

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

You Can Hide, Watch or Run but You Better Not Snitch: A Study of Student Perceptions of School Safety at an Urban High School

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This study addressed the gaps in the research about how schools are made safe for children. It brings students' perspectives forward to describe how they are experiencing school policies and procedures, programs and practices regarding their safety.

The incidence of criminal activity in school has been on the increase and there have been major incidents which have received media coverage. The carnage has had an effect on our society and led families, schools and education authorities and the government to seek improvement in school security measures.

While most of the research on school safety focuses the viewpoint of safety experts, police officers, school and district officials and parents. Little research describes student perceptions of school safety programs. Given this lack of data and conflicting perceptions on program effectiveness, school and district administrators have few guidelines to help them make informed choices among the myriad of violence prevention program alternatives. Instead they are likely to make decisions based upon such factors as the availability of program materials and training, ease of implementation, and public relations issues such as how visible a particular

tactic might be. Popular methods such as physical surveillance and zero tolerance policies regarding guns and violent behavior may be convenient, but they are not necessarily the most effective to prevent the development of violent behavior.

The purpose of the research was to provide a context in which students describe what makes a school safe as well as the ways they perceive the effectiveness of school safety programs. In the first phase, a multiple and open response survey gathered quantitative information regarding student interactions, the discipline environment, and specific safety issues. This information was used to construct the questions which comprised the participant interviews of students, teachers, and the assistant principal in phase two of the study.

The participant interviews allowed the researcher to engage in rich discourse involving safety procedures and practices which were part of the schools' safety programs, evaluate their effectiveness, and discern if the adults and students had a shared understanding of the school safety issues occurring at the school site. Through the interviews with students, the researcher was able to gain an understanding the students' perspectives on school safety and the challenges they faced both in school and in the community as they traveled to and came from school. The interviews with teachers and administrator enabled the researcher to understand their perspective and the school safety challenges. Both teacher and student interview formats permitted participants to identify the effectiveness of the programs in place and discuss what they would do or suggest to improve safety.

The third phase, document analysis, allowed the researcher to review school and district documents on school safety and programs being implemented. It also gave an opportunity for the researcher to collect fliers, meeting agendas, and other primary documents which helped to build a total understanding of the school safety practices, how they are communicated to students and faculty, and the effectiveness of communication.

The themes which emerged from the data included: (a) students had developed two safety strategies to deal with threats at school and in their community which were not known by faculty; (b) the common attribute of successful programs was collaborative communication with the adults; (c) Social constructions which led to the perceptions of school safety programs and their implementation were influenced by prior personal schooling experiences; (d) top down legislative policy implementations were not identified as successful by students.

This study's findings suggest schools should be empowered to develop through their staff, students, and community their own safety plans and measures based upon their social construction of what is safe, the best practices and current research which have been identified, and what is culturally acceptable for the school community. Students believed talking about situations and procedures would allow them to help with school safety and be able to contribute to the safety of the campus. It would also allow them to understand the procedures of certain members responsible for school safety and how they must respond to certain situations.

The school as part of their planning process should also develop their local strategies for tracking data and self-reporting in order to inform their implementation. Under the current No Child Left Behind model, the only remedy for a school labeled unsafe is students can move out of the school to another "safer school" of their choice at district expense. But the legislation does not guarantee the students creating the disorder will not be the ones transferring and thus spreading their "disorder" to the "safer school." School safety plans created collaboratively and involving students and faculty would eliminate the misalignment of school safety programs which do not meet the needs of students and faculty.

The recommended planning process could occur in a manner similar to the Title One plans which a school must author each year to receive federal Title One funding. Through this process, a specific plan could be authored with the input of teachers, parents, students, and administration. The

school faculty and students could share strategies to assist in creating a safe environment. This communication could also guide the development of school safety strategies involving the development of strong communication between faculty and the students which could produce a focus on safety. Specific funding could be attached to the plan and justifications written for the allocation of the funds. Goals and their measurements could be developed and reviewed each year as the plan is reviewed and updated.

This study's findings suggest the development of school safety programs and positive behavior expectations must be done through the collaborative approach while recognizing the social construction of school safety by the students, faculty, and community members will affect the development of expectations and programs and determination of effectiveness.

Schools and districts should evaluate the need to provide specific staff development to promote successful communication among students and staff. This communication could support student safety and also support achievement. It may also resolve the need to implement programs which have negative effects on students, such as zero tolerance.