

SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND THE ROLE OF
THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

by

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ABSTRACT

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Violence occurring on school campuses has recently been gaining much attention. Historically, school violence has been defined as a physically aggressive act. As educational associations have begun to conduct research on the topic of school violence, the definition has evolved to include all forms of physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts. This research project concerns a review of the literature regarding school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, experiences with school violence, and their perceived readiness to address school violence. The results of past research indicates that school psychologists continue to view violence in terms of physically aggressive behaviors. The purpose of this research is to propose an updated study regarding school psychologists' perceptions, experiences, and preparedness under an all inclusive definition of violence to include all acts which might harm an individual physically, psychologically, or emotionally.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Significance of the Study.....	6
Definitions of Terms.....	7
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE.....	9
History of Violence Research.....	9
Definition of School Violence.....	10
Perceptions of Violence.....	12
Experiences with Violence.....	18
Perceived Readiness to Respond.....	20
Critical Analysis of the Research.....	24
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....	29
Implications of the Current Literature for Future Research.....	29
Proposed Future Study.....	30
Participants.....	30
Survey Instrument.....	31
Perceptions of school violence.....	32
Experiences with school violence.....	32
Perceived readiness.....	33
Data Analysis.....	34
Significance of Research.....	34
Anticipated Findings.....	35
Potential Limitations of the Proposed Study.....	36
REFERENCES.....	38

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Concern over school violence has been gaining momentum since the early 1970's (Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1994; Poland, 1994). Most recently, the 1990's have shown a dramatic increase in juvenile violent crimes (Barras & Lyman, 2000; Callahan, 1998; Gorski & Pilotto, 1993; Mazza & Overstreet, 2000; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1993; Petersen, Pietrzak, & Speaker, 1998; Schwartz, 1999). The United States Department of Justice and the National Association of Secondary School Principals both reported a staggering three million crimes have been occurring on or near school property each year (Callahan, 1998; Elam & Rose, 1995). Also, teenagers currently experience and are the victims of crime at a higher rate than any other age group (Callahan, 1998). Elam and Rose (1995) report that students and parents identify fighting and violence as one of the biggest problems for current schools. Further, the public believes that national and local school violence is increasing (Elam & Rose, 1995). It appears that students agree as approximately 160,000 students skip school daily due to the fear of violence (Callahan, 1998) and between 7% and 8% of middle and high school students miss one day of school per month due to the fear of violence (Banks, 1997; Batsche & Moore, 2000).

School psychologists nationwide and in Western Australia have been surveyed regarding their perceptions of school violence. Findings suggest that even though school psychologists do not perceive violence as a large or significantly large issue on most school campuses (Furlong, Babinski, & Poland, 1994; Furlong, Babinski, Poland, Munoz,

& Boles, 1996; Griffiths, 1995), students, parents, and teachers report that school violence is one of their biggest concerns. Further, of those school psychologists surveyed many report that they feel ill-prepared to address school violence (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995), which is attributed to a lack of specialized training. However, when university school psychology program directors are surveyed, they appear more confident in practicing school psychologists' readiness to address school violence as they indicate that violence prevention is typically incorporated into course work, practicums, and/or internships (Busse & Larson, 1997).

One reason for these discrepancies may be due to the lack of a universal definition of what constitutes a violent act. Past research has determined that most school psychologists have witnessed a significant amount of bullying, cursing, pushing and shoving, verbal threats, and ethnic put-downs on school campuses (Furlong, et al., 1994; Furlong, et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995). However, they generally do not view these behaviors as violent. Instead, school psychologists have typically defined school violence in terms of severe physical threats and acts such as homicide, weapon-related threats, and stabbings (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Larson, 1993; Morrison et al., 1994). Considering school violence in this context encourages a narrow definition which may impact how school psychologists perceive a school's overall level of safety as well as their preparedness to address campus violence. More importantly, a narrow definition of violence may lead to a constricted view of the psychological needs of children in schools, many of whom are already afraid to attend school due to perceived threats of violence.

Given that school violence continues to be a public concern for many groups of

people including parents, students, and educators, school psychologists need to redefine the definition of violence to include all acts that may cause physical, psychological, and/or developmental harm (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Furlong, Morrison, & Pavelski, 2000; Morrison et al., 1994). Adopting a broad definition of violence will allow all forms of violence to be recognized, which may also allow for a better understanding of the role school psychologists can play in providing all students with a safe learning environment free of physical force, inappropriate use of power, and verbal attacks.

Purpose of the Study

Past studies have shown an interest in assessing school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, experiences with school violence, and how prepared school psychologists believe they are to address school violence. It was the intent of past research (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995; Larson, 1993) to determine how school psychologists viewed each of these variables independently as well as to assess how the variables may be related to one another. However, only a few studies considering school psychologists' perceptions, experiences, and preparedness to address school violence have been completed, and most of them are over five years old.

Further, past surveys suggest that school psychologists do not associate bullying, pushing, verbal threats, and harassment as forms of school violence (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996); however, students report that these types of acts certainly impact their educational experience (Banks, 1997). Thus, a broader definition of what constitutes "school violence" needs to be considered in future studies. Finally, past

research has pointed to a discrepancy between how prepared school psychologists feel to address school violence and the amount of violence prevention course work trainers say universities provide, which may also be related to a poorly defined construct.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to review the literature with regard to school psychologists' perceptions, experiences, and preparedness to address school violence and propose an updated survey of current school psychologists on the topic of school violence. Objectives of previous studies will be addressed (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995). However, the literature review and proposed study will consider each of these areas under a broad, all inclusive definition of school violence. Thus, school psychologists' perceptions of how safe a school is physically, psychologically, and emotionally will be considered. Experiences with school violence will consider how often and what types of physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts school psychologists witness. Finally, preparedness will be addressed by determining how adequately trained school psychologists feel they are to address physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts experienced by students.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study relates to the importance of understanding what types of violence are occurring in our nation's schools. Given that school violence appears to be increasing, determining the current opinions of school psychologists will put us one step closer to understanding the daily conditions of school environments. It is strongly believed that school psychologists are in a unique position to participate in violence reduction efforts due to their background in the psychological processes of

people (Morrison et al., 1994). By examining school violence from a broadened definition, training programs may be better able to prepare school psychologists and to increase their confidence in their abilities to address school violence. Finally, this study will also provide a framework from which further research on school violence can be developed.

Definitions of Terms

Perceptions

A school psychologist's interpretation of the degree of violence occurring in a school based on opinion.

Experiences

A school psychologist's estimated frequency of the number of violent events occurring in a school.

Perceived Readiness or Preparedness

How adequately trained a school psychologist believes he or she is to address school violence.

School Violence

“Threatens the physical, psychological, or emotional well-being of students or school staff” (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 1997, p.17). School violence can be classified into one of two categories, physically aggressive acts and “less severe forms of interpersonal violence” (Furlong et al., 1994, p. 6). Physically aggressive acts tend to involve more serious types of assault with or without weapons. Less severe forms of interpersonal violence tend to involve psychologically or emotionally harmful

behaviors such as verbal threats, bullying, cursing, ethnic taunting, pushing and shoving.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Relevant Literature

The literature review will begin by examining the history and evolving definition of school violence. This information will then be brought together with research specific to school psychologists' perceptions of, experience with, and perceived readiness to address school violence. Finally, a critical analysis of past research will be addressed.

History of Violence Research

From a research perspective, youth violence has been studied since the 1970's. At this time, violence was defined as a physically aggressive act (e.g., homicide, stabbings, shootings). Initially, educational professionals were not involved in these efforts. Instead, research was conducted by professionals in institutions outside of the school setting. When violent crimes first began to appear on school campuses, the criminal justice department was called upon to find a solution to this new phenomenon (Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Furlong et al., 2000; Hyman & Perone, 1998; Morrison et al., 1994). As a result, researchers from the juvenile justice perspective were typically concerned with determining which factors contributed to the development of violent behaviors (Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Furlong et al., 2000). Even though violent crimes continued to be present on school grounds, educators were not generally involved in the efforts to study or reduce violence.

As physically aggressive violent crimes continued, public health officials believed that youth violence was too large an issue for law enforcement to solve alone (Dryfoos, 1993; Gorski & Pilotto, 1993). In the mid 1980's, Surgeon General C. Everett

Koop conducted a workshop on “Violence and Public Health” (National Mental Health Association [NMHA], 1995). From the public health perspective, professionals were interested in finding ways to reduce homicide and physically related acts of violence in our schools and communities (Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Hausman, Spivak, & Prothrow-Stith, 1995; Sosin, Koepsell, Rivara, & Mercy, 1995; Spivak, Hausman, & Prothrow-Stith, 1989). Individuals connected to the field of public health (i.e., physicians and psychologists) also continued to conduct studies to determine the risk factors (e.g., gun ownership and drug use) associated with youth violence (Kellermann et al., 1993; Kingery, Mirzaee, Pruitt, Hurley & Heuberger, 1991). Thus, educators still did not play an integral roll in violence prevention efforts.

It was not until the early 1990’s that the American Medical Association and the National Association of State Boards of Education joined forces and agreed that “education and health are inextricably intertwined” (Dryfoos, 1993, p. 84). As a result, schools were recognized as the best setting to implement policies and programs to reduce youth violence. In addition to involvement in violence prevention policies and interventions, educators also became interested in studying school violence and began conducting their own research. In 1992, the youth violence phenomenon became commonly referred to and labeled as “school violence” (Furlong & Morrison, 2000).

Definition of School Violence

The definition of violence has also been evolving since the 1970’s. Until recently, the definition of youth/school violence was considered in terms of only physically aggressive acts such as homicide and weapon-related threats. Yet, as educational

associations across the country began to take a position on the problem of violence in our schools, the definition of what constitutes school violence has evolved to include acts such as verbal assaults, bullying, pushing and shoving, harassment, and teasing. The National Association of Pupil Services Administrators (NAPSA) believes that “a safe and secure school environment is the foundation required for effective instruction and learning” (National Association of Pupil Service Administrators [NAPSA], 1999, p. 1). Similarly, the goal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is “to decrease the extent of violence in all forms” (NAEYC, 1993, p. 81), and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) “believes that students have a fundamentally and immutable right to attend school without the fear or threat of violence, weapons, or gangs” (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 1994, p.3). Thus, it is apparent from these statements that the definition of what constitutes school violence has been expanded upon to include more than just physically aggressive acts.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has committed to taking the definition even further as the organization has resolved “to help rid America’s schools of the destructive influence of violence in all its forms” (NASP, 1997, p. 17). In this sense, school violence is defined as any act which threatens the physical, psychological, or emotional safety of all students. Further, NASP contends that these threats may include, but are not limited to, “physical assaults with or without weapons, bullying, and social isolation” (NASP, 1997, p. 17).

NASP’s position on school violence carries a couple of implications for school psychologists. First, school psychologists can no longer consider school violence in

terms of strictly physically aggressive acts. Instead, all behaviors which might harm a student psychologically or emotionally must also be considered as violent. Examples of these types of behaviors include verbal assaults, harassment, bullying, teasing, etc. Second, school psychologists must help develop a school environment that not only promotes non-violent behaviors, but reinforces the acceptance and understanding of all individuals.

As NASP has taken an interest in school violence, school psychologists have started to question the types of violence occurring in their schools. This has resulted in a handful of studies that have been conducted to determine school psychologists' perceptions of, experience with, and perceived readiness to address school violence. These issues are described below.

Perceptions of Violence

Research regarding school psychologists' perceptions of violence on school campuses is limited. In 1993, Larson conducted the first known study regarding school psychologists' perceptions of school violence. In his study, 340 Wisconsin school psychologists were surveyed regarding their perceptions of whether the number of students referred for displaying aggressive behavior had increased, decreased, or remained the same over ten years. From the elementary to the high school level, Wisconsin school psychologists perceived that the number of students referred for aggressive acts had increased between 66% and 76% over ten years.

While the findings of this study appear to be significant in that they suggest that Wisconsin school psychologists' perceive aggressive behavior to be increasing, several

issues limit generalization of the results to the general population of practicing school psychologists. First, due to sampling concerns, only school psychologists from districts of fewer than 10,000 people were included in the final analysis. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to school psychologists practicing in districts larger than 10,000 people. Further, because larger districts were not included in the sample, it is not possible to compare results across groups. Second, Larson was interested in whether aggression had increased, decreased, or remained the same over a ten year period of time. Thus, only school psychologists with ten years of experience or more as a practitioner were included in the final sample. It is unknown whether the perceptions of individuals with ten years of experience can be directly generalized to less experienced professionals with regard to whether schools are currently perceived as having a violence problem. Finally, respondents were asked to recall from memory whether the number of students referred for aggressive behavior had increased, decreased, or remained the same over a ten year period. This procedure leaves room for concern as the results of this study are based solely on the psychologists' memory of events.

Of particular concern, given NASP's most recent position on school violence, is the fact that Larson defined aggressive behavior as a "physical assault" such as hitting, shoving, and tripping. Verbal assaults and other non-physical aggressive behaviors that might be considered aggression were not included into the definition. As educational associations have expanded upon the definition of school violence to include all forms of physical, psychological, and emotional acts, research should also apply this broad definition of violence to better understand the condition of school environments. Being

the first study to look at school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, the results of this study contribute valuable insight into changes in the frequency of violence which are occurring in Wisconsin schools. However, because the Larson study only included a few of the behaviors that are currently thought to be violent, these findings do not represent an overall picture of the present school violence phenomenon.

In 1994, Furlong and colleagues also considered school psychologists' perceptions of the amount of violence present in today's schools. Participants in this study included 121 school psychologists nationwide who were NASP members. The respondents were asked to complete questions regarding their perceptions of how big a problem school violence was and the degree to which they worry about their personal safety while at work. Results indicated that less than two percent of school psychologists nationwide reported that school violence was a very big problem at their schools, approximately one third perceived their school as having a middle-size problem, and nearly two thirds stated that their school had little or no problem with school violence. In addition, the data collected revealed that over 60% of school psychologists nationwide reported worrying very little about their personal safety and nearly 75% had never thought of leaving their jobs due to safety concerns. Only 11.9% of the school psychologists surveyed worried about their safety weekly or daily. Thus, it appears that the general population of school psychologists feel safe on their school campuses as they do not perceive school violence to be a very large issue.

Unfortunately, while the results of this study included school psychologists nationwide, it is unclear if the sample was truly representative of the general population

of school psychologists. Furlong and colleagues state that surveys were received from school psychologists representing all geographic regions. However, methods used to report the results were vaguely defined. Thus, it is unclear if respondents represented all demographic areas and whether the findings may be generalizable to school psychologists across the nation. It should also be noted that an unspecified number of school psychologists completed the survey at a conference on school violence. Arguably those respondents may have a biased opinion as they may have been more concerned about the topic of school violence than a practitioner who did not attend the conference.

Further, unlike the Larson (1993) study, the definition of what constitutes a violent act was not included as part of the Furlong et al. (1994) questionnaire, which left room for the respondent to use his or her own opinion of what should be considered a violent act when reporting their perceptions. As a result, it is unclear if each school psychologist used the same criteria when reporting on their perceptions of the degree of school violence in their schools.

In a similar study, Furlong et al. (1996) surveyed 123 school psychologists in California regarding their perceptions of how prevalent school violence against students and staff is on their campuses. Respondents were again asked to report their perceptions of how big a problem school violence was on their campus and the degree to which they worry about their personal safety at school. However, the school psychologists' perceptions of how large a problem school violence was on their campuses was unclear in the findings reported. Unlike the 1994 study, Furlong and colleagues did not provide information regarding the actual frequency of responses in this study. Instead, the

correlation between school psychologists' perceptions of school violence and experiences with school violence were examined. Findings indicated that as physically aggressive violent acts (weapon-related, property damage) against students and staff increased, school psychologists' perceived their school as having a greater problem with school violence. Likewise, as the amount of reported aggressive violence against students and staff decreased, school psychologists perceived their schools as more safe.

While the results of this study clearly indicate that school psychologists in California did not perceive their campuses to be violent unless physically aggressive acts occurred, it is unclear how large a problem school psychologists in California actually perceived school violence to be on their campuses. Results of this study concerning the degree to which respondents worry about their personal safety at work revealed that nearly 80% of school psychologists in California worry about their personal safety at work less than once a year and three quarters stated that they would not leave their position due to safety concerns. These finding are similar to the Furlong et al. (1994) study in that school psychologists generally report not worrying about their personal safety and would not leave their positions due to the fear of school violence.

The results of this study contribute valuable insight to the already existing literature. However, even though participants worked in schools representing a range of demographic characteristics, generalization of the findings to the general population of school psychologists is difficult because participants were from California only. Further, similar to the Furlong et al. (1994) study, this study also did not supply participants with a definition of violence. Therefore, participants were again left to interpret the definition of

violence based on their own opinions. As a result, it is unclear whether school psychologists uniformly agreed about what constitutes a violent act.

In 1995, Griffiths surveyed school psychologists in Western Australia regarding their perceptions of school violence. Results indicated that nearly half of the school psychologists in Western Australia perceived violence as a significant problem in their schools. Further, one third perceived violence as a mid-sized problem, and less than ten percent considered violence to be a large or very large problem. However, over 90% of school psychologists weren't concerned about their personal safety at school and most said that they worried about it less than once a year. Further, only 5.2% said that they would resign from work due to school violence. Compared to the Furlong et al. (1994) study, Western Australian school psychologists' perceptions of the prevalence of school violence appear greater than school psychologists practicing in the United States. However, school psychologists in Western Australia appear less concerned about their own personal safety relative to school psychologists in the United States. It is also important to mention that Griffiths did not provide explicit documentation as to whether respondents were presented with a definition of violence along with the questionnaire. Therefore, it is unclear whether this discrepancy is due to a difference in the construction of the survey or due to a difference in school psychologists' perceptions of what constitutes a violent act.

While the information obtained in this study provides valuable information on Western Australian school psychologists' perceptions of violence, it is not easily generalized to psychologists in the United States given that the sample was located in

Western Australia. Further, the methods used to obtain this information were vaguely defined in the documentation of the results. Thus, sampling issues including sample size and sample selection are unclear. It does seem that information was gathered by subjective means as the participants rated their perceptions of how large of a problem school violence is on a scale from very large to middle-size.

Experiences with Violence

Similar to the literature on school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, few studies have been conducted examining school psychologists' actual experiences with school violence. However, other groups such as teachers, building administrators, and district administrators have been surveyed to determine the common types of violence occurring on school campuses (Petersen et al., 1998). Findings from these studies suggest that teacher's and administrator's experiences with student to student violence have significantly increased including the occurrence of pushing and shoving, sexual harassment, punching and hitting with hands, and kicking (Petersen et al., 1998). As described below, research concerning school psychologists' experiences with violence appear to yield similar results. A significant amount of emotional and psychologically harmful events, in addition to physical aggression are reportedly occurring in today's schools.

In both Furlong (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996) studies, school psychologists' experiences with violence were measured using a broad definition of violence. Participants were provided with a list containing a broad continuum of violent acts, which allowed for less opinionated responses as survey participants were provided

with examples of acts that the researchers considered to be violent. This list included physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts which allowed for greater consistency with NASP's (NASP, 1997) most recent position regarding school violence. Examples of the behaviors comprising the list were cursing, grabbing and shoving, pushing and kicking, verbal threats, ethnic taunting, weapon-related threats, and sexual assault. Results indicated that more than three quarters of the school psychologists surveyed reported a widespread occurrence of less severe forms of interpersonal violence such as pushing and shoving, cursing, and bullying taking place on school grounds. Further, less than one quarter of the participants witnessed more severe forms of violence such as weapon-related threats and sexual harassment occurring on their campuses. (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996). Thus, it appears that school psychologists in the United States are reporting that more than just physically aggressive crimes are occurring on school campuses.

In the Furlong (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996) studies, experiences with violence on school campuses were measured as they related to either students or staff. While the results from these studies provide important information to understand the overall occurrence of violence in schools, it is unclear what percentage of these incidents involved student to student violence, student to staff violence, and staff to student violence. As a result, findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of students or to the entire population of school staff. Determining the types of violence students and staff experience independently allows for a better understanding of the types of violence a school experiences as it relates strictly to students or to staff.

Griffiths' 1995 study also considered the types of violence school psychologists in Western Australia have experienced on school grounds. Over half of the school psychologists had witnessed students displaying verbal abuse, one quarter felt that physical forms of violence were a concern, and a small percentage reported that severe forms of violence (e.g., threatened or harmed with a weapon) were an issue. These findings were similar to the Furlong (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996) studies in that school psychologists in Western Australia are also reporting that less severe forms of interpersonal violence are occurring more frequently on their school campuses. However, it is unclear whether respondents were asked to generate examples of the types of violence occurring in their schools or if the researchers replicated the Furlong survey (Furlong et al., 1994) and provided the participants with a broad list of violent acts and were asked to indicate which incidents they had witnessed on their campus.

Most of the violent acts reported in the Griffiths (1995) study were between students; with only ten percent of school psychologists indicating that they experienced some form of violence themselves. These findings are insightful in that they provide much needed information regarding a differentiation of the types of violence occurring specifically to students and to staff independent from each other. Therefore, it appears to be important to make the distinction between student to student violence, student to staff violence, and staff to student violence as school psychologists' opinions of their own safety cannot be generalized to the population of students.

Perceived Readiness to Respond

Information concerning school psychologists' perceived readiness to respond to

campus violence is also scant. However, the data available suggests that school psychologists generally do not feel prepared or equipped to address school violence, even though surveys of trainers suggest that they should be. In the Furlong et al. (1994) study, nearly half of the participants felt unprepared to address school violence issues. Further, nearly 90% believed that they would need special training in school violence to address this issue, and less than 15% indicated that they received such training in their training programs. Similarly, nearly half of the respondents to the 1996 Furlong et al. survey reported feeling unprepared to address violence in their schools, with only one quarter stating that they were confident in their preparedness to address school violence. Further, over three quarters stated that they had received no formal training in school emergency situations.

Findings from the Griffiths (1995) study were even more outstanding in that nearly three quarters of school psychologists in Western Australia believed that they had not received formal training in how to address school violence. This was nearly one and a half times the number of U.S. respondents who felt unprepared. Of those who did receive special training, more than three quarters attended bullying workshops while others gained knowledge and experience by participating in training programs and reading books. Thus, all of this training received occurred after the psychologists had completed their training programs.

Because the respondents across studies were not provided with a definition of what types of violence they should consider in determining their preparedness, the results of these surveys relied on school psychologists' opinions of what constitutes a violent act.

Thus, this lack of perceived readiness reported by school psychologists is most likely related to a biased perception of what types of violence they would be expected to respond to, most notably serious violent crimes. Indeed, the authors even suggest that school psychologists felt unprepared because they think that violence only entails physically violent acts (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996). This makes sense as we consider these findings in relation to school psychologists' perceptions and experiences with violence.

Past studies indicate that school psychologists do not feel prepared to address school violence issues. However, it appears that many school psychology training programs provide violence prevention training. In 1997, Busse and Larson surveyed school psychology program directors nationwide about their program's level of training on school violence issues including whether the training and course work available was required or not required. Overall, nearly three quarters of school psychology program directors reported that violence prevention was covered in course work. Further, more than one third of the program directors stated that violence prevention was covered in practica and internships. However, the criteria for how school psychology program directors defined violence and violence prevention training is unclear. Because the results indicate that a significant number of programs provide violence prevention training, it appears that program directors may define violence in a broad sense to include all forms of physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts.

When comparing the findings from the Busse and Larson (1997) study to the Furlong studies (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996), an interesting discrepancy

presents itself. While 67% of school psychology program directors nationwide report that school violence training is incorporated into the curriculum, a large majority of practicing school psychologists state that they have not received training on school violence. The reason for this discrepancy is unknown. However, it may be due to practicing school psychologists defining school violence strictly as physically aggressive acts (i.e., homicide) rather than under a broad continuum which includes physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts.

In 1993, Larson examined school psychologists' opinions regarding their level of training to deal with aggressive behaviors in students. In his study, Larson defined aggressive behavior as a physical assault such as hitting, shoving, and tripping. Results indicated that over one half of Wisconsin school psychologists regarded themselves as adequately trained to address aggressive behaviors. Further, nearly all of the school psychologists stated that they were willing to work with students displaying these types of behaviors.

While this study provided respondents with a definition of violence that included more than just serious physical crimes, it did not include other lesser forms of violence such as verbal attacks, harassment, etc. into the definition. Nonetheless, the results provide interesting information. When psychologists are provided with a definition of violence to include less severe forms of interpersonal violence, a greater number of the respondents felt that they were trained to deal with such behaviors. Thus, while school psychologists may feel ill-prepared to address violence in the forms of physically aggressive violent acts (i.e., weapon-related threats and shootings), the majority feel well

prepared to address violence in the forms of less severe types of interpersonal violence (i.e., hitting, shoving, and tripping).

As hypothesized with regard to other aspects of school violence surveys, these findings suggest that if researchers supply school psychologists with an explicit and broad definition of violence, survey responses may vary. In particular, perceptions of preparedness to address school violence may increase when less severe forms of interpersonal violence are defined as violent behaviors. Further, these findings are less discrepant relative to the opinions of school psychology trainers who report that school psychologists are adequately trained to address school violence.

Critical Analysis of the Research

Historically, school violence has been studied and researched by law enforcement officials and individuals connected to the field of public health. Under these philosophies, it has been narrowly defined to include only physically aggressive acts such as homicide and weapon-related threats. Recently, professionals in the field of education have also become involved in researching the issue of school violence. As a result, the definition of school violence has been considered in a broader sense as educational associations (e.g., ASCA and NASP) have taken the stance that school violence includes all acts of behavior which may harm another individual physically, psychologically, or emotionally (NASP, 1997).

As educational professionals have begun to conduct research on school violence, several studies have been attempted to determine school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, experiences with school violence, and their perceived readiness to

address school violence (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995; Larson, 1993). A review of the literature pertaining to these past studies has found that the majority of practicing school psychologists do not perceive school violence to be a very large problem on school campuses and do not feel unsafe on school grounds (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995). Yet, over half have witnessed less severe forms of interpersonal violence (i.e., verbal threats, bullying, harassment) taking place on school grounds (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995). Further, approximately one quarter of school psychologists have witnessed more severe forms of violence taking place on school campuses (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995).

Similarly, past research has determined that school psychologists do not believe that they are well prepared to address violent behaviors occurring on school campuses (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995). However, school psychology program directors state that training programs adequately prepare school psychologists to address school violence (Busse & Larson, 1997). Further, past research has determined that three quarters of school psychologists do not worry about their personal safety at school (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996; Griffiths, 1995).

It appears that the reason for these discrepancies may be due to the methods used in conducting the past surveys. In particular, few of the studies reviewed provided school psychologists with a definition of violence to reference when responding to questions regarding their perceptions of violence and perceived readiness to respond to school violence. In fact, the review of the literature has established that only one study has been

conducted which provided school psychologists with an explicit definition of violence, and that definition focused on aggressive externalizing behaviors including hitting, shoving, and tripping (Larson, 1993). When this definition was used, results indicated that school psychologists perceived aggressive violent behaviors to be increasing on school campuses, and the majority stated that they felt they were well trained to address the specific behaviors outlined.

Findings from the Larson (1993) study indicate that if school psychologists are provided with an explicit definition of violence that includes examples of less severe forms of interpersonal violence, their perceptions that school violence is a significant problem are higher than the perceptions of school psychologists who are not provided with a definition of violence. Further, when given specific examples of behaviors such as hitting, shoving, and tripping, school psychologists perceive themselves as prepared to address these forms of violence.

Indeed, findings from past studies (Furlong et al., 1994; Furlong et al., 1996) suggest that when school psychologists are not given a specific definition of school violence to reference when completing the survey, they tend to consider only severe physically aggressive acts (i.e., weapon-related threats) in their responses. When this is the case, it appears that school psychologists believe that they do not have a very large problem with school violence on their campuses and further, they report that they are not prepared to address such behaviors. Given that educational associations, including NASP, have taken the position that school violence entails all forms of physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts, additional research needs to be carried out

in order to address these definitions, clarify discrepancies from past research, and update the literature on school psychologists' perceptions of school violence.

An additional method to improve upon from past research includes the procedures used to measure school psychologists' experiences with school violence. Furlong et al. (1994) and Furlong et al. (1996) measured school psychologists' experiences with school violence as those incidents related to either students or staff. From these findings, it is unclear what percentage of the violent incidents reportedly occurring on school grounds involved student to student violence, student to staff violence, or staff to student violence. Griffiths (1995) study made such a distinction between student to student violence and student to staff violence. Differentiating between student to student violence and student to staff violence allows for a clearer understanding of a school's level of safety. As a result, additional research with school psychologists in the United States needs to be conducted to determine what types of violence are occurring to students independent from staff such that the findings may be generalized to the entire population of students.

Further, although past studies provide valuable information regarding school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, experiences with school violence, and perceived readiness to respond to school violence, there has not been one study conducted which can be easily generalized to the entire population of school psychologists practicing in the United States. Reasons include the lack of a representative sample as the Furlong et al. (1996) study surveyed school psychologists in California only, the Griffiths (1995) study surveyed school psychologists in Western Australia, and it is unclear if respondents to the Furlong et al. (1994) study sampled a group representative of all

geographic locations. Future research should attempt to obtain a sample representative of school psychologists. In particular, variables such as geographic location, school size, degree attained, and number of years as a practitioner should be considered as these may be differentially related to reports of school psychologists' perceptions of school violence.

The next chapter will incorporate the issues described above with additional implications for future research. A framework for future research on school psychologists' perceptions of violence will be proposed. In particular, considerations of ways by which to improve the survey instrument, increase confidence in the validity of participant respondents, and determine a sample representative of the general population of school psychologists will be addressed.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This chapter will consider the implications of past research as it applies to the purpose and significance of the proposed study. Methods to expand upon past research will then be introduced. Finally, the significance of the proposed study, anticipated findings, and potential limitations of this research will be addressed.

Implications of the Current Literature for Future Research

School violence is a topic that has traditionally been researched by professionals outside of the field of education. As school psychologists began to contribute to the literature on school violence, several studies have been conducted to determine school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, experiences with school violence, and their perceived readiness to address school violence. The review of the literature has noted several discrepancies regarding school psychologists' responses to these variables. The reason for these discrepancies may be multifaceted. However, one hypothesis is that previous studies have worked from a vaguely defined construct of school violence. In addition, methodological weaknesses of past studies including procedures used to measure school psychologists' experiences with violence as well as sampling concerns are evident.

It is the intent of this paper to propose a study to expand upon past research in this area. In order to alleviate the discrepancies found in past research, future research should be conducted that considers definitions of school violence that include all behaviors which may harm an individual physically, psychologically, or emotionally. Further,

future research should differentiate the degree to which students experience violence independent from the degree to which school staff experience school violence. Finally, future research should obtain a representative sample of Nationally Certified School Psychologists, such that the findings may be more widely generalized than the findings from past studies.

Thus, the purpose of the proposed study is to determine how safe school psychologists' perceive schools to be physically, psychologically, and emotionally; to describe how often and what types of physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful behaviors school psychologists witness occurring between students at school; and to determine how prepared school psychologists believe they are to address physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts experienced by students.

Based upon the preceding discussion, the following research objectives are proposed:

1. To determine school psychologists' perceptions of the prevalence of school violence and how safe school psychologists perceive their school to be.
2. To assess school psychologists' reported experiences with student to student school violence.
3. To evaluate school psychologists' perceived readiness to address school violence.

Proposed Future Study

Participants

In the past, sampling issues have resulted in survey findings that are not easily

generalized to the overall population of practicing school psychologists. Thus, it is proposed that future research should attempt to include participants which represent a range of demographic characteristics such as gender, age, race, highest degree attained, number of years as a practitioner, grade level of school, geographic location, and school size. To identify a representative sample of participants, future research should consider randomly sampling the national membership of NASP or nationally certified school psychologists.

Survey Instrument

Past studies have generally used the National School Violence Survey to measure school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, their experiences with school violence, and their perceived readiness to address school violence. While this survey provides a useful framework to determine the above mentioned objectives, there are several problematic features of the instrument that need to be improved upon. Proposed revisions to the survey are described below.

A revised version of the National School Violence Survey would be necessary in order to determine school psychologists' current perceptions, experiences, and preparedness under a broad all inclusive definition of what constitutes a violent act. Therefore, changes to the National School Violence Survey should be based on NASP's definition of violence to include items related to physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful behaviors. In addition, the NASP definition of school violence should be provided to respondents along with the survey. Thus, the future survey would consist of three general subparts including perceptions of school violence, experience

with school violence, and perceived readiness to address school violence based on this broadened definition.

Perceptions of school violence. As previously suggested, items on the National School Violence Survey regarding school psychologists' perceptions of school violence should be revised by adding more questions based on a broader definition of school violence. Further, past surveys have determined school psychologists' perceptions of school violence based on a single question. The future research should not only expand upon that question to include a broader continuum of violent acts, but should also add additional questions regarding how safe school psychologists' perceive their school to be. Previously, school psychologists' perceived level of safety at school was determined by a yes or no question. It is proposed that the items measuring school psychologists' perceptions of violence and their perceived level of safety be based on a five-point Likert scale in order to have a better understanding of the degree to which violence is an issue on school grounds.

Experiences with school violence. Updating items on the National School Violence Survey regarding school psychologists' experiences with school violence should also occur. Past surveys presented respondents with a detailed list of violent acts and asked school psychologists to report which of the behaviors had occurred on their campuses within the previous month. While the list contained a broad continuum of violent acts, physically aggressive behaviors dominated the list. The future research should collect information regarding school psychologists' experiences in the same manner; however, a revised list containing an equal number of physically,

psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts should be provided to respondents. Further, future research should expand upon past surveys by obtaining information concerning how often these behaviors are occurring on school grounds. Also, future research should differentiate whether these behaviors are occurring between students, students and staff, or staff and students. Thus, in this section of the survey, respondents should be asked to check mark the behaviors which they have witnessed between students and to estimate the frequency of occurrence of each behavior witnessed.

Perceived readiness to address school violence. Future research should also revise questions found on the National School Violence Survey regarding school psychologists' perceived readiness to address school violence. Former studies determined school psychologists' perceived readiness to address school violence based on one question which did not consider school violence under a broad definition. Future research should expand upon this item by creating additional questions to address school psychologists' perceived readiness to address both physically aggressive acts as well as less severe forms of interpersonal violence. It is proposed that the items measuring school psychologists' perceived readiness to address school violence be based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from totally unprepared to totally prepared.

In addition, future research should also expand upon the former survey regarding how well trained school psychologists believe they are to address school violence. Additional items should be created to determine whether school psychologists have received their training on school violence intervention before or after completing their training programs (e.g., workshops, seminars, conferences). The future study should

also include questions to determine whether school psychologists believe they need additional training on school violence issues. These items would also be based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree to totally agree.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics should be used in analyzing the results of the future research. For example, frequency counts, percentages, means, and standard deviations should be used to describe the subject's responses to each of the questions. Further, correlative relationships between school psychologists' perceptions, experiences, and preparedness should also be explored.

Significance of the Research

The proposed study is significant in that currently there is a lack of updated information regarding school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, experiences with school violence, and preparedness to address school violence. Further, the information that is available is based on a narrow definition of violence which is not consistent with NASP's current position that school violence needs to be considered in terms of all harmful acts. Conducting the proposed study would substantiate NASP's position and allow for a better understanding of school violence from a broader perspective.

Most importantly, conducting the proposed study would encourage school psychologists to start thinking of violence in broader terms to include all physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful acts students may experience. This is important as school psychologists must take the lead in promoting a non-violent

environment so that all students may feel safe while attending school.

An updated study would also contribute new information to the literature including a better understanding of the degree to which school psychologists perceive violence as an issue on school campuses. In addition, obtaining information from school psychologists on the proposed survey would result in a better understanding of the types of violence taking place and the frequency with which violence is occurring in our nation's schools.

Finally, gaining current information regarding school psychologists' perceived readiness to address school violence based on a broad definition of violence would provide useful information regarding what types of violence school psychologists are and are not prepared to address. Further, results of the proposed study would provide school psychology trainers with information regarding how well school psychologists are trained to address a broad continuum of violent acts. Based on the findings of the proposed study, school psychology trainers should better understand the areas in which school psychology students could benefit from additional training.

Anticipated Findings

It is the intent of the proposed study to improve upon past research which has considered school psychologists' perceptions of school violence, experiences with school violence, and perceived readiness to address school violence. This would be accomplished by revising the items found on the National School Violence Survey. The proposed study would include more questionnaire items which cover a broader continuum of violent acts. It is anticipated that revisions to the survey would result in new findings

relative to past research. In particular, the proposed changes may eliminate the discrepancies found in past research. One discrepancy found in past research has been that school psychologists have overwhelmingly reported that school violence is not a significantly large issue on school campuses. However, most school psychologists have witnessed a large amount of less severe forms of interpersonal violence taking place on school grounds. It is anticipated that even if school psychologists do not report that their school has a significant problem with severe forms of violence, when given a continuum of potentially problematic behaviors related to violence, psychological or emotional safety, issues may be present.

Another discrepancy found in past research has been that school psychologists do not feel prepared to address school violence. Yet, school psychology program directors state that school psychologists are adequately trained in this area. It is anticipated that when a broad continuum of violent acts are provided, school psychologists will perceive themselves as prepared to address interpersonal violence. Yet, they may still report that they are not confident in their abilities to address physically aggressive behaviors, which may explain the discrepant finding between school psychologists' opinions that they are not well prepared to address school violence and program director's opinions that they are well trained.

Potential Limitations of the Proposed Study

There are two possible limitations of the proposed study. First, school psychologists would be asked to report on their perceptions of how large of a problem school violence is on their campus. Responses would be based on school psychologists'

opinions as they would not be required to consult official documents verifying past violent events. Second, school psychologists would be asked to report on the types and frequency of violent acts which have occurred in the last month on their campuses. Again, this presents a limitation as school psychologists would be reporting on past events based on memory rather than official records. Although the findings of the proposed future study would be subject to the opinions of school psychologists, these are often what drive an individual's behavior with regard to professional decision making and therefore are important to study and understand.

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