Study examines role of school culture in promoting bullying, bystander intervention

August 12 2014, by Sharita Forrest

Bystander intervention programs may have limited success in addressing bullying in middle schools unless children and adults perceive school officials as committed to eradicating the problem, suggests a new study by Dorothy L. Espelage. Espelage is a Gutgsell Endowed Professor in the College of Education. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A new study of middle-school youth reveals the powerful role of school culture, including teachers' and staff members' perceptions, in creating

environments that promote or discourage bullying and bystander intervention.

More than 3,600 students from 24 schools in Illinois and 12 schools in Kansas were surveyed about bullying and violence in their schools. Led by bullying and youth violence expert Dorothy L. Espelage at the University of Illinois, the research team also interviewed 732 teachers and staff members at schools in Illinois and 715 of their counterparts at schools in Kansas.

While bystander intervention has become a focal point of many anti-bullying campaigns, bystanders' willingness to intervene is determined by a complex array of factors, including individual characteristics which may be nurtured or compromised by the school's culture.

Traits such as high self-efficacy, positive attitudes toward victims, concern for others in distress and a sense of personal responsibility increase the likelihood that students will come to the aid of bullying victims, research has shown.

But in school environments where teachers perceive aggression as an endemic problem and administrators' efforts to address it as ineffectual or absent, "students may have less of these individual-level characteristics or they simply don't feel that they have the self-efficacy to intervene," Espelage said. "Therefore, it's critical to address the aggression and safety issues in the school before trying to implement a bystander intervention program."

Although prior studies suggested that teachers tend to underestimate the prevalence of bullying and aggression in their schools, the current study found a high degree of correlation between teachers' perceptions and students' reports of these problems.

Treating boys and girls differently and tolerating sexual harassment – such as unwanted sexual commentary and homophobic name-calling – appears to be particularly influential in fomenting unhealthy school cultures.

Schools in the study that promoted gender equity and showed less tolerance of sexual harassment had significantly lower levels of bullying perpetration and peer victimization.

"If teachers and staff say that they're doing something, such as developing policies, creating an advisory board or engaging in professional development opportunities, then the kids engage in less bullying, they're victimized less and they're more willing to intervene when they see bullying happen," said Espelage, who is an educational psychologist and an Edward William Gutgsell and Jane Marr Gutgsell Endowed Professor in the College of Education.

The paper, "Teacher and Staff Perceptions of School Environment as Predictors of Student Aggression, Victimization and Willingness to Intervene in Bullying Situations" appears in the journal *School Psychology Quarterly*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Study examines role of school culture in promoting bullying, bystander intervention (2014, August 12) retrieved 3 May 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-08-role-school-culture-bullying-bystander.html