School Climate, Perceived Safety and Bullying in Relation to Observations of Playground and Lunchroom Monitoring Behaviors

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BACKGROUND

Schools across the United States struggle with bullying on a regular basis. Studies of prevalence suggest that approximately 20-35% of students report involvement in bullying (Kann et al., 2014; Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2013). Less structure and supervision have been linked to bullying, especially on playgrounds and in lunchrooms. Additionally, students report feeling less safe in unsupervised locations (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). The supervision methods used by staff may be related to how safe students feel and to overall school climate. Clearly articulating rules, maintaining close proximity, positive communication, and the provision of structured activities are four areas important to effective monitoring on the playground and during lunch periods (Leff, Costigan, Power, & Manz, 2003). The purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between school climate, student perceptions of safety, and observations of monitor behaviors on the playground and the lunchroom. We hypothesized that both school climate and perceptions of safety are related to observations of monitoring behavior, but student perceptions of safety are a stronger predictor of direct observations.

METHOD

Participants/Procedure
Students n = 2383 (Male = 1152, Female = 1231) from grades 4-6 at 36 predominantly rural schools in the Midwest participated in a survey. Playground and lunchroom observations were conducted by trained graduate students who established interrater reliability (κ = 0.5 to 1 with average of 0.79) on the observation form.

Behavioral observations were conducted and coded using a rating form developed based on the following information: a review of best practices in playground safety; specific skills described in the training program, *Systematic Supervision* published by Iris Ed; and concepts from the Playground and Lunchroom Climate Questionnaire (Leff, Power, Costigan, & Manz, 2003).

Measures
School climate surveys, developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education were administered via Qualtrics on tablets or computers. We derived two scales to assess **Perceptions of School Safety** (9 items) and **Perceptions of School Climate** (17 items), that demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach alpha = .89, .77) respectively.

MEASURES

Scale	Sample Items
Perceptions of School Safety	How safe do you feel in the lunchroom? How safe do you feel on school grounds?
Perceptions of School Climate	My school is a friendly place. I enjoy being at school. I feel accepted by adults at my school.
Playground/Lunchroom Observations	One or more staff has a specific area to monitor. Staff provide directions, reminds students about the rules. There is a consistent staff presence on the playground/lunchroom.

TABLES

Playground Monitor Observations

Variables	t	β	R^2	F
School Climate	1.321	.032		
Safety	-1.672	-.042		
Bullied	-1.734	-.049		
Witness	2.882*	.080		
Overall Model			.006	2.875*

*Note. * p < .05.*

Lunchroom Monitor Observations

Variables	t	β	R^2	F
School Climate	-.274	-.007		
Safety	.532	.013		
Bullied	-1.029	-.029		
Witness	1.999*	.055		
Overall Model			.002	1.144

*Note. * p < .05.*

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RESULTS

Student ratings of school climate, perceptions of safety, and reports of bullying both directly experienced and witnessed, predicted a significant portion of the variance in behavioral observations of playground monitoring (R^2 = .004, F(4,2047) = 2.875, p = .022). Further, witnessing bullying was a uniquely significant contributor to the overall model (β = .080, t = 2.882, p = .004). Although the overall model for observed lunchroom monitoring behaviors was not significant, witnessing bullying was a significant predictor of monitoring behaviors observed in the lunchroom (β = .055, t = 1.999, p = .046). Student reports of bullying on the playground and in the lunchroom were significantly related to playground monitoring scores, (r = -.043; r = -.055, respectively). Reports of bullying specifically occurring on the playground and at lunch were significantly related to observed playground monitor behavior (r = -.051; r = -.050, respectively).

DISCUSSION

This is part of a larger project funded by the National Institute of Justice. Results of the current study indicate that student perceptions of school climate, safety, and bullying victimization were related to the observed methods of monitoring on the playground. These data demonstrate the validity of self-report data and student's reported perceptions of school safety. They also suggest that the behavior of school staff on the playground is integrally related to perceptions of school climate as a whole. Further research is needed investigate methods of enhancing school climate.
Given the dearth of existing programs, future studies should develop and evaluate specific interventions for playground and school monitoring.

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