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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF SECONDARY PUBLIC
SCHOOL SAFETY

by

Suzanne Elyse Jacobson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Education Specialist

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education

Brigham Young University

August 2009

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIOS AND EXPERIENCES OF SECONDARY PUBLIC SCHOOL SAFETY

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The purpose of this study was to generate in-depth understanding and descriptions of secondary students' experiences of safety in the public schools. Quantitative research has demonstrated that students self-report feeling unsafe in school (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006). School violence is decreasing, yet many school districts have sponsored and implemented heightened security measures. It seems a contradiction, but amidst heightened security secondary public school students self-report feeling unsafe in school. This study investigated this phenomenon to provide rich and detailed data, utilizing a grounded theory approach to qualitative research and design. The perceptions and experiences of secondary students in public school were described in focus groups comprised of eighth grade students. Five central and unifying themes emerged from the data informing how and why secondary students feel safe and unsafe in school. Results indicated that students feel most safe in schools when students have trusting relationships with school personnel and peers and when school adults adhere to procedures and policies and respond in meaningful ways to student concerns.

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This thesis represents summation of three years of thinking, researching, finding, clarifying, struggling, and learning. Thank you to my family and friends for their motivation, inspiration, and love. Thank you all!

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INTRODUCTION

In-depth understanding and descriptions of secondary students' experiences and perceptions of safety in public schools are currently lacking in the literature and warrant further research. Overall, national statistics indicate that school violence is not increasing (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), yet many school districts have sponsored and implemented 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). It seems a contradiction, but amidst heightened security secondary public school students self-report feeling unsafe in school (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006). The factors contributing to students' self-reports of feeling unsafe in public schools remain under-analyzed (Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 2006).

Certain researchers have suggested that Americans live in what they term a culture of fear where irrational fear is created and supported by society due to the values of that society (Furedi, 2002). Others infer that a collective worldview of violence that promotes fear emerged in American culture after the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 (Dority, 1999), resulting in increased school safety measures nationwide (Cohen, 2005; DeBates & Bell, 2006; Granberg-Rademacker, Bumgarner, & Johnson, 2007). The breadth and depth of this collective fear may be statistically unwarranted, as school shootings are rare and decreasing in frequency (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2006; Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2005).

Schools are viewed as safe havens of learning (Warren et al, 2006), so that school violence represents a significant breach of trust and thus attracts much media attention. Some feel the extensive graphic and emotionally provocative media coverage of events of school violence encourages the social perception that school shootings and other violence at schools

occur more frequently than they actually do (Granberg-Rademacker, Bumgarner, & Johnson, 2007; Redding & Shalf, 2001). Actual statistics of school safety further support this assertion and demonstrate that students are more often victims of violence outside of, not inside of, schools. Ten of every 1,000 students were the victims of serious violent crime at public schools in 2004. More than twice that number (26 of every 1,000 students) were victims of serious violent crime off campus (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2006). This is an illustration of public perception not based on actual occurrence. As a result, the social perception that schools are safe places of learning seems to be frequently questioned.

Despite reduction of actual documented school violence in the past decade, perceived school violence seems to have increased and continues to increase (Anderman, 2002). School violence is not increasing; it is decreasing (NCES, 2006); yet students continue to report feeling unsafe in school (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006). Secondary students now live in a post 9/11 and Columbine era of numerous safety measures and low tolerance policies. Such harsh disciplinary school policies send the message to students that violence can and will occur at any time (Chapin & Gleason, 2004), thus potentially decreasing students' feelings of safety within the schools.

This kind of perceived threat is largely socially constructed (Bandura, 2001): If a community supports the perception that a school is unsafe, it is, even if it is safe as exhibited by low incidences of documented violence. In this way, the school is an extension and representation of the surrounding community (Gordon & Patterson, 2007; Granberg-Rademacker et al., 2007; Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2003; Stephens, 1998). The question of actual or perceived student safety in school decreases in relevance in context of social construction. Whether students' fear in school is rational or not, the important fact is that students self-report feeling unsafe in schools (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006). Increased

social acceptance of amplified school violence ramifies students' perceptions and experiences of school safety as well: 17.3% of youth reported bringing weapons to school monthly for protection and 5.2% of youth skipped school because they feared for their personal safety in 2006 (NCES).

Indicators of School Quality Data

Empirical research, such as the Indicators of School Quality (ISQ) (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006), corroborates statistics with students' self-reports of feeling unsafe in secondary public schools (Chandler, 1993; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 2006). The ISQ is a survey created by the Center for the School of the Future at Utah State University as a way for school administrators to measure the success of their efforts in school improvement and is administered on a yearly basis to teachers, parents, students and other school staff as an assessment of their perceptions as to 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.

Statement of Problem

The ISQ and other quantitative measures (Johnson & Persson, 2007; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004; Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004) clearly indicated that secondary students feel unsafe in school (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2006), yet their reasons for feeling unsafe remain either unidentified or described and their experiences and perceptions undocumented and unexamined. Feeling safe or unsafe is an internal decision for students gingerly linked to features of the school environment (Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2002) Understanding and describing the students' inner worlds in regards to school safety is requisite to developing schools where students feel comfortable and safe.

Research Question

The purpose of this research is to describe secondary students' perceptions and experiences of public school safety and to add depth to the existing body of research. The students' self-reports of feeling unsafe in school, as reported by the ISQ, will neither be actively proven nor disproven. The phenomenon of students feeling unsafe in school will be described in focus groups comprised of secondary public junior high and middle school students, discussing their perceptions and experiences of school safety.

Previous analyses of ISQ data (a measure of school improvement utilized by school administrators) suggest the need for further research of students' perceptions and experiences of school safety. Students' underlying reasons for feeling unsafe in school have not been adequately detailed or addressed. For this reason, further analysis of students' perceptions and experiences regarding the rationale behind their feeling unsafe at school is warranted and the purpose of this study.

While the ISQ survey and other quantitative measures effectively identify school safety as a major student concern, they are not sufficient tools to describe how students feel regarding school safety. The kind of qualitative research methodology encompassed in this study, specifically focus groups, will permit greater understanding for students' perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes regarding school safety. In this way, the school safety and PBSI literature, and institutional knowledge will be enriched. The qualitative data gathered in this research is therefore vital for identifying and increasing our understanding of students' feelings of safety in school. School violence can make students fearful and affect their readiness and ability to learn, and concerns about vulnerability detract from a positive school environment (Scheckner, 2002). Gaining better understanding of how students view the safety of their school may provide additional information for creating safer schools and therefore has the potential to increase

student achievement and commitment to school. The following research question guided the overall research and organization of the student focus groups: What are eighth grade students' perceptions (ideas and reflections) and experiences (physical and emotional) of school safety?

Potential Impact of the Research

This study is important to documenting and possibly improving the experience of students in secondary schools by offering in-depth data describing student's perceptions of school safety. The qualitative research methodology of this study through focus groups is valuable to improving students' perspectives regarding school safety. This research has the potential to illuminate how students feel safe or unsafe in schools. There is need in the school safety body of literature for this study. Recent studies focused on particular features of school safety, such as bullying (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Coloroso, 2004; Simanton, Burthwick, & Hoover, 2000; Slee, 1994; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002) to demonstrate if a decrease in these behaviors might result in students feeling safer in schools. However, while this information might be helpful to inform, these studies do not supply descriptions of specific perceptions and experiences of students regarding school safety.

The potential to receive an accurate view of students' safety concerns and utilize this data in future research and interventions to impact school policy is possible. School administrators will obtain detailed information regarding their students' beliefs and perceptions of school safety (Aleem & Moles, 1993) When administrators and other educators understand students' beliefs about school safety, interventions designed to be responsive to student concerns are more likely to be implemented (Bliss, Emshoff, Buck, & Cook, 2006). The data that were gathered through this research study will provide qualitative information regarding school safety. This information

will be crucial to informing any necessary changes in future policy and procedures to facilitate safety improvement at the secondary schools.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Ideally schools are free of violence in order to maximize student learning in safe environments. Violence not only affects those students directly involved but may also disrupt the school climate, bystanders, and the surrounding community (Henry, 2000). Previous literature on the topic has identified possible sources of students feeling unsafe in school, including bullying (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Coloroso, 2004; Simanton et al., 2000; Slee, 1994; Stockdale et al., 2002), relational aggression (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004; Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004), drugs (Colvin, Kameenui, & Sugai, 1993; Kadel, Watkins, Follman, & Hammond, 1999), and gangs (Thompkins, 2000). How exactly these elements make students feel safe or unsafe in school is, however, elusive in the literature. In general, the literature has focused on child and adolescent risk factors and social factors correlated to criminal behavior and psychiatric illness and not adequately described students' perceptions (Chandler 1993). Therefore, an accurate understanding of the extent and nature of the issue of school safety is requisite for parents, school personnel, and policymakers to address school safety effectively.

Need for Safety in School

Feeling safe in school and learning are intrinsically linked: Students learn more and better when they feel safe in school (Duke, 2002; Sugai & Horner, 2001). Furthermore, if students see violence in school on a regular basis, they do not feel safe (Overstreet, 2000). Experiencing violent situations, either as a participant or bystander, decreases students' learning and achievement and results in decreased feelings of safety (Williams, 2006). Violence at school can be an obstacle to student achievement (Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998). This phenomenon is not surprising as Maslow's hierarchy of needs stipulates that physical and safety needs must be met before intellectual and emotional learning can occur and proceed (Gordon, 2001). Positive

school climate and culture increase students' feelings of safety in school and their learning (Kitsantas, Ware, & Martinez-Arias, 2004).

Contributors to School Safety

The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) has identified three elements that contribute to a safe school environment: (1) goals, a strong emphasis on academic mission in the school; (2) rules and procedures, clear disciplinary standards that are firmly, fairly, and consistently enforced; and (3) a caring climate that guides interpersonal relationships in the school (Aleem & Moles, 1993). Empirical research has demonstrated the important connection between school factors such as positive school climate, discipline code, fairness, and security actions taken by the school, to student behavior and perception of safety (Farmer, 1999). Students that self-report higher levels of feeling safe in school attend schools that incorporate these factors; and the converse has been demonstrated (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

The most influential element impacting students' feelings of safety in school was students' recognition of their school as safe (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandex, 1989). Other factors that increased positive student behavior, thus increasing feelings of safety as well, included improving students' opportunities for success, positive teacher-student relationships, and high expectations for achievement (Esposito, 1999). Effective school leadership and vision among administration, teachers, and staff was also demonstrated to be vital to student determination of a school as safe (Cotton, 2000). A school can be documented as safe through low incidence of violence and implement all factors of school safety, but if students fail to recognize safety at school and feel safe in school, they will likely continue to feel unsafe in school.

National Assessment of School Safety

How and to what degree students recognize their school as safe is highly nuanced, not completely understood or predictable, and tends to incorporate community values greatly. The first comprehensive national assessment of school safety was published by the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1978, entitled *The Safe School Study*, illustrated this point. This assessment demonstrated that neighborhood conditions around the school were highly associated with school violence. A majority of respondents who identified the school as safe generally also identified the surrounding community as safe.

It was further suggested by this study that the greater the exposure to violent behavior by students in the neighborhoods where they lived, the greater incidence of school violence they experienced. Students do not cease being who they are when they enter the school doors. They bring with them their learned behaviors, cultural values, and experiences. This seemingly impacts and influences students' perceptions and experiences within school. In this way, schools are microcosms of the surrounding larger community (Lorion, 1998; Small & Dressler-Tetrick, 2001).

Federal Law Related to School Safety

Federal law reflects the values of American society in regard to school safety; the legislation is largely based on social values and perceptions (Bliss, Emshoff, Buck, & Cook, 2006). Recent laws related to school safety tend to be reactionary and punitive in nature, which serves to increase unsafe feelings among communities (Cassidy, 2005). And as discussed earlier, unsafe feelings among communities directly impacts and relates to students' unsafe feelings in school. It would appear that increased federal laws regarding school safety could be counterproductive to cultivation of students' feelings of safety in school. Schools face the pressures of reform instituted by the Federal Department of Education, Congress, and state and

local government, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2000) and IDEIA (2005), the *Safe and Drug Free School and Communities Act*; the *Gun Free Schools Act*; and the *Safe, Disciplines and Alcohol and Drug Free Schools* (Department of Education, 2004).

As a result of the above legislation, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned the NCES to develop a systematized and standardized method of cataloging and reporting crime, violence, and discipline information in schools (NCES, 2004). The statistics compiled by NCES have the potential to slowly discredit the social misperception that schools are unsafe. Accurate information often has the positive effect of diffusing negative outcomes that stem from fear of the unknown (Granberg-Rademacker, Bumgarner, & Johnson, 2007). This study has the potential outcome to result in such a positive effect by providing accurate information regarding student's perception and experiences of school safety that could inform future improvements. As school personnel and students are made aware of this information accurately, students' feeling unsafe in school could potentially decrease as students recognize safety in their school.

Statistical Reality of School Safety

Specifically, students could potentially feel safer in schools if made aware of the following statistics taken directly from The U.S. Department of Education's Indicators of School Crime and Safety: In 2006 of the 54.9 million students enrolled in prekindergarten through grade 12, ages 5–18, 28 (21 homicides and 7 suicides) were fatal victims; 6% (decrease from 12% in 2001) of students ages 12–18 reported they were afraid of attack or harm at school (including on the way to and from school); 4% of administrators at all public schools took one or more serious disciplinary action in response to student's use or possession of a firearm or explosive device; 83% of public schools controlled access to school buildings by locking or monitoring doors during school hours; nearly all public schools required visitors to sign or check in when entering the school building (98%); 22 students per 1,000 are involved in violence at school.

Some of these statistical indicators document improved student safety. For example, the victimization rate of students ages 12–18 at school declined from 73 victimizations per 1,000 students in 2003 to 55 victimizations per 1,000 students in 2004. However, other aspects of school safety have not improved. For example, the number of homicides of youth ages 5–18 at school was higher in 2005 than in 2001 (21 versus 11 homicides). However, simple statistics indicating low rates of personal violence do not indicate whether students perceive the school as safe or students' perceptions of what does not feel safe to them. Students may continue to feel uncomfortable or unsafe simply because of their perceived potential for harm at school. Thus, examining school safety from a student's perspective can provide insights to the elements that affect perceptions of school safety (Kitsantas, Ware, & Martinez-Arias, 2004).

Reactionary School Safety Policy

A close examination of students' perceptions often does not seem to guide formulation of school safety policy, which tends to be reactive and not proactive in violence prevention (Cassidy, 2005). For example, within three months of a school shooting at Heath High School in West Paducah Kentucky, a school security committee had authorized a \$148,000 security plan. As a result, all visitors, teachers, and students wear identifying name tags around their necks; students sign consent forms for staff to rummage through backpacks, a ritual that is repeated every morning; the school has a uniformed security guard; all officials wear two-way walkie-talkies on their belts; emergency medical kits are in each classroom and disaster instructions in every handbook (Newman, 2004). These kind of reactionary procedures are not the exception, but the norm in other schools coping with violence (Peterson, Larson, & Skiba, 2001). The goal of such strategies to decrease student maladaptive behavior and promote pro-social skills has not been produced by these reactive safety measures. Instead, these safety strategies contributed to more negative and hostile school environments (Sugai & Horner, 2001).

Other school districts have followed Heath High School in implementing increased security measures. Indiana was the first to install metal detectors in their elementary schools after three students were apprehended carrying guns in school (Greene, 1999). Across the United States, increased security measures and policies are being implemented in the public schools. Police officers are replacing teachers in their traditional roles of monitoring, intervening, and communicating with students, families, and school personnel (Easterbrook, 1999). The negative effects or outcomes of this and other reactionary school policy, such as zero tolerance, on students remains illusive in the literature and difficult to identify, such as poor academic performance, lower creativity, and increased fear and helplessness (Caine, 1994).

A specific form of reactive safety measures is zero tolerance policies that may counteract positive school climate and improvement and reverse the intended positive effect (Holloway, 2001). Schools that adopt this get-tough approach, include the use of punishment-based and exclusionary policies and strategies (Safran & Oswald, 2003). Such policies are reactive and punitive in nature and tend to be problem focused, in that they target negative behaviors instead of teaching and reinforcing positive social skills.

The fear of punishment intrinsic to zero tolerance policies has the potential to discourage students from acting in a preventive manner when faced with school violence. For instance, more than 20 students and 1 teacher heard a California student's threats to shoot up his school the day before the 2001 incident; nobody took his threats seriously, and some told reporters that they did not want to get their friend expelled from school for what were most likely idle threats (Chapin & Gleason, 2004). Zero tolerance discipline policies tend to have limited usefulness in enhancing teacher and student perceptions of safety because the policies often contribute to the level of systemic violence in the school. Such policies can be disruptive to the educational setting and can increase the potential for academic failure of at-risk students (Kitsantas, Ware, & Martinez-

Arias, 2004), have resulted in more negative and hostile school environments, (Sugai & Horner, 2001) and do not typically create teaching opportunities that promote pro-social behavior (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). These disciplinary measures tend to occur in response to undesirable behavior rather than proactively preventing the occurrence of such behaviors (Smith & Sandhu, 2004). However, Positive Behavior Support measures and strategies support prevention, which also decrease displays of violence and increases students' feelings of safety.

Students' Perceptions of School Violence

Regarding students' perceptions, it is significant that according to research, today's youth do not perceive most acts of aggression and fighting as violence (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001); which seems to impact students' report and seeking help. It appears there is a typical scenario preceding a violent incident at school that is collectively understood and accepted by the student body and by default the school culture. The student is teased, used as a scapegoat, or is ostracized in some way because he or she does not fit in. These negative social interactions lead to anger, frustration, and low self-esteem within the student. Feelings of isolation and vulnerability within the student increase and feelings of safety in school decrease. Then some incident occurs in which the student feels they have been disrespected. The culmination of the pattern leads to retaliation. Many students self-report that they do not see such retaliation as violence, but as self-defense. Thus violence becomes a viable means of conflict resolution (Fatum & Hoyle, 1996). Again, research demonstrated that the way in which students perceive their experiences and interactions directly impacts how they feel in school, whether safe or unsafe.

Post Columbine and 9/11 court case decisions tend to recognize the rights of school personnel to protect schools and communities from potentially violent behavior over individual rights. The effect of this shift is that many students may feel their privacy is invaded by school

safety measures (Arnett, 2000), implemented with the goal of increasing safety; which ironically might decrease students feeling safe in school. As a result, students may not report incidents to school personnel because they have lost respect for them and do not view them as offering security (Beyer, 1997); which in turn probably decreases the number of and degree to which students feeling safe in school.

Intervention Models

Over the past decade, several programs have been developed to make schools safer and cultivate students' feelings of safety. The programs are generally defined in three types depending on school needs: (1) programs focused on behavior either within the students' locus of control (such as communication skills, problem-solving) (2) or those external to the student (such as locker searches or other behaviors by those in authority), (3) or those which may be shared (students and authorities). The scope or focus of intervention would be defined as crisis intervention, early intervention, or preventative intervention (such as physical safety ensured by metal detectors, versus community minded attitudes requiring social and cognitive interventions) (Linquanti & Berliner, 1994).

According to a study published in the journal *Urban Education*, the direct-prevention plan most commonly reported by school administrators is to have teachers supervise in the hallways. The second most frequently utilized prevention plan is to isolate and assemble together the students displaying behaviors that violate school rules; and the final prevention plan is visitor registration (Taylor-Green et al., 2000). It is difficult to quantify the effectiveness for these prevention plans, as it is virtually impossible to measure what did not occur and was avoided. However, national statistics demonstrate reduction of violent incidents at schools implementing these prevention plans (NCES, 2006).

Critics of current school safety interventions argue that such measures undermine the fragile trust between students and school personnel. It seems that an exciting correlate might exist between students' feelings of safety and trust of school personnel. Measures that include behavioral management, discipline systems, and training for staff tend to build trust between school personnel and students (Sugai, 2002). Positive leadership is also an effective intervention that increases trust and increases students' feelings of safety in school. Research demonstrated that leaders exhibiting poor human relations, abrasiveness, arrogance, and uncaring behaviors might contribute to a school climate fostering violence (Bulach, Pickett, & Boothe, 1998) and ultimately decrease students' feelings of safety.

While leadership within schools is crucial to promote positive school safety and students' feelings of safety, leadership from the surrounding community is vital. The most effective safe school plans involve the entire community: teachers, students, parents, law enforcement professionals, mental health professionals, politicians, academics, and business, religious, and community leaders (Kitsantas, Ware, & Martinez-Arias, 2004). Involvement of the afore listed community figures seems to support students' perceptions of schools as safe (Warren et al, 2006); which appears to encourage positive experiences for students in school.

Students tend to both have more positive experiences in school and feel a sense of belonging and a bond to school through community involvement and cultivation of trusting relationships with teachers, administrators, and other school personnel are less likely to commit violent acts (Anderman, 2002) and feel unsafe in school. Trusting relationships seemingly impacts students' perceptions of school safety (Granberg-Rademacker, Bumgarner, & Johnson, 2007); which influences their experiences in school (Gordon & Patterson, 2007). School safety interventions that involve positive behavior support and the surrounding community tend to be more effective in increasing students' feelings of safety in school than those that do not

(Granberg-Rademacker et al., 2007) due in part to the outcome of the social perception of the school as safe by the surrounding community at large (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2003).

Positive behavior support (PBS). Positive Behavior Support (PBS) has been shown to be an effective alternative to reactionary discipline methods (Center of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2001), which aims to provide “ a broad range of systemic and individualized strategies for achieving important social and learning outcomes while preventing problem behavior” (Sugai, 2002, p.1). Within the PBS model, the origins of problem behavior are not perceived as existing solely within the individual but are viewed as an interaction between the environment and the child (Jackson & Panyan, 2002). PBS interventions are designed to be proactive and to prevent problem behavior by altering a situation before problems escalate while simultaneously teaching pro-social skills (Carr et al., 1999).

PBS is an application of a behaviorally-based systems approach to enhance the capacity of schools, families, and communities to design effective environments that improve the link between research-validated practices and the environments in which teaching and learning occurs (OSEP, 2006). One of the goals of PBS is to establish educational practices that support adoption and sustained use of evidence-based practices, in turn creating positive, preventive, predictable, and effective learning environments for all students (Sugai, 2002; Zins & Ponte, 1990). School environments that exemplify these characteristics tend to be more caring, healthier, have enhanced learning and teaching outcomes (Sugai, 2002) and students who feel safe. PBS represents a major development in school-wide behavior management, with an emphasis on proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors (OSEP, 2006) and prevention.

The PBS program implemented by Brigham Young University’s Positive Behavioral Support Initiative (PBSI) is an example of a school-wide PBS model that aims to teach positive

social skills to children, thereby enhancing the learning and teaching environment within a school. Through the implementation of the following four components, PBS aims to create a positive and safe school environment that proactively teaches appropriate behaviors and actively reinforces these skills. These components are (a) environmental alterations, (b) skill instruction, (c) systems change, and (d) research validated interventions, which will be a focus on this literature review (Young, K.R., Young, E.L., Anderson, & Johnson 2003). These components of the PBSI program closely align with PBS principles in order to facilitate initial change and stayed improvement within a school.

With the pressure on schools to improve school cultures, research-validated strategies are an important part of the school-wide discipline and behavior management picture. However, systemic factors such as administrative support, team-based problem solving, and data-based decision making assume even greater importance in the day-to-day implementation of these strategies (Sugai & Horner, 2000). This expanded view of school-wide discipline has caused behavior analysts to expand their unit of study to include systems or organized collections of behavior. The result of this extended analysis has resulted in the evolution of school-wide PBS (Sugai & Horner, 2002) with emphasis on prevention of maladaptive behaviors.

Prevention of maladaptive behaviors. A major component of PBS includes a focus on prevention of students' maladaptive behaviors. This focus on prevention stems from increasingly common reports of so-called behavioral earthquakes in the schools that include acts of violence among students and towards teachers, theft, bullying, substance abuse, etc. (OSEP, 2006). PBS prevention derives from research that purports that these behavioral incidences are best prevented when the entire school supports and uses evidence-based practices (Sugai, 2002).

Behavioral expectations are clearly outlined and taught consistently to students in a school using PBS. Once these expectations are clear, educators aim to reward students for

following the rules rather than waiting for misbehavior to occur before responding (OSEP, 2006). Interestingly, it appears that clear expectations and positive rewards increase positive school climate and culture while punitive measures and interventions do not result in a positive school environment (Kitsantas et al., 2004) and actually decrease students' feelings of safety in school. Increased positivity to school climate and culture appears to decrease negative student perceptions of the school and increase students' feelings of safety in school.

Summary

The ISQ, other self-report survey measures, and school safety research clearly indicate that secondary students self-report feeling unsafe in school (Utah State University: Center for the School of the Future, 2007), yet descriptions of students' perceptions and experiences relating to school safety remain limited and inadequate. This study enriches the school safety literature by describing the perceptions of students during their early adolescent years. It is requisite to understand and describe students' perceptions and experience in regards to school safety. The important question explored here from the ISQ is what are the experiences and perceptions of secondary junior and middle school students regarding school safety.

The phenomenon of students feeling unsafe in school was described in focus groups comprised of secondary public junior high and middle school students, discussing their perceptions and experiences of school safety. Previous analyses of ISQ data illustrated the need for further research of students' perspectives and experiences of school safety. For this reason, further analysis of students' perceptions and experiences regarding the rationale behind their feeling unsafe at school is warranted. While the ISQ survey and other quantitative measures effectively identify school safety as a major student concern, they are not sufficient tools to describe students' experiences and perceptions of school safety. The kind of qualitative research methodology in this study, which is absent in the literature, specifically through focus groups,

will permit greater understanding for students' perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes regarding school safety.

In this way, the ISQ literature, PBSI literature, and institutional knowledge will be enriched. The qualitative data gathered in this research could potentially provide increased understanding of how students view the safety of their school and additional information for creating safer schools that has the potential to increase student achievement and commitment to school. This study is important to documenting and possibly improving the experience of students in secondary schools by offering data describing student's perceptions of school safety.

There is need in the school safety body of literature for this study. Recent studies focused on particular features of school safety, such as bullying (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Coloroso, 2004; Simanton, Burthwick, & Hoover, 2000; Slee, 1994; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002) to demonstrate their decrease might result in students feeling safe in schools. However, while this information might be helpful to inform educators on the subject, these studies do not supply descriptions regarding the specific perceptions and experiences of students regarding school safety.

The potential to receive an accurate view of students' safety concerns and utilize this data in future research and interventions to impact school policy is possible. School administrators will obtain information regarding their students' beliefs and perceptions of school safety. When administrators and other educators understand students' beliefs about school safety they might be more likely to design interventions that will be responsive to student concerns. The data gathered through this research study provides a wealth of qualitative information regarding school safety. This information will be crucial to informing future policy and procedures to facilitate school safety improvements.

Method

The qualitative nature of this study, based on grounded theory design, gathered detailed data in a focus group format that elicited the experiences, ideas, opinions, and perceptions of secondary students' feelings regarding safety in their schools. The qualitative approach to research promotes the view that human behavior is fluid, dynamic, situational, social, contextual, and personal (unlike quantitative approaches that assume that human behavior is regular and predictable), which fits this research purpose of description (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The method of focus groups was utilized to optimally facilitate student discussion in an efficacious manner in order to gain rich descriptions, as the results are a narrative summation with rich description rather than a statistical report.

Research Paradigm

The inductive nature of the grounded theory approach to qualitative research, including rich descriptions, served as the theoretical structure and research design for this study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) formulated grounded theory to move research away from theory confirmation to theory generation, or developing new theory grounded in the data. "Grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). This is a process of swimming in the data and utilizing constant comparison of data to develop an understanding of the phenomenon.

Four important characteristics comprise grounded theory: fit, understanding, generality, and control. Grounded theory within this study resulted in a theory of the phenomenon of students' self-reporting feeling unsafe in school that fit the data, was clearly stated and understandable, generalizable to larger populations, and utilization of the theory to somewhat inform and control the phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1990) expanded and clarified Glaser and Strauss' original formulation as follows: "One does not begin with a theory, then prove it.

Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (p. 23).

Participants

Participants in this study included eighth grade students from one junior high school in a rural western US state (grades seven through nine=School A) and one other junior high in a neighboring community (grades seven through nine=School B). Each focus group was designed not to exceed a seven student maximum. Students from the respective schools participated in one of eight total focus groups, ranging from four to seven total participants. A total of 50 students (26 female, 24 male) participated in the focus groups; 26 students (11 female, 15 male) from School A and 24 (15 female, 9 male) students from School B.

Setting

Schools A and B are in neighboring communities of the same school district in a western U.S. state. Both of these schools have implemented PBS models in the past. School A is located in a suburban city with a population of about 14,500 people and has approximately 1056 students enrolled and 42 teachers. The ethnic composition of the student population at School A is as follows: 90% Caucasian, 9% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% Native American. Students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch totals 36%. The students in the school are 54% male and 46% female. Students at this school scored in the 54th percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test complete battery, where the statewide average is in the 52 percentile (Utah State Office of Education, 2008). School A is currently 77% academically proficient, where 80% is the goal (Utah State Office of Education, 2008).

School B is located on the outer edge of a middle-sized city with an approximate population of 26,000 people. It has approximately 845 students enrolled with 43 teachers. The ethnic composition of the student population is as follows: 93% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic/Latino,

2% Native American, and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander. The students are 53% male and 47% female. A total of 33% of students qualify to receive free or reduced lunch and 8% of students are English-language learners (Public School Review, 2008). This school is currently 82% academically proficient, where 80% is the goal (Utah State Office of Education, 2008).

Procedures

Prior to initial contact with students' parents/guardians via letter, and obtaining permission from the school district, administration of each school, and Internal Review Board (IRB) a practice focus group was conducted by the primary investigator, thesis chair, and research assistant comprising students of the approximate age range of this study's sample. The prescribed focus group questions were utilized and later analyzed by the team in terms of effectiveness in eliciting rich data and subjective student response. Subsequently, the focus groups questions were edited and reduced to nine questions.

A randomized sample was produced that included all students from the respective schools; receiving general education, special education, and ELL students. Two hundred total students were randomly selected as potential participants, 100 from School A and 100 from School B. Parents or guardians of each of the selected participants were sent letters in English and Spanish that included (a) an introductory letter from the principal of that school endorsing the study and inviting students to participate with parental consent, (b) a parental consent form, and a (c) student assent form.

Table 1

Focus Group Participants per School

| Date of Focus Group | School | Total Number of Participants | Number of Female Participants | Number of Male Participants |
|---------------------|--------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 03/31/2008 | A | 7 | 0 | 7 |
| 04/02/2008 | A | 6 | 6 | 0 |
| 04/03/2008 | A | 6 | 3 | 3 |
| 04/04/2008 | A | 7 | 2 | 5 |
| 04/07/2008 | B | 6 | 6 | 0 |
| 04/09/2008 | B | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| 04/10/2008 | B | 8 | 5 | 3 |
| 04/11/2008 | B | 6 | 4 | 2 |

Participants were assigned to a specific focus group based on location, timing of response, scheduling of the group, and gender. Students were placed in focus groups for their respective school until maximum capacity was reached at seven participants, as empirical research suggests this to be the most effective structure (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). As capacity was reached in one focus group, the next responding student was placed in the next focus group for that school, until eight total focus groups were formed, with four focus groups per school. Students were first assigned to two focus groups per school based on gender. One focus group per school was comprised of male students and one with female students. In total, two focus groups comprised all male students and two focus groups comprised all female students. This assignment design allowed for comparison based on gender between focus groups

and future, in-depth analysis. This method of participation and placement followed guidelines for a randomized sample, increased structural validity, and potentially provided generalizable data representational of large populations of secondary students.

The caregivers of 56 total participants were contacted via phone calls, informing of their selection to participate, and supplying information regarding the date, time, location, and any other questions and concerns. Fifty students from the eighth grade participated in eight focus groups located in conference rooms in their respective schools.

Data Collection

A semi-structured format was utilized to collect data during the 45-minute focus groups for this study to facilitate a free exchange of ideas, brainstorming, and discovery between researchers and participants (Edmunds, 2000). The following nine prescribed questions were asked the students by one or two moderators after a letter of orientation was read (see Appendix A), explaining procedures and limits of confidentiality, while the primary researcher observed and took notes:

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 in school?

9. Could adults and other school personnel do some things to help you feel safer in school?

The questions were designed to move participants from general information with relatively short questions and to more specific, detailed responses with longer questions. The moderators to clarify responses and obtain detailed, in-depth data also elicited extemporaneous questions and comments. Rapport between moderators and participants was achieved through conversation prior to initiation of focus group with positive, non-judgmental reaction from moderators to participants' responses. Interaction between moderators and participants resulted in rich data through open-ended questions, rephrasing, and neutral responses of active listening to result in optimal understanding of participants' perspectives possible. Each focus group was video recorded as the primary tool of data collection and audio recorded for back-up data collection as a safeguard for later transcription.

Data Analysis

Collected data from the focus groups was analyzed by the primary researcher that included transcription, coding, and interpretive discussion. Through the meticulous process of transcribing data by watching video recordings of the focus groups, pausing, transcribing, and then verifying the transcription, the primary researcher became very familiar with the content of the data, useful in later analysis steps of forming unifying themes. All data was transcribed, read numerous times, and reviewed by the primary investigator prior to initiating the first of three stages of grounded theory data analysis, open coding. An auditor also reviewed the transcripts and provided additional support in the data analysis process.

Important words or concepts emerged from the data common amongst the majority of focus groups during the open coding and later utilized in the second stage of grounded theory data analysis or axial coding; the concepts were compiled into like-categories of more abstract

concepts common amongst the majority of data across focus groups. This inductive process allowed the primary investigator to “create new and theoretically expressed understandings” (Strauss and Corbin, 1999, p 8). The primary investigator was rigorously involved with the data to both detect common themes and understanding relationship nuances amongst data through the method of constant comparison of data. The goal of axial coding was reached in conjunction with theoretical saturation, as five central and unifying themes emerged from the data. The third and final stage of grounded theory data analysis was accomplished as a grounded theory was produced from the incorporation of open and axial coding results (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that helps explain the phenomenon of students self-reporting feeling unsafe in school.

The primary investigator was assisted by the Thesis Committee Chair, Ellie Young, to ensure accuracy of interpretation through peer review. The peer reviewer first read a portion of the transcripts, specifically one third, for familiarization with the data; then the peer reviewer evaluated interpretations of the author of the thesis by reviewing the transcripts a second time for consensus of believability and validity of the primary investigator’s interpretation of the transcribed and coded focus group data (Bruner, 1987).

The findings of the peer review of the data were compared, discussed, and refined by the primary investigator and the peer reviewer to determine discrepancy and similarity with the primary investigator’s findings and interpretations of the focus group data. As discrepancies were found, they were evaluated with the primary investigator and the Thesis Committee Chair. The five major themes and grounded theory emerged from the data and from this process and recorded in this thesis.

Assumptions of the Researcher

The thoughts, assumptions, and biases of the author of this study impacted every aspect of this research. Previous experiences of working with students and their families within the

schools as a teacher influenced the decision making process and informed subsequent data analysis. These experiences combined with other personal experiences of receiving public education in urban, suburban, and rural environments resulting in a personal view of the world and people that informed the design, implementation, and perceived outcomes of this study. Assumptions abounded concerning this research: students' perceptions of school would impact their feelings of safety in school; the sample would be diverse; moderators' behaviors and communication style would minimally influence students' responses; 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 was striving to be aware at some degree of personal biases and identify as best as possible potential ramifications of such and designed checks and safeguards for them in this study.

RESULTS

Data from all eight focus groups, comprised of eighth grade students (n=50), were analyzed with a three-tiered approach, including (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for grounded theory research design. Themes emerged from the data through this analysis by theoretical sensitivity, which contributed to answering the research question and to the formation of a grounded theory (selective coding) for the phenomenon of students self-reporting feeling unsafe in school. The resulting five themes detailed below represent common perceptions and experiences shared by students:

1. Students Feel Safe in School with Friends
2. Students Feel Safe in School with Adult Supervision and Feel Unsafe in School Without Adult Supervision
3. Students Feel Unsafe in School When They Witness or Are the Target of Physical Bullying, Verbal Bullying, Intimidation, and Ridicule
4. Students Feel Safer When There is a Peer Culture of Mutual Support Against Bullying
5. Students Recommend Procedural Fidelity to Increase Student's Feelings of Safety in School

Theme 1: Friends in School

Students expressed that friends helped them to feel safe in school. Having friends appeared to cultivate and support students' perceptions and feelings of belonging, not being lonely, and being protected. Being around friends seemed to help students have a sense of security. Numerous students represented in a majority of the focus groups expressed further that they feel safer in school, specifically in classes in which they have friends. Students shared

experiences of not only feeling safe in classes with friends but generally enjoying more and performing better in those classes. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding this theme:

Student M4SS3: I feel safe with my friends. When I'm with my friends, I feel safe. [What is it about your friends that make you feel safe?] I don't know, just people around that like you.

Student S1S4: 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.

Student S4S6: When you're talking and laughing with friends, it's a really positive atmosphere and you feel safe.

Student M3S7: 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.

Student M1S3: Um, well there's like, in the band room I feel safe 'cause like I have friends in there. And we always have fun. We always have a good time in there.

Student M1S2: 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. And so, it's a lot easier and you feel a lot safer in a class that you have your friends with. 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.

Theme 2: Adult supervision

Students expressed that adult supervision helped them to feel safe in school: while adult supervision perceived as unvigilant or inadequate resulted in students feeling unsafe in school. Student expressed feelings of safety in classroom with teachers present, alert, and responsive to their safety needs and requests. Conversely, students also expressed feeling unsafe in classrooms and other locations with teacher or other adult supervision that was perceived by students as unresponsive, absent, and/or non-attentive. Hallways, locker rooms, lunchrooms, and certain classrooms with either limited or no adult supervision appeared to be perceived by students as

unsafe and resulted in students' unsafe feelings in school. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding this theme:

Student M4S4: I feel safest in the classroom. [What about the classroom makes you feel safe?] There's a teacher there, adult supervision, and a good environment.

Student M3S7: 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.

Student S1S2: [Teacher's name], [teacher's name], every teacher is usually outside patrolling the halls. They just stand there and look. If they see something wrong, they go fix it.

Student S1S3: I think [teacher's name] is a big contributor to that. 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.

Student M1S3: 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.

Student S2S3: They used to have teachers stand out in the hallways last year, watching over. But they stopped for some reason. Yeah, some teachers still do it, like [teacher's name]. Yeah, it [makes me feel safe]. It makes you feel like you're not going to get hurt or trampled. They're just watching us kids, making sure nothing's going on, that we're okay. We've had a couple fights last year, so like they watch over for fights.

Sub-theme 2.1: Confidence in adult supervision. Numerous students expressed this sub-theme that they feel safer in school when confident in adult supervision. Whether confident in adults to protect from potential threats or provide guidance through crisis, students associated feelings of safety to confidence in adult supervision. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding this sub-theme:

Student S1S6: 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.

Student S1S6: Another thing is, we know there's not much violence here, because of the teachers. [Students] know it would be dumb if they brought a weapon to school. They'd know. All the time I've been here, there hasn't been a weapon. It's more like minor things, like a rubber band or something. But it's never to the extreme where someone could get really injured.

S2S3: Last year I was opening my locker and there was a fight right next to me. It wasn't a fake fight, it was an actual fight. The kids shoved his head in the locker next to me. I slammed my door shut. I ran to the principal's office. I was so freaked out. When the teachers all came, I felt safer because they can control it.

Student M4S4: We have a good principal. She's not mean, but she does enforce rules. That helps me feel safer.

Student S2S2: Yeah, you go in [vice principal's] office and if there's something wrong he'll stand up for it. If there's a bully, talk to [vice principal's name] and he's not bullied anymore.

Student S1S1: There was a smoke bomb and we all had to evacuate. The fireman came and made sure everything was safe. When this happened, every teacher was outside and making sure all the kids were outside. They made sure every kid was safe. [Vice principal's name] was rounding the hall, making sure all kids were out.

Sub-theme 2.2: Ineffective adult supervision. Numerous students represented in a majority of the focus groups expressed this sub-theme that they feel unsafe in school without adult supervision. Many students shared experiences when they felt unsafe due to physical or verbal threats from other students when adult supervision was either absent or perceived as inadequate. The locus of many of these experiences was the lunchroom and other locations such as hallways and locker rooms. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding this sub-theme:

Student S1S5: I was in the hall during lunch one day. This guy came up to my friend Matt and started pushing him. [So he was messing around with him?] Yeah, like pushing him. [What about that experience made you feel unsafe?] Well, there was this kid just pushing people around in the halls and nobody was stopping him. The teachers weren't even there.

Student S4S4: 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. I came like in the middle of it and the girl was really beat up. So, I don't know how long it lasted, but I know there was a lot of shouting when it started...maybe about five minutes is that part I witnessed. I heard screaming and I went out there to see what was up.

Student S2S5: In PE, the teachers don't watch the locker room. A lot of people go around and mess around. [What do you mean mess around?] Take stuff, slam each other into

lockers. Or while you're changing, they'll walk by and slam your locker. Also while you're changing in PE, people wind up their shirt and whip you with it.

Student S2S2: One time a kid threw my shoe in the toilet. 'Cause they think it's funny. They flush the toilet, it gets clogged and overflows.

Theme 3: Witness as well as target of physical bullying, verbal bullying, intimidation, and ridicule

Students expressed feeling unsafe in school when they witness or perceive that they are targets of bullying, either or both physically or verbally, especially in conjunction with intimidation or ridicule. Emotional expressions of having been ridiculed appeared as significant to students as physical bullying and was correlated to students' feelings of safety. Most student experiences involving this theme concerned minor incidents according to school safety policy, including harassment, which students reported resulting in public humiliation. Theme 2, regarding adult supervision increasing students' feelings of safety in school, appeared closely connected to this theme, as perceived lack of adult supervision and intervention appeared to increase frequency and duration of bullying, resulting in students feeling unsafe in school. Several students further described feeling unsafe in school due to differences in dress, behaviors, and manners amongst students. In every focus group, students utilized the term "scary kid" or "scary kids" in reference to students whom were perceived to intimidate other students with aggressive behavior and dress. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding this theme:

Student S1S3: In art class today, there's this bunch of kids who get mad every time I talk and they said to me, "You better watch your back!" Scary. Because they're like tall and big.

Student M4S4: I skipped seventh grade this year. And so most of the kids in my classes are older than me. I'm intimidated, I guess that they're older. [What about that makes you feel like that?] They're all bigger. And they're like you're smarter, we're stupid. [Makes you feel isolated?] Yeah, and they're a lot bigger than me too.

Student S2S4: I think teachers should help us more. I got bullied in a class. I went to the substitute crying because of the kids and she didn't even discipline them. She just told us we could go to the library. So she didn't do anything major about it. They were like scooting a table back on me and my friend. One kid snuck in the class, he wasn't even supposed to be there and was sucking in gummy worms and throwing them in my hair.

Student S2S3: We sat there and they'd push the table into our backs. And we'd push it back and tell them to stop and they wouldn't stop. And we went up to the substitute and said could you please make them stop? And she's like, you can go to the library, so we went to the library and talked about it.

Student S1S4: Last year in seventh grade, me and my friend had first lunch, which most seventh graders don't have so, we were sitting there with eighth and ninth graders and it was weird, because they're like twice as big as us. So, one day we were getting picked on, called short, and so it was kind of scary.

Student S1S6: I remember a fight in seventh grade, there were these two girls that got in a fight. It's the kind of thing where if you see it, you're afraid it's going to happen to you all day. You're kind of watching your back and stuff. And of course there were teachers there and stuff, but I kind of felt unsafe for the rest of the day.

Student M3S1: Well, some people make fun of me. Well, I'm in the play Aida, so, and I've been practicing ever since January, and I'm trying to make the play perfect so that the people that come to watch it have a good time. And everyone's like, "Whatever, who cares, just leave us alone! You're a brat" I'm not, whatsoever.

Student M4S4: There are scary kids here. They're like emo and stuff. They act scary. Student S2S5: In the seventh grade hall, they are so scary that even ninth graders say they're afraid of them. [What do those kids look like?] They're just...I don't know. They wear heavy makeup with black hair...They're always screaming! And like people are way scared of them, it's sad. Those kinds of kids need attention. Everyone's scared of them and they're not getting enough attention.

Student S2S1: They'll scream at you if you're like...trying to pass by, they'll scream at you. Yeah, the pushing, the swearing, the screaming...and you don't know why they're doing it. Yeah, they're like "Get away!" And then they're singing songs in the hallways at the top of their lungs. They want to get attention. Yeah, why would they be screaming in the hallways unless they wanted people to look at them. [That's the gangster hallway?] Gangster, skater kid hallway. That's where all those kids hang out. They kind of wear like different baggy, really baggy, baggy clothes. Everybody packs in it and we're shoulder-to-shoulder, trying to get through. People always run into each other and there's always like people pushing each other.

Student M2S3: They sit there in their baggy pants and their baggy shirt and they're looking at you every second of the day.

M4S4: Um, well, I think sometimes people wear shirts, jackets and stuff that have rude messages or scary images, like skulls and stuff. Like goth people and stuff. They're scary and wear black and stuff.

Theme 4: Peer culture of mutual support against bullying

When asked what would help them to feel safe at school, student responses varied greatly, from no ideas to hopeful suggestions. This question required some self-reflection on the part of the students to analyze both their school environment and personal goals and motivations. Students offered that they contribute to increasing their own feelings of safety in school and that of their classmates by generally supporting one another, which may include behaviors such as verbally denouncing bullying and other forms of physical and verbal violence, including relational aggression tactics of spreading rumors, isolation, and humiliation. Numerous students in the focus groups further expressed this that they feel safer in school when rumors are not spread. Concepts of relational aggression, specifically rumors, emerged tangentially to bullying. Students seemed to identify the pain students targeted with rumors felt, connected such relational aggressive tactics as devastating, and expressed their desire to eliminate it. Students shared the following experiences and perceptions regarding this theme:

Student S1S1: Stick up for kids. I think, like during the seventh grade fight, most people just gathered around to watch rather than help. So, I think if one person had hopped in to help, then others would. So, if we could be an example to help, then others would too.

Student S3S3: 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.

Student S1S2: Well, I think this school is okay because there are a lot of kids that stick up for a lot of kids.

Student S1S6: 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.

Student S3S2: Most people will throw their friends under the bus, so...stick up for people.

Student S4S4: When we see something, we could try to do something, instead of just watching it.

Student S4S3: Instead of getting in there, maybe you could go get a teacher or someone you know will do something to help.

Student S3S1: Not spread rumors and try to stop them. If you have a friend that spreading a rumor you can tell them it's not true.

Student M1S2: Not spread rumors. Don't pass it on. Don't believe it because you don't know if it's true and forget about it and don't tell anyone else.

Theme 5: Procedural fidelity

When asked what they, individually and collectively, could do to help students feel safe at school, students' suggestions encompassed the idea of procedural fidelity. Students shared that additional adult supervision, security cameras and guards, securing campus and increased alertness and assertion of leadership on the part of teachers would increase students' feelings of safety in school. Students shared the following experiences and perceptions regarding this theme:

Student M3S7: Yeah, they could get more teachers to patrol like hallways in like unsupervised areas. There's only two teachers outside during lunch and they can't always see everything.

Student M4S1: 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 to stop. So, I think there should be more adult supervision in the halls.

Student S1S5: More teachers in more places. Well, like there's this hall by the gym, where most of the ninth grade lockers are, and that's never watched. There's a lot of fights, 'cause ninth graders think they're the best and anyone who walks through is their mortal enemy.

Student S2S3: 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 by the dumpsters. I've seen so many kids getting beat up over by the dumpsters.

Student M2S1: 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 got called in to see [the vice principal] about my grades for second term and I was watching the TV screen and I could see the cameras flipping on and off. I was like, "Whoa they're missing a lot of things."

Student S3S2: 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. They're like little black shells on the walls... Yeah, 'cause people don't do stuff when they know they're being watched.

Student S3S4: Everyone says they're not real cameras. They say, "those cameras don't work, they didn't see what that person did last Friday." [What are some things kids do when they think the camera isn't on?] Graffiti, or bullying. Last year, my friend threw a kid in a trashcan.

Student S2S3: To actually have a police officer. It's like makes you feel safer, like no one's going to hurt you, so no one can hurt you. If we had a police officer here, even his presence would make you feel safer. There was this one time Officer Turbo was with us, teaching us, and a junior high student came a long and graffitied 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.

Student S2S4: 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.

Sub-theme 5.1: Secure schools. Numerous students represented in a majority of the focus groups expressed this sub-theme that they feel safe in secure schools, which was defined as including closed and locked entries, check-in at the main office for late students and visitors, and adequate enclosures or gates encircling the perimeter. Experiences regarding perceived weaknesses in entry and exit of the school campus were shared. Students seemed to prefer having school doors locked and no unauthorized exiting. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding this sub-theme:

Student M2S4: I don't understand why they don't close the school. That way people don't sluff. And any person could come in and kill somebody. The gates are too little, you can just go over and get through them. Or like close the school. They have big fences, they're close to everything. They need to close them so they can't get out. [So you're not so much afraid of kids in school, but other people getting in?] Yeah.

Student S4S5: I think they should have the back doors locked and only the front doors opened during the day.

Student S4S6: There's a little sign on the back door that says these doors are locked during the day for our students' safety, but I go, and it's open.

Student M2S1: Yeah, people usually don't read the signs that say visitors must check in at the office. If you're tardy, you just have to walk in, they don't see you.

Student S2S6: Kids just leave all the time. I see kids all the time leaving the grounds and coming back and nobody says anything to them.

Student M2S3: There are kids that jump the fences into people's backyards over here and there are little kids playing in the backyards and throw stuff at the kids. And they don't even do anything about it. So bigger fences and closed campus would be a good idea.

Sub-theme 5.2: Alert and assertive leadership from teachers. Numerous students represented in a majority of the focus groups expressed this interesting sub-theme that they feel safer in school, not only when confident in adult supervision, but when leadership from teachers is alert and assertive. Students shared experiences of perceived inadequate, weak, or absent leadership from teachers. Such experiences were linked to students feeling unsafe in school. It seems students prefer teacher to take control of their classrooms through vigilant supervision and enforcement of appropriate consequences for infringement of expectations for students. Students shared the following perceptions and experiences regarding this sub-theme:

Student M4S5: There's some teachers that don't have a clue about anything that goes on in their classrooms. Have those specific teachers taught that these are the things you need to look for. There are some teachers that think things are perfect and wonderful and nothing bad happens in class, but...getting the teachers instructed to look for warning signs.

Student M2S1: Well, the teachers have sharp eyes, but they're deaf. They don't really listen. Life if you report something, they don't really listen. Like there was this kid snorting crack in eighth period and a long time ago. I told the counselor about it and he was like, "We'll look into it." And they didn't do anything.

Student S2S2: And the kids need to know that the teachers are in charge. Teachers should not go too over the top, but they need to show that they're in charge.

Student M1S2: Make sure that they [teachers] stand up for themselves, because a lot of the time kids will get really rowdy and stuff and they'll just let them get away with it because they want to be nice to them. They want to be good teachers, you know, it's like

you can still be nice to them and be a good teacher, but you have to get after them when they're doing something bad so they can learn, or else they just keep on going.

Student S3S4: They [teachers] could be more strict with the students. There's a lot of talking back. The students push teachers down, but they need to push us down and exert more authority.

Grounded Theory

The theory that emerged from analysis of the data collected about the phenomenon of students self-reporting feeling unsafe in school is that largely students' perceptions and experiences contribute to feelings of safety in school; students tend to feel safe in school with friends, under adult supervision, in a peer culture of mutual support against bullying. Similarly, students feel unsafe without adult supervision and when they witness or are the target of physical and/or bullying, intimidation, and/or ridicule; procedural fidelity in supervision, security cameras and guards, and teacher alertness/assertion of leadership could increase students' feelings of safety in school. It appears that students' perceptions of school safety influence experience of safety in the school and vice versa.

In synthesis, students feel safe when the school climate and culture facilitate trusting relationships and when adults exert attentive authority in supervision to maintain boundaries, order, expectations, and consequences. The perceived positive or negative character of those relationships informs student experiences and perceptions of safety in school. When the authority figures set and maintain standards of acceptable conduct students sense a reduction of ridicule and other minor incidents of bullying. When school adults are responsive to even seemingly trivial incidents of bullying, students' perceptions of safety increase.

DISCUSSION

Existent research has seemingly either excluded students' perceptions and experiences of school safety (Bauman, Rigby, & Hoppa, 2008) or narrowly investigated it contextually, most often in terms of bullying (Johnson & Persson, 2007). This research attempted to explore and offer rich data regarding students' reporting feeling unsafe in school. The five themes emerged from the data as commonly shared perceptions and experiences of school safety amongst the majority of students and combined to create the grounded theory.

Contributors to Student Perceptions of Safety

For adaptive and healthy development, students not only want to feel safe at school but also need to feel safe in school. Adaptive emotional, mental, behavioral, and even physical student progress is impacted by students' experiences that either increase or decrease their feelings of safety in school (Loukas & Robinson, 2004). The consensus among studies in the literature is that students' feelings of safety correlate to student academic performance, school attendance, and overall sense of well being (Elliott, Grady, & Beaulieu, 2000). As students feel safe in school, students self-report positive perceptions of the school climate, increased feelings of safety and higher levels of connectedness by having friends and trusting relationships with teachers that are responsive.

School climate and connectedness. Unlike school climate that measures sociocultural and school variables of student relations (Johnson, Stevens, & Zvoch, 2007), school connectedness measures the sense of attachment and commitment students feel as a result of perceived caring from peers and school personnel (Wilson, 2004). School climate specifically reflects the perceptions that students have of the impact of their school environment on their own well-being in terms of friction, cohesion, competition among students, and overall satisfaction with classes (Loukas, & Murphy, 2007; Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006; Stone & Han, 2005). School

connectedness, however, gauges the degree to which a student experiences a sense of caring and closeness to teachers and the overall school environment (Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000). School climate and school connectedness are therefore distinct constructs. Understanding school climate and school connectedness and their relationship to students' perceptions and feelings of safety can potentially help school administrators, teachers, mental health professionals, and other personnel facilitate, evaluate, and implement effective safety policy and interventions.

A sense of well-being seems to be a key outcome when students feel safe, connected, and experience warm interpersonal relationships. For example, Wilson's (2006) research demonstrated a significant association of student connectedness and school climate, where student connectedness could operate independently of school climate. Analyses indicated that a student's connectedness to school is predictive not only of increased feelings of safety, but lower levels of practiced and experienced aggression beyond the influence of the overall school climate; however, highly connected students who exemplified high levels of attachment and commitment, whether in positive or negative school climates, were more likely to experience low levels of bullying than would be expected if no relationship among connectedness and students' feelings of safety existed; as substantiated by data from this study: having friends, trusting relationships, and adult supervision support students feeling safe in school.

Friends. Generally, regardless of motivation, a majority of students reported feeling safe and safer in school with friends. Certain students described situations in which a positive atmosphere was cultivated in school when talking to, laughing with, or being around friends. This positive atmosphere cultivated feelings of safety for students. Several recent studies regarding school safety indicated findings congruent with the results of this study. Specifically, students are more likely to have positive experiences that cultivate and increase their feelings of

safety and less likely to experience negative situations such as bullying and report and seek help (Dupper, & Meyer-Adams, 2002; Williams, & Cornell, 2006; Yoneyama, & Rigby, 2006).

Students also described situations of isolation in which the students felt alone and that they felt less safe than when surrounded by friends. It is interesting that the number of friends did not emerge as issue; whether students had one or numerous friends did not present as an important distinction.

Even one friend potentially improves feelings of safety for students in school. A subtheme emerged in conjunction with this theme: students feel safer in classes with friends than without. Students expressed feeling vulnerable to bullying and other forms of violence when present in classes without friends. This perception is supported in the literature that negative student perceptions regarding their classroom climate were found to be significantly associated with increased rates of bullying behaviors (Yoneyama & Rigby, 2006). Student responses from the focus groups further demonstrated that students' academic, social, and behavioral performance could be tied to having friends in the particular class; as students feel safer in classes with friends they tend to learn more and perform better when they feel safe. Interesting research by Loukas, Suzuki, and Horton (2007) supported this conclusion and expanded the concept of friendship as a protective factor for students in school against the destructiveness of the effects of physical and verbal aggression. These effects included student attendance, levels of social withdrawal and depression, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors, and academic performance.

Feeling safe in school through friendship effectively moderated the effects of student aggression and other risk variables in the schools (Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989, such as truancy (Coloroso, 2004). Students who feel safe in school generally attend school and perform better than students who do not feel safe in school and are generally truant (Haynes,

Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997). Student responses from the focus groups indicated this as well, as students shared experiences of choosing to stay home due to various reasons that made them feel unsafe in school.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2005 illustrated this concept: 6% of all total students in America missed school in the last 30 days at the time of the survey due to not feeling safe in school. Brook Meyer, Faint, & Enrich, (2006) substantiated this, and further demonstrated that students' feelings of safety and school climate were significantly and positively related to attendance rates and significantly negatively related to dropout rates and large class size. School policy and interventions responsive to students might effectively incorporate positive school climate and smaller class sizes to increase students' feelings of safety, and attendance and truancy and decrease dropout rates.

Trusting Relationships

While friendship appears to increase both student attendance and academic performance through an increase of safe feelings, another major connecting concept evident in student responses was that students want and their feelings of safety increase when students perceive themselves to have trusting relationships in school. It appears that students want to trust teachers and administrators (Fein et al., 2002; Redneck et al., 1997). Students in the focus groups named specific teachers and administrators and identified their personal qualities perceived as trustworthy and their actions that either built or eroded trust. It is a significant finding within this data and other studies that the degree to which a student experiences a sense of caring and closeness to teachers and other school personnel seems directly related to their feelings of safety within the overall school environment (Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000).

The trusting relationships, then, cultivated between students and school personnel have implications to adaptive student behavior. Students who identify themselves as having trusting relationships within the school not only report feeling safe in school, but also report lower involvement in violent or criminal acts. A sense of belonging and a bond or trust is seemingly established that serves to counteract student involvement in violent acts (Anderman, 2002). This finding is supported by Harish's (1969) social control theory, which stipulated that establishment of adolescents' social bonds in school decreases the likelihood of deviant behavior.

Trusting relationships appear to protect or buffer students from both the effects of and involvement in school violence. In this way, students who lack trusting relationships have a lower likelihood of positive outcomes in terms of violence. Additionally, students who feel connected to their schools and parents were less likely to be involved in violence or bullying, but they did not find that feelings of connectedness to family alone buffered youth from the effects of violence and bullying. These results (Brook Meyer et al., 2006) substantiated other findings that even highly positive family functioning contributed to strong connectedness is not sufficient to mitigate the effects of severe violence exposure to youth (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004). In further analysis, students' feelings of safety correlated more significantly to lower levels of student violence than did student connectedness to parents; importantly, parent connectedness did not exhibit a protective effect and was not able to mitigate the effects of violence (Brook Meyer et al., 2006). It is therefore imperative that teachers and administrators intervene and cultivate trusting relationships with students, as they are the most impactful source that both increased students' feelings of safety and reduced their involvement in violence in school.

Authoritative Adult Presence

Another similar common theme emerged, expressed by a majority of students, related to safety in the classroom: students feel safe in school with adult supervision and feel unsafe in

school without adult supervision. Students expressed that adult supervision helped them to feel safe in school, while adult supervision perceived as unvigilant or inadequate resulted in students feeling unsafe in school. Students perceive that adults have legitimate authority and want adults to use that rightful power. Students expressed feelings of safety with teachers present, alert, and responsive to their safety needs and requests. Experiences were frequently shared regarding teacher responsiveness. It seems that if a student perceives that a teacher will not listen and respond to student concerns in a meaningful way, that student may be more reluctant to relate a concern. Students in all focus groups mentioned teachers by name that they perceived to be either good or bad teachers which seemed to be based on perceived responsiveness and was closely related to their feelings of safety in school.

It further appears that this perceived inability to seek help from adults decreases students' feelings of safety in school. Conversely, students also expressed feeling unsafe in classrooms and other locations with teacher or other adult supervision that was perceived by students as unresponsive, absent, or non-attentive. Hallways, locker rooms, lunchrooms, and certain classrooms with either limited or no adult supervision appeared to be perceived by students as unsafe and resulted in students' unsafe feelings in school. Hallways seemed to be the location of most concern to students and a desired place for supervision to increase feelings of safety; some students felt the hallways were well supervised, while other students in the same group would express countering opinions.

An interesting sub-theme of this theme emerged from the data that students' feelings of safety regarding adult supervision appears to be dependent on the amount of confidence or belief the students' placed on the adult. For example, students who largely perceived their school as safe and generally felt safe also expressed confidence in the adult supervisors' abilities in general and specifically to protect and respond appropriately to crisis. Students' further expanded this

sub-theme to a second sub-theme that students clearly feel unsafe without adult supervision. Students shared experiences of being physically bullied in lunchrooms, locker rooms, and hallways; students reported being verbally bullied in classrooms when adult supervision was either not present or unavailable.

Bullying and Ridicule

Students recounting the experiences of bullying spoke regarding personal experience; however, the next theme that emerged, expanding this previous theme to include witnessing physical or verbal bullying, especially ridicule, that decreased students' feelings of safety in school. Students expressed feeling unsafe in school when they perceived that they were targets of bullying, either or both physically or verbally, especially in conjunction with intimidation and ridicule. A majority of the experiences described by students regarding this theme pertained to incidents that would be classified as minor as opposed to severe according to school policy.

When students experienced bullying or public humiliation they also tended to have decreased feelings of safety. Secondary students seemingly associate physical bullying and ridicule on the same continuum. They further reported that teachers may not perceive some minor incidents of bullying as important, but students want them to attend to these chronic, minor instances of bullying because they are important to students. Students perceive that adults have authority, and they want them to use this authority to create a culture of safety and respect. School administrators could design and implement safety interventions in school that target ridicule and verbal harassment in conjunction with physical bullying. Ridicule and teasing relates to feelings of school safety, which current literature fails to adequately investigate or address and seems a significant finding of this research.

Furthermore, students' feelings of safety in school also seem to interact to buffer students from the effects of violence exposure and bullying (Unnerve & Cornell, 2004). Students in the

focus groups who felt safe in school also shared fewer (relative to students who felt unsafe in school) incidents of being targeted for or witnesses of violence in school and expressed that they wither had or would report incidents of violence in school. Students in the focus groups who reported feeling unsafe in school also shared more incidents experiences where school personnel were unresponsive to their pleas for help and reported more incidences of bullying. In fact, Williams & Cornell (2006) corroborated the above student perceptions in their research and concluded that students who perceived their schools as having negative climates reported bullying incidents less, as they perceived that bullying was tolerated and that teachers and administrators were unlikely to respond in a supportive manner to diminish the bullying. Additionally, these students also perceived that other students would be unlikely to reduce or stop the bullying (Williams & Cornell, 2006).

The second theme, regarding adult supervision increasing students' feelings of safety in school, appeared closely connected to the theme regarding students feeling unsafe due to witnessing or targets of violence, as the student perceived lack of adult supervision and intervention appeared to increase frequency and duration of bullying, resulting in students feeling unsafe in school. In fact, lack of adult supervision and response increased the likelihood of bullying behaviors and negative student perceptions regarding their classroom climate, which were found to be significantly associated with increased rates of bullying behaviors (Yoneyama & Rigby, 2006). To many students, perceived lack of adult supervisory response raised threat to their personal physical, psychological, or emotional safety.

Physicality appeared to be closely related to this theme as well: if the intimidator was perceived to be physically or socially more advanced, the larger the perceived threat and decrease in students' feelings of safety. A sub-theme developed around this concept, that students feel unsafe around "scary kids" (other students not conforming to the perceived majority

culture in dress, speech, and behavior). It must be noted that students participating in our focus groups were largely clean-cut and probably would not stand out in a mainstream crowd. Had our sample included more students labeled “scary kids” perhaps this theme would not have emerged. Overall, association was made by a majority of students between aggressiveness displayed by “scary kids” and decreased feelings of safety in school.

School Culture of Peer Support

Students who experienced a sense of peer support seemed to have a greater sense of safety than students who may have experience a consistent sense of peer support. The underlying concept of aggressiveness decreasing students’ feelings of safety developed the next theme of students feeling safe in school with peer support against bullying. Students in the focus groups shared that they felt safe in school when their friends and other students did not support bullying and would intervene if they witnessed bullying. It seems that if students felt that their peers supported a school culture intolerant of bullying, they reported feeling safe in school. If students felt the peer culture in their schools supported bullying, they reported feeling unsafe in school. An interesting component of addressing this theme included student responses that indicated that the school’s peer culture impacted their report of bullying and other violent or maladaptive behaviors.

It seems that students’ perceptions influenced student action to report bullying; specifically that students reported that they would not report if they perceived the school’s culture to be permissive of and non-responsive to bullying. Other research demonstrated this concept that students’ perceptions of school personnel’s responsiveness influence students’ decision to report bullying (Unnerve & Cornell, 2004) and that students, like those in the focus groups, reported being bullied more in school settings that fostered student trust in school personnel (Were, 2006). Bullying is less likely to be reported if a culture of bullying is supported

in schools through student conviction that neither teachers nor classmates would assist to counteract bullying and that many students would join in bullying (Packman, Lepkowski, Overton, & Smaby, 2006).

This theme developed specifically from data collected in response to questions regarding what would help students feel safe in school. Student responses varied greatly, from no ideas to hopeful suggestions. This question required some self-reflection on the part of the students to analyze both their school environment and personal goals and motivations. Students offered that they contribute to increasing their own feelings of safety in school and that of their classmates by generally supporting one another, which may include behaviors such as verbally denouncing bullying and other forms of physical and verbal violence, including relational aggression tactics of spreading rumors, isolation, and humiliation. A sub-theme also developed mainly in the focus groups comprised of female students, but also in one other mixed-gender group, that students feel safe when rumors are not spread. Students related experiences of their friends and themselves when they participated in or were the victim of rumors, emphasizing that they feel safer when rumors are not spread.

Fair School Policy Consistently Enforced

The final theme illustrated an underlying concept shared by a majority of students and connected in nuanced ways to all other themes: students feel safe when there is procedural fidelity in school. Students' trust in the fairness and enforcement consistency of school policy seemed to greatly impact students' feelings of safety within the school. Students who expressed positive perceptions regarding this also generally expressed feeling safe in school. It appeared that students who expressed negative perceptions of procedural fidelity in the school either expressed feeling unsafe in the school or did not respond.

In association with this theme, students emotionally expressed opinions and shared experiences regarding equity and fidelity of supervision and teacher leadership. It appears students fervently want clear expectations and consequences and when teachers fairly enforce them, students feel safe in school; when teachers do not create a sense of procedural fidelity, students do not report feeling as safe. This idea expanded in the expression of procedural fidelity in closing campus to secure it. Students felt safe in a closed campus school. Concern regarding procedural fidelity even extended to components of the facility: students expressed that they were aware of and concerned about surveillance cameras not working. Virtually no student voiced concern over having surveillance cameras in terms of violation of privacy, and in fact, often stated that they would feel safer in school if the surveillance cameras were both in operation and watched. Students shared that the cameras often were not in operation and if school personnel watched them, it was office staff, which could be distracted and not solely paying attention to the cameras.

This perception developed another sub-theme shared by a majority of students, that they wanted security guards in the school. Some students shared positive experiences of feeling safe in elementary school where there was a security guard. These data demonstrated that security measures in and of themselves do not make students feel safe, but inconsistent or non-use of them did and procedural fidelity in the management of security measures such as surveillance cameras and security guards would increase feelings of safety for students in school.

These results also have an implication for developing anti-bullying programs for early adolescent students. Anti-bullying programs are common in schools and focus on prevention and intervention of school aggression (Kitsantas et al., 2004). However, these data indicate that educational efforts to decrease bullying do not require a complex program, model, or approach. Developing and consistently implementing school policy seems to be one very important and

effective factor. Another fundamental aspect that would supersede an anti-bullying program is working with teachers and students to develop and demonstrative effective social skills that lead to creating and maintaining trusting relationships.

Limitations

This study certainly had limitations. The homogenous nature of the sample represented limitation in receiving data of varying perspectives not represented by the majority of the population. 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 increase number of responses, but could impact detail obtained.

The structure of the focus groups lead by moderators asking rote questions could be viewed as a limitation and perhaps some information might not have been shared by students who could have felt that their ideas were narrowly focused to answer the questions. The variance of the understood definition of safe amongst students definitely impacted the data, as what one student considered safe could be considered unsafe by others. These limitations were considered and guided the design of the study to mitigate their impact as much as possible.

Implications for Practice

This study provides valuable data, the utilization of which possibly could improve the experience of students in secondary schools by offering in-depth data describing student's perceptions of school safety. This research illuminated how students feel safe or unsafe in schools. There is need in the school safety body of literature for this study. Recent studies focused on particular features of school safety, such as bullying (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Coloroso, 2004; Simanton, Burthwick, & Hoover, 2000; Slee, 1994; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002) to demonstrate their decrease might result in students feeling safer in schools. However, while this information might be helpful to

inform on the subject, these studies do not supply descriptions of specific perceptions and experiences of students regarding school safety and this study does.

This study pointed to teacher training and administrators facilitating school safety interventions and procedural fidelity in terms of teacher accountability for maintaining school climate and culture conducive to safety through respect, supervision, and student ridicule reduction. The data supported such positive behavior supports as effective and responsive to students' needs, rather than expansive and costly school safety programs. School administrators who employ strategies based on these results would utilize student perceptions and experiences to design and implement safety interventions in their schools that promote respect, friendship, ridicule reduction, and procedural fidelity; which interventions are most effective (Aleem & Moles, 1993). When administrators and other school personnel understand students' beliefs about school safety, interventions designed to be responsive to student concerns are more likely to be implemented (Bliss, Emshoff, Buck, & Cook, 2006).

Effective school safety interventions would adequately address and potentially reduce student ridicule. Teachers could also effectively help in reduction of student ridicule and might receive the message from this study that students more than appreciate their vigilant supervision and assertive leadership, such elements of school climate engenders feelings of safety within students and appears to increase both their academic performance and general sense of well being. It further seems that the administrator's demeanor, leadership style, and visibility all affect how students feel in school. Students feel safe in schools with administrators who provide assertive leadership who is routinely visible in all locations.

This information will be crucial to informing future district policy and procedures and their improved implementation and practice by school personnel consistently to facilitate safety improvement that reduces student ridicule at the secondary schools. Students did not report

desiring anti-bullying programs, they did report that they want, and their feelings of safety would increase through, relatively simple and cost-effective means: trusting relationships with school personnel that are responsive to students' needs, friends, adequate supervision, a school culture of care, support, and standing up for others, and consistent enforcement of school procedures and policy. Students reported that their feelings of safety in school positively increase when their school addresses these areas of concern.

Implications for Future Research

The data collected is rich and nuanced, providing opportunity of further analysis. Such analysis is currently in effect, as the data is being analyzed in terms of gender to highlight the nuances of student responses. Other research could utilize the data in comparison with urban populations and other age groups. The data could further analyzed according to academic achievement, to investigate possible correlates of students' feelings of safety in school to academic performance. Investigation regarding group dynamics utilizing these data could potentially yield insights to influence of social factors on student response.

The focus group questions could be altered and administered to other students in comparison to these data or eliminated to investigate student response. Future studies might also analyze these data according to individual student responses to garner trends and patterns, according to other research questions. Understanding the roles that economic status, social status, gender, and ethnicity play in both the rate and type of student response could be another facet of future research.

Summary

Data from focus groups of secondary public school student demonstrated how and why students feel safe and unsafe in school. Perceptions of students greatly impact not only if students feel safe or unsafe in school but also their opinions, their attitudes, and ultimately their

experiences in school. A school is a complex matrix of student and adult attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about the school, including perceptions about interpersonal relationships within the school. Values and norms, particularly in relation to resolving interpersonal conflict and codes of behavior are also integral components (Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000).

Students shared that they feel safe in school with friends, adult supervision, and procedural fidelity in a positive peer culture that does not support violence. Students shared that they feel unsafe in school without friends, adult supervision that they are not confident in, and are targeted for or witness of aggression. The consensus among studies in the literature is that such components of school climate listed above, whether positive or negative, affects the students' sense of safety (Elliott, Grady, & Beaulieu, 2000; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005) in school. Further investigations about students' perceptions and experiences of school safety are important, because school safety may operate above and beyond the individual level to promote reduction of violence in the schools (Brookmeyer et al., 2006). Strengthening school climate and peer culture, while specifically targeting reduction of student ridicule, through administrators, teachers, parents, and community organizations might then reduce violence in the schools more effectively than obscure efforts. Therefore, an accurate understanding of the extent and nature of the issue of school safety relative to students' perceptions and experiences is requisite for school personnel to address school safety effectively and implement improvement.

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APPENDIX A
Student Orientation

Student Orientation

Read to the students at the beginning of each focus group.

Thank you for being in this discussion group today.

We want to learn how you feel in school and what happens in your school. To do that, we want you to tell us what you think about your school.

This is how this discussion group is going to work: we will ask you questions about your school and you can choose to answer them or not. We ask that you take turns talking without interrupting other students while they're talking, to make sure everyone gets a chance to talk.

There are no right or wrong answers; it doesn't help us to tell us what you think we want to hear, just tell us what you really want to say and what you have experienced.

Your answers to the questions will be kept private. We will record and take notes of the discussion, but we won't put names next to who says what. You don't have to answer any questions if you don't want to.

We will not tell your parents or teachers what you say when you answer questions. We won't tell anyone your names. Instead, we'll just say "a group of students from this school said ..."

You don't have to be in this group. You may ask to leave at any time. Leaving this discussion group won't lower your grades or get you detention or any other consequences.

This discussion group today will last about 45 minutes.

What questions do you have before we begin?