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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

Keywords: Safety, Middle School, and Mental Health
INTRODUCTION
Students’ perceptions of school safety during middle school is particularly important to their mental health and overall academic performance (Joyce, 2019).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Researchers went to a local middle school to survey the students in their classes. An institutional review board approved study procedures, which included obtaining passive parental consent and written student assent. While students completed their survey, researchers handed out snacks. They were then asked to sit quietly until all the students finished. All survey information was collected on electronic tablets.

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


