone else. That it's kind of scary to be around people that are different.
- FS3.1: There's like fights, people getting beat up by gangsters would gang up on people not like them. And just beat them up.
- FS5.2: Or even people swearing at you, that makes me feel scared.
- FS7: I feel safer in groups kinda. [**Moderator: You feel safer in groups?**] People by me, yeah. Yeah, they're really intimidating. Sometimes they turn out to be the nicest people, but it really like scares you to talk to them or walk by them because you're afraid they might hurt you.

FS3.2: I have a couple friends in the seventh grade and one of them is not normal. So like her group of friends are a little scary, but I've gotten to know them. I act differently from them, but they approve of how I act. So like that is true, you can get to know them and understand them more. I'm one of those friendly ones that go around and talk to everyone. So, I'm not that afraid of anyone.

**Boys:**

MS1: All the punk kids meet in one area and all the rest of the kids have to go around them. They just stand there and stare at you and it's really weird.

MS2.1: There's a lot of goth people here too. And I'm actually scared by them. Yeah, they're like emos. I guess they knife their wrists and stuff because they're depressed.

MS2.2: I mean at our school, you'll see, not to be racist or anything, but the Hispanic kids will be talking to each other and get into fights and stuff, like fist fights in front of the school, then they'll fight with each other.

MS4: There are scary kids here. They're like emo and stuff.

MS2.1: Probably because there's a lot of bigger kids and stuff and they look scary. But it's the big kids that are nicer. It's the little kids that want to hurt you.

MS5: Most of them, at this school, they're just trying to play a role, and they're not even...really they're good kids, and when they're out of school they act mature and I've seen them be nice to people, but in school they try to be totally different people.

**Weapons.** Weapons in schools were an area of concern for both males and females.

Comments made by both genders indicate an unsafe feeling associated with seen and unseen weapons in the school. Specific incidents that involved weapons brought up some unsafe feelings. Several students indicated ways to change the school rules relating to weapons.

Girls reported experiences with weapons, such as knives and guns, which made them feel unsafe. These weapons seemed to be mentioned often as concerns for many of the female students. The female students were less concerned when common items were used as weapons such as rubber bands.

Boys mentioned concerns with things like smoke bombs, rocks, and lighters in the schools. One boy said he knew of knives in their school. When knives were mentioned boys discussed the merit of metal detectors as a way to deter students from bringing more severe weapons to school. The males stated that metal detectors would make things a lot nicer.

### Girls:

FS3: There was this one time Officer Tebow was with us, teaching us, and a junior high student came a long and graffittied his cop car. We all came outside because we were in the lunch room and we saw him do it. The police officer arrested him right there. He had his face against the car, then pulls him away and started yelling at him. I felt unsafe because he could have had a gun or another weapon instead of a spray can.

FS5: Did you guys hear what happened when I was in second grade? It was the last day of school and we were drawing on the basketball court and a junior high student was riding his bike and shot the police man in the leg. All of us were standing right there and we had to have a lock down in the lunchroom and I didn't feel safe.

FS4.1: I wouldn't be as afraid of a knife as I would be about a gun. You'd feel more defenseless if a gun was aimed at your head.

FS4.1: People are sneaking knives in the school. And it seems they're concerned with banning rubber bands, and headbands because they're gang symbols. There are more dangerous things, like guns and knives that would kill a person faster than a rubber band ever would.

FS7: Yeah, there's switchblades and I'm scared to walk by them.

FS1: Actually, my friend brings a switchblade with her because she walks back and forth from home.

FS4.2: **[M: Why would a kid bring a knife to school?]** 'Cause they're guys. **[M: You think only guys bring knives to school?]** Can you imagine a girl going shopping and switching out her switchblade?

### Boys:

MS1: There was a smoke bomb and we all had to evacuate. The fireman came and made sure everything was safe.

- MS3.1: There was this one time, where like in the display cases they have these glass rocks that they put in fish bowls and kids were getting them and hitting other kids in the heads.
- MS6.1: Mine would probably be lighters. 'Cause there's been lots of lighters at the school. Kids are like lighting people on fire in the hallways. And in the cafeteria three times. They light...they hit a girl and burned her hair off.
- MS5: I know kids that bring knives already to school.
- MS6.1: I think they could sneak in a knife or something, but I think that applies everywhere. We don't have metal detectors or anything.
- MS3.2: If we did, it would be a lot nicer.

**Teachers and Staff.** Teachers and faculty members help students to feel safe at the school. Through supervision and healthy relationships, teachers can make the school feel like a safer place for both male and female students. The actions of teachers can also lead to students feeling unsafe if they are unresponsive or unkind to students. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding these two themes related to their teachers and administrators:

**Supervision.** As one student aptly shared, "People don't do stuff when they know they're being watched." Adult supervision is a major factor in helping students feel safe. When there is an adult in the vicinity students feel protected and cared for, provided the adult is aware of what is happening and consistently enforces school rules. When teachers are not around or are not paying attention students can feel more vulnerable to bullying, fights, or other negative peer interactions.

The girls reported that areas that are well supervised help them to feel safe. However, they also reported that there are many areas that are lacking active adult supervision. Female students reported teachers needed to be more alert to what is happening around them.

The boys reported feeling safe with teacher supervision as well. Male students mentioned many male teachers helped them feel safe due to their large physical stature. The boys mentioned no female teachers as a source of security. The boys reported that students were compliant with school rules because of fear for the teachers. Just like the girls, the boys also said that teachers needed to be more aware and responsive during supervision.

**Girls:**

- FS7.1: I feel safer in class because it's more supervised. Like in track, everyone kind of does their own things, so there's not that many adults to watch you.
- FS4.1: I feel safest in the classroom. There's a teacher there, adult supervision, and a good environment.
- FS3: Um, well, there's...most of the time there are teachers patrolling to make sure there aren't any fights going on or nothing bad happening. I think that's safe. It helps a lot. The teachers should stand outside of the school too. Like before and after school and during lunch there's a lot of stuff that goes on outside of school.
- FS7.1: There are areas that aren't supervised all the time. And there are a lot of kids that if they hear about a fight some of them will tell a teacher, but most won't. They'll keep it quiet so it happens.
- FS1: There should be more teacher supervision in the halls during the break. There's this group I pass all the time and they throw each other around and hurt other people and there's no one to tell them not to.
- FS4.2: That fight was right outside seven teachers' classrooms. And you can't say that all of them were out of their classrooms. At least one of them had to hear it or see it.
- FS7.1: Teachers need to be more alert. Like when it's happening right in front of them, they're oblivious to stop. So, I think there should be more adult supervision in the halls.

**Boys:**

- MS2.1: I feel safe with Mr. Jones. If there's anything going on, he just plows...if you get in his way. Like we had a smoke bomb in the bathroom, I've never seen Mr. Jones run so fast. Yeah, he's always around. He's always wandering around the school. If something's wrong he makes sure it's okay.

- MS3: I think Mr. Rogers is a big contributor to that (school safety). He's always standing out in the hall, telling people how much time they have left and he tells them scoot over to the side of the hall if you're going to talk.
- MS2.1: Mr. Rogers is a big guy and good on school spirit, so he protects the school.
- MS2: Mr. Jones, Mr. Hill, every teacher is usually outside patrolling the halls.
- MS6: Another thing is, we know there's not much violence here, because of the teachers. They know it would be dumb if they brought a weapon to school. The teachers have everything under control. If a disaster happened, they're going to make sure everyone else is safe over themselves. I know we're safe here because of the teachers. They keep us safe.
- MS1.1: **[M: Do you feel unsafe in the locker rooms?]** Yeah, because there's no teachers.
- MS2.1: More teachers out in the hall. Like ones that will do something. Some of them just let it fly.
- MS1.2: Well, the teachers have sharp eyes, but they're deaf. They don't really listen. Like if you report something, they don't really listen. Like there was this kid snorting crack in eighth period a long time ago. I told the counselor about it and he was like, "We'll look into it." And they didn't.

*Student/Teacher relationships.* The relationship between a teacher and a student is a major contributor to the overall safety of the student. When a student believes that they can go to a teacher to share experiences and concerns, the student is likely to feel that they teacher cares about them and will respond to their concerns. The students reported that some teachers did not listen to the concerns. There were also student comments that indicated that students and teachers had untrusting relationships. Other participants indicated that when teachers could be trusted, that helped them to feel safe.

Female students enjoy relationships with teachers with whom they feel comfortable talking. These relationships with teachers help students to feel safe and comfortable in the classroom. Some students commented about other students who may not show the same respect for teachers, and this often creates an unsafe environment that tends to make it difficult to learn.



Male students reported feeling unsafe in classrooms when teachers held grudges and acted in inappropriate and unexpected ways. The boys' comments indicated that they felt unsafe in their relationships with specific teachers. However, the boys, like the girls, reported feeling safe and protected when teachers were receptive and friendly.

### Girls:

- FS7: Sometimes teachers are intimidating, but at other activities like track it's not so intimidating. But, like with the whole class, they don't always listen to you and what you're trying to tell them. You're not so much afraid of the teachers, but you're afraid of what your friends might think of you. Like that you're a tattle tail or...think you're worrying about their business when it doesn't have anything to do with you. But I guess students are afraid to talk to their teachers.
- FS4: I think that's a big problem at our school: talking back to teachers. There's not a lot of respect between the teachers and students. **[M: Do you think that makes a difference in how the school feels?]** It makes a huge difference. Not only in how you feel in the classroom, but how well you learn. Yeah, the students just won't care if they get in trouble, they'll just keep goofing off and it's really hard sometimes.
- FS5.1: Yeah, it's really hard sometimes 'cause they just argue back and forth. They don't care if they get in trouble?
- FS1.1: **[M: So do you think if there were more adults you'd feel safer?]** Yeah, I actually like being in classes that if I have a problem I can take it to the teacher.
- FS3: **[M: What would make a kid feel safe in your school?]** Probably knowing that, um, teachers are there to help them and that they care about them and they don't just totally ignore them. I like teachers you feel like you can actually talk to them. With some teachers, you walk up to them and they start freaking out because they're trying to control the class.
- FS2: The teachers kind of want you to learn, so that makes you feel kind of safe around them, because they do care. I like teachers that try to get to know the students.
- FS5.2: **[M: Are there teachers in this school you would feel comfortable going to if something happened?]** Yes, Mrs. Cutter, I think this would be different with boys, they'd name all the guy teachers.
- FS1.2: In fourth grade we had the same teacher two years in a row, so we got to know them much better. We could approach them if we needed help.

**Boys:**

- MS3: Mr. Pots is evil. He was yelling at one of his classes and somehow Mr. Jones came in and he swore at him.
- MS5.1: A lot of teachers swear. It scares you because you don't expect it.
- MS4.1: There's this teacher that um...he has a grudge against me, he doesn't like me. Any time I was around him, I didn't feel safe. I wanted to get away. There's things that I do if I was doing he'd snap at me and say, "Don't do that!" But if somebody else were doing it he wouldn't care.
- MS1: Yeah, some of the teachers here they are racist. My science teacher, she like get mad at every Mexican kid in there, and she talks gently if the white kids are worse. Even with regular things she like she makes it harder for them. I don't like it. Well, like they talk, even if they say something in Spanish that's good not really bad, she's like "You know, this is America, speak English!"
- MS7: Sometimes teachers only believe certain kids. Like if they tell on you, the teacher will just believe it even if it isn't true. **(So you feel unsafe that the teachers don't trust you?)** Yeah.
- MS4.1: I don't think they listen to me that much, but in other activities like track, I can go up and talk to my coach whenever I want. It's easier.
- MS2: Yeah, you go in Jones's office and if there's something wrong he'll stand up for it. If there's a bully, talk to Mr. Jones and he's not bullied anymore.
- MS5.1: Teachers that are not trying to be so much a leader, well they're trying to be leaders, but they're trying to be friends too. They're not just trying to just teach and that's it. They're trying to build relationships with students.

**Environmental Context.** In addition to feeling safe or unsafe in the school based on interacting with other people (i.e., peers and teacher), students reported safety concerns with physical objects. Objects such as the physical structure of the school, weapons in the school and security cameras were mentioned as things that led to students feeling of safety in the school. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding these themes relating to objects in the school.

**Hallways.** Throughout all the focus groups a common place where the students reported feeling unsafe was in the hallways. Both male and female students reported feeling unsafe in the hallways. Issues that led to feeling unsafe included the physical structure of the hallways, too many people in the halls, lack of supervision, the kinds of students in the halls, and earthquakes/fires.

The girls brought up issues about the physical structure of the school. They were concerned about the ceilings falling down and what would happen in an earthquake. They were also concerned about the layout of the hallways that led to overcrowding. Girls also reported feeling unsafe due to the different kinds of people in the hallways.

One boy brought up the fact that if there was a fire, the hallways would be too crowded to safely evacuate. Both the boys and the girls mentioned that they felt uncomfortable and crowded in the hallways. The boys mentioned that the state of the hallways encouraged pushing and shoving.

### **Girls:**

- FS2.1: The ceilings! You feel scared that they're going to fall down on you! They have water spots and stuff. But, I bet if we have an earthquake, we'd all die because of this construction is so bad!
- FS2.2: 'Cause like all the hallways go into it. It's like this little short hall and it's thinner than all of the rest of them. And so...everybody kind of piles in. Yeah, that's the problem with small hallways. We have two major small hallways that lead to the girl's gym and leads to the girl's gym. Both of those are small and really crowded.
- FS4: People clump up in the middle of the hallway to talk. They take over half of the hallway, so you can't get through. Right outside the girl's gym, it's kind of scary to walk in that hall.
- FS1: Everybody packs in it and we're shoulder-to-shoulder, trying to get through.
- FS6: And people are always running into each other.

FS2.2: Yeah, people always run into each other and there's always like people pushing each other. And there's all these different kinds of kids around you, so you don't know what could happen.

FS5: It's kind of hard to get through and they're kind of rough housing.

**Boys:**

MS3.1: **[M: Are there any places in the school that kids would feel less safe?]**  
Probably the hallway down there because everyone groups up and... They just crowd up the hallway and you can't get through.

MS1: Well, it's kind of hard not to get tackled in the halls while you're trying to get to class. Well, there's so many kids that if you want to get through, you have to shove. Yeah, they clutter the halls. They'll pack in this one big group and you can't get through. If there's a fire, we're in trouble.

MS2: There was a group by my friend's locker and they just huddle around, no one can get through. They just huddle there and swear at each other.

MS3.1: No one really follows the rules of the hall. When you're talking, scoot over to the side. They're always in the middle so you have to go around.

*Cameras and Officers.* Both male and female students mentioned cameras and police officers as a source of security. Students mentioned that working cameras would help them to feel safe. Both boys and girls mentioned that they felt that the security cameras weren't providing constant surveillance of the school. The boys and the girls mentioned that if they knew that cameras were working they would feel safer knowing they were being watched. The male and female students also felt that security officers, in addition to cameras, would help them feel safe inside and outside the school. The idea of someone with authority watching over them is important for both genders to feel safe. There were not really any differences reported between the male and female students in regards to these security measures.

**Girls:**

FS1: My last school had, well it wasn't a very safe school because it was in a bad neighborhood. They would have cameras and police officers there. So, when something would happen, all cameras would turn on and they'd film it, so when a

fight happened they could see what happened. It's kind of like the teacher thing, so see what was going on outside the classroom. **[M: Do you feel that made a difference in your school?]** Yeah, before they put cameras in, there's been lots of fights and violence. And when they put the cameras up it was completely different.

FS5: Just having the teachers out there. And like cameras. They need to see, because they might not believe us and think we're lying.

FS3: Half of our school cameras don't even work. They just put them there. Yeah, that one's [by the lunchroom] on. But there's like one upstairs, one over by the gyms in the ninth grade hall, one by the office, and then one by the lunchroom are the only ones that are on. There are none in the seventh grade hall that are on. There's a second one upstairs, but that one's not on. There's one by the band/choir room that isn't on. About two thirds of them aren't on. They just think these ones will keep it safe. Yeah, working cameras would make me feel safer!

FS4.1: Everyone says they're not real cameras. They say, "Those cameras don't work, they didn't see what that person did last Friday."

FS4.1: **[M: Do you think that police officers are needed in junior high schools?]** In some ways, junior high is worse, because we're just growing up and we haven't officially decided what we're going to be yet, so junior high would be a little bit worse. In elementary school, we had a police officer and on the days he came it always felt safer in the school. He'd be out on the playground and you could go play with him, talk to him.

FS3: Yeah, we had Officer Tebow and it was the safest thing. It like makes you feel safer, like no one's going to hurt you, so no one can hurt you. It's safe. If we had a police officer here, even his presence would make you feel safer.

FS6: Yeah, no one would try to do anything.

### Boys:

MS5: **[M: What would help a student to feel safe in this school?]** Lots of cameras.

MS2.1: Half of those don't work.

MS1.1: Yeah and they also have cameras around the school too so that helps. Well, there's one thing that could be better at this school, the security cameras flip to the new things, like if some one's running, you can see it flip on, so it would help if they were constantly running, I was like, "Whoa they're missing a lot of things."

- MS1.2: They have cameras, but they never use them. [M: **How do you know they never use them?**] ‘Cause there’s like teachers talking about it in the hallways like, “Why do we even have them, if we don’t use them?”
- MS6.1: They never use them unless they have a problem. [M: **Would you feel safer if you knew they were being used?**]
- MS5: Yes.
- MS1: Yeah.
- MS2: Oh, yes.
- MS2.1: I don’t know if there’s empty shells for cameras, but there’s a lot of things that happen in the hallways that don’t get caught. Maybe they’re not real cameras. We’ve had graffiti problems too. [M: **So you think if it was clearly evident that the cameras were working, it would help you feel safer?**] Yeah, ‘cause people don’t do stuff when they know they’re being watched.
- MS6.2: Probably a full-time [guard] would be better. Especially for kids who sluff and stuff.
- MS3: At my other school, they had this guy that walked around.
- MS2.2: That’s a good idea. He could patrol around outside and watch out to see how things are going.

### Summary

The selected male and female quotes from these focus groups showed many differences and similarities. The similarities seemed to indicate that male and female students generally do feel safe in their schools, as both male and female students reported feeling normally safe around friends and teachers. Certain peer groups and locations in the school, such as those places with less adult supervision, were reported by both genders as producing unsafe feelings. Differences between the genders regarding what contributed to feelings of safety were slightly different. The boys reported feeling physically protected while the girls more often reported feeling emotionally supported. Both genders reported that they generally felt unsafe in the hallways due

to factors such as overcrowding and lack of supervision. Male and female students reported working security cameras and security officers would help them feel safe while at school.

## **Discussion**

The history of gender research has produced countless articles relating to gender differences and similarities in areas such as: bullying, aggression, teacher attention, academics, biology, and many more (Beaman, 2006; Buckley, Storino, & Sebastiani, 2003; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Harmon, Stockton, & Contrucci, 1992; Marsh, Martin, & Cheng, 2008; Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). Although many of these studies addressed issues of safety, none of them considered the factors that create feelings of safety at school for male and female students. This study was conducted to answer the following question: What are the differences and similarities in how male and female eighth grade students experience school safety?

### **Highlights of Findings**

The students in the focus groups discussed many of the research topics mentioned in the literature review. However, some issues, such as bullying, were not mentioned as much by the students in this study as was expected based on the available literature. The focus groups did produce several intriguing themes that contributed to understanding how students experienced and viewed school safety. The themes that were presented in the results section were areas such as: peers, weapons, supervision, student-teacher relationships, hallways, security cameras, and officers. When considering the differences and similarities between male and female students' responses understanding the relationships and connections among the themes became important to understand as well.

Looking at all the themes and the relationships among the themes, it was evident that females and males had some different experiences in the schools in regards to what helped them to feel safe. There were also many things that were similar that contributed to feelings of safety. An interesting finding when looking at the quotes from the focus groups is that male and female



students seemed to focus on two different kinds of safety. Female students seemed to focus more on emotional safety, or a need to feel secure and comfortable, while the male students talked about physical safety, or a need to feel protected from bodily harm. Looking at these areas of physical safety and emotional safety will help to illustrate the differences and similarities reported by the students by highlighting the common issues within each gender across each theme.

**Physical safety.** The idea of physical safety was mentioned many times by the male students. Comments such as, “When you’re with friends, no one is going to try and hurt you. So, I feel safer with friends,” exemplify that male students reported needing friends in the school as a source of protection. Male students also mentioned the physical stature of male teachers as a source of protection from physical harm. For example, one student reported, “Mr. Rogers is a big guy and good on school spirit, so he protects the school.” This student seemed to be communicating that because his teacher had a large stature he protected the school. Male students often referred to the need to have physical protection to feel safe, and male faculty members, who are perceived to be strong, provided this physical protection.

Female students also mentioned the need for physical safety. The following quotes help to emphasize the girls’ feelings in regards to physical safety, “I bet if we have an earthquake, we’d all die because of this construction is so bad!” “There are more dangerous things, like guns and knives that would kill a person faster than a rubber band ever would.” The girls’ comments were related to the need for a safer physical structure of the school or a fear of weapons. The girls did not often mention the need for people, such as peers or teachers, to provide physical safety.

These findings show that boys seek protection from physical aggression while girls do not express that same need. This supports research that states boys often tend to be involved with aggressive behaviors while girls are generally perceived as passive and socially pleasing (Crick, et al., 1999). Research also states that boys are more often the victims of physical violence from other boys (Crick & Nelson, 2002). This may indicate why boys feel the need for more physical safety in the school. If girls are not the victims of physical aggression as much as boys they might not feel the need for protection as much as boys. However, the girls did express fears that were connected to the structure of the building or the potential for student controlled weapons. Interestingly enough, girls did not seem to emphasize the physical qualities (e.g., size, strength) of school adults in helping them feel safe.

**Emotional safety.** Just as the boys turned to peers and teachers for physical safety the girls looked to the other people in the school for emotional safety. Having someone to laugh and talk with is something that creates, as one student mentioned, “a really positive atmosphere and you feel safe.” One female student mentioned that when you have people around you who help you feel comfortable you can act genuine and you feel that, “you’re around people that understand you.” Many girls shared comments about caring teachers. “The teachers kind of want you to learn, so that makes you feel kind of safe around them, because they do care. I like teachers that try to get to know the students.” The girls’ comments seemed to focus more on feeling emotionally comfortable with those around you, rather than looking for protection, as a way to feel safe.

However, boys also mentioned the need to develop relationships with teachers and peers to feel more emotionally safe in school. One boy mentioned, “They’re [teachers] not just trying to just teach and that’s it. They’re trying to build relationships with students.” Another male

student mentioned that his track coach provided that same sort of emotional support, “In other activities, like track, I can go up and talk to my coach whenever I want. It’s easier.” In referring to friends a male student mentioned, “I think that the school is small, so you get to know people fast and you know people from your childhood, so they probably won’t do anything.” Statements like this seem to indicate that male students also have a need to have familiar people around them to feel comfortable and safe. However, the reasoning behind the secure feeling is left in doubt by the males’ statements. This is best exemplified by the last quote where the student states that these students won’t do anything. This phrase indicates that the student feels safe around these familiar peers because of the assurance that they won’t cause him physical harm.

Research has stated that one of the most important factors in students feeling safe in the schools is a caring climate (Aleem & Moles, 1993). The teacher’s presence alone is not enough to make the students feel safe. Both boys and girls need to feel that the teachers care and that they will respond to student concerns (Jacobson, 2009). Research has shown the connection between school factors, such as positive school climate, and the student’s perception of safety (Farmer, 1999). Research shows that students whose schools support a positive school environment have more students that report feeling safe (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). The students’ comments in this study supported the research that positive relationships created a safer environment that led to a safe feeling in the school.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study has a unique place in the body of literature concerning gender differences in the reporting of school safety. Previous studies have detailed violence interventions that have been used for both boys and girls to improve school safety (Chesney-Lind & Shelden 1998; Weiler, 1999). Many programs have also sought to help deter bullying behaviors (Berson,

Berson, & Ferron 2002; Kadel, Watkins, Follman, & Hammond, 1999; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Stockdale et. al, 2002; Warren et. al, 2006). Other programs have been designed to prevent school violence through strict enforcement of rules and invasive prevention devices such as metal detectors, video surveillance technology, and armed security guards (Ferraraccio, 1999; Noaks & Noaks, 2000; Ryan-Arredondo, et al., 2001; Schreck, Miller, & Gibson, 2003). However, these studies did not address how gender differences or similarities might influence how school safety issues are perceived and experienced.

This study provides some insight about how interventions may be perceived differently or similarly by males and females. The findings of this study indicate that separate interventions for boys and girls are not necessarily needed. Rather, different emphases could be placed on components of intervention efforts. Interventions that focus on building better student relationships in the schools could be effective in helping both male and female students to feel safe. However, these types of interventions could focus on social relationships with peers for girls and on increasing feelings of protection for boys. Interventions that center on increasing student-teacher relationships could be effective regardless of gender. However, focusing on developing teachers' friendship and listening skills could be more effective for girls, while instructing teachers to provide more physical protection for male students could have a positive effect for the boys. Interventions such as metal detectors and security cameras may be effective in helping boys and girls to feel safe as well as decreasing violence in the schools, but the students need to know that they are working and being monitored. The emphasis in creating feelings of safety should be on relationships rather than reactive responses to aggression or punitive approaches. Supportive, positive, warm relationships with peers and teachers are key pieces of facilitating feelings of safety.

Females and males reported, for the most part, feeling fairly safe in the schools, but the increasing focus on gender differences and similarities can help to address concerns that broad, general interventions could overlook. Interventions cannot rely on outcomes alone to prove their effectiveness. Just because school data might indicate that aggression or bullying has statistically decreased, does not mean that students feel safer. School staff and administrators need to ask the students how effective the interventions are in helping the students *feel* safe. When asked about school safety, the male and female students suggested different ways that they feel safe. This kind of information needs to be taken into account when designing school wide classroom safety interventions. It is recommended that school staff consider conducting regular focus groups, like the ones in this study, to get feedback from the students on the effectiveness of the school interventions.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future research could use different comparison groups. Looking at factors such as environment of settings (urban, rural, and suburban), other age groups (elementary, high school, or even college) or different regional areas (Eastern, Southern, or Northern parts of the United States). These comparison groups would add valuable information to the research because perceptions of safety are distinct to each school. The data could be further analyzed accounting for factors that include: academic achievement, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or parental occupation. Research could be conducted using this data to look at comments made in mixed gender groups and compared to single gender groups to potentially yield insights about the influence of social factors on student responses in regards to gender.

This data can also be used to further build discussions between students and faculty and staff at the schools. As previously mentioned, this study could be used as a model to help

individual schools design or modify efforts to increase feelings of school safety. Using the idea of action research, each school could internally conduct similar focus groups on a yearly basis to help the staff be more aware of the ever-changing viewpoints of the student body.

Future studies might also consider gathering data that could be analyzed according to individual student responses, as there is the possibility that peers in the focus group influenced topics and issues that were discussed. The individual response pattern could be compared to other students' responses to produce a more in-depth look at what factors contributed to each student's experiences and comments. Conducting individual interviews rather than using focus groups may help account for social pressures that may have influenced responses.

### **Limitations**

There was limited ethnic diversity in the sample group, which could be a limitation in understanding and collecting a variety of perspectives about school safety. The number of total possible participating students (seven) in the focus groups may have impacted the rate and type of student responses. Including more students might have increased the number of responses but could have decreased the detail obtained and the opportunity for responses. What dominant students said may have impacted the individual student comments.

In performing a qualitative study there are inherent limitations because the researchers are the means by which the data are analyzed in the study, and as such, they approach any qualitative study with their own lens of seeing the world. The primary researcher of this study acknowledges that preexisting assumptions determined what was included in the literature review, the methods of the study, and the quotes that were used for analysis. In an attempt to limit bias, the themes that were determined from the quotes as well as other aspects of this paper were established with the assistance of other researchers from the committee and research team.

The structured, focused questions that moderators asked could be viewed as a limitation; perhaps students who could have felt that their ideas were different from others in the group or what they thought the researchers were looking for might not have shared some information. In addition, the students' definition of school safety may have varied from the researchers' definition of school safety. These limitations were considered and guided the design of the study to lessen their impact as much as possible, but considerations may need to be made for future research.

### **Summary**

Gender affects many aspects of life, including an adolescent's school experience. As children go through childhood and adolescence, gender differences and similarities are evident. Children continue to realize their gender roles after they enter into school (Beaman, Wheldal, & Kemp, 2006; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Paechter, 2003; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2008). As these gender roles become less flexible, children's experiences in education change as well. Several studies found that boys may receive more negative attention in the classroom (Kelly, 1988; Younger, Warrington, & Williams, 1999). Boys also receive more special education services (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). With these understood differences, further exploration of the differences and similarities of gender differences in perception and experiences in school safety seemed warranted.

Gender differences in school safety have been noted. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2006) reported that boys were the victims of violent acts in the schools more often than girls. However, another study found that females at small universities felt unsafe more frequently than their male counterparts (Bryden & Fletcher, 2007). Many studies have reported different results relating to how safe students perceive their schools to be

(Addington et al., 2002; Kitsantas, Ware, & Martinez-Arias, 2004; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997).

This study considered gender differences and similarities in students' perceptions of school safety. Boys and girls report different things about how they experience safety in the schools. Boys reported looking toward teachers and peers for protection from physical harm. Girls reported using relationships with friends and school faculty members as a source of emotional security and comfort. There were also many similarities in what the different genders reported, such as the need for extra security measures (i.e., cameras and officers) and the need for more trusting relationships with teachers and peers. Based on students' comments and considering gender differences, the effectiveness of school safety measures may be increased if master planning considered student input, particularly considering the needs of each gender.



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