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***ASSESSING SCHOOL THREATS: LEARNING FROM
STUDENTS AND PARENTS***

***L'ÉVALUATION DES MENACES À L'ÉCOLE :
APPRENDRE DES ÉLÈVES ET DES PARENTS***

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RÉSUMÉ

L'évaluation du danger posé par des élèves identifiés comme menaces potentielles à la sécurité a été l'objet d'attention intense, mais peu de recherches se sont focalisées sur les perspectives de ces élèves et de leurs familles quant à la réponse de l'école face au comportement perturbateur de l'élève. Nous avons analysé de façon qualitative des entrevues semi-structurées, détaillées et retrospectives d'un échantillonnage de 12 élèves et leurs parents au sujet de leur expérience d'une évaluation de sécurité. Les thèmes principaux ont inclus l'histoire de luttes pour le pouvoir, la perception d'être jugé de façon négative et le sentiment de l'injustice. Le résultat de notre évaluation entraîne des implications pour la recherche et offre des connaissances quant à l'importance d'établir des relations positives afin d'éviter ou de désamorcer les conflits.

MOTS-CLÉS : Violence à l'école, sécurité à l'école, évaluation de la sécurité, évaluation des menaces, relations école-parents.

ABSTRACT

Assessing risk among students identified as potential safety threats has received intense focus, but little research has focused on the perspectives of these students and their families on their schools' response to the student's disruptive behavior. We qualitatively analyzed detailed retrospective, semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of 12 students and their parents regarding their experience of a safety assessment. Key themes included: history of power struggles; perception of being negatively labeled; and a sense of unfairness. The findings have implications for research and insight about the importance of building positive relationships and avoiding or diffusing power struggles.

KEY WORDS: School violence, school safety, safety assessment, threat assessment, parent-school relationship.

A student builds a website that “rants” against a teacher.

Another student posts on line, “The only way you’re going to get attention today is if you pick up a gun and shoot somebody.”

A high school student talks about poisoning a peer.

A student is found with a knife in his backpack.

Each of the above incidents prompted a referral for a safety assessment in a Northeastern US urban school district we studied, but they could happen in any school district on any day. Such events create a sense of urgency for school officials to respond decisively. When confronted with such disturbing behavior, administrators and teachers must first ascertain whether a student poses a genuine threat and then respond in a way that maintains safety within the school environment.

Threats vary in severity. The most severe involve targeted school violence, defined as a planned school/student attack in which the perpetrator and the target(s) are potentially identifiable prior to the assault; these are relatively rare (Reddy et al., 2001). More often a student who makes a threat does not require immediate intervention by law enforcement, but warrants further assessment and support. Previous research by members of our team found that most of these students have serious unmet emotional needs and have a range of psychosocial vulnerabilities (Rappaport, Flaherty, & Hauser, 2006). Our aim in this study was to understand the experiences of students and their families leading up to, during, and following the safety assessment; what they found to be helpful; and what they wished could have been done differently. A recent paper by Goodrum et al. (2018) studied a school shooting case ending in tragedy and found a need for this type of research to examine students’ and parents’ perceptions of threat assessment procedures.

We were interested in identifying factors that might be helpful in preventing threatening behaviors and changing the outcome for students identified by schools as posing a danger to themselves or others. Ultimately, we hope that this analysis will provide guidance on how mental health professionals working in schools can best support students and families during a severe crisis for everyone involved.

BACKGROUND

THREAT ASSESSMENT

The Safe School Initiative (SSI) recommended a threat assessment approach to identify students who may have potential for killing multiple people in a targeted attack, known as targeted school violence (Fein et al., 2002). This initiative created a process to evaluate students’ threatening behavior or communication, supported by the research-based premise that those students who engage in targeted violence have a detectable pattern of thinking prior to the devastating event (Fein et al., 2002; Fein, Vossekuil, &

Holden, 1997; NTAC, 2018). The SSI did not present a formal model or set of procedures; it highlighted the need to prioritize risk factors and evaluate whether the student has the resources, intent and motivation to carry out a threat. Research from the SSI suggested that many students may make a threat but do not pose a threat. The emphasis of the assessment is to understand the developmental and situational context of the threat in order to determine the appropriate response (Fein et al., 2002). Building on this finding, Cornell et al. developed and field-tested a manualized approach called the Virginia Student Model for Threat Assessment Guidelines (Cornell et al., 2004; Cornell & Sheras, 2006). They made an important distinction between transient and substantive threats. Substantive threats involved sustained intent, repeated threats with plausible details, mention of a bomb or a knife. These threats were generally made by older students who showed warning signs such as a history of violence. Students who made substantive threats posed a risk of danger to self and/or others, required more immediate actions and at times, warranted mental health consultation and/or law enforcement intervention (Burnette, Datta, & Cornell, 2018). In contrast, transient threats tended to be made during a fight, for which students expressed remorse afterwards. The majority of threats were in the transient category and these could be handled with routine and often minimal school interventions and disciplinary measures. In a subsequent study, school staff were trained in the Virginia Guidelines model and the results showed that among secondary schools, schools using the Virginia guidelines recorded 15% fewer short-term suspensions and 25% fewer long term suspensions per year than other schools controlling for school size, the percentage of low income students, and the percentage of minority students (Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009). The school authorities were more likely to hold a parent conference and to use mental health counseling services than school authorities in the control schools (Cornell, Allen, & Fan, 2012).

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

While the prevention of school shootings has been a preoccupation in the US and to a lesser extent, a few European countries, interpersonal violence, encompassing community, familial and intimate partner violence, is a worldwide problem. Likewise, school violence, including bullying and harassment, occurs worldwide. Schools have been seen as a vital locus of prevention of all types of violence (WHO, 2017). The World Health Organization has highlighted the importance of addressing violence in the lives of children and adolescents from a public health perspective. It has published resource documents beginning in the 1990s (WHO, 1999). Many of the initiatives highlighted in the various reports are consistent with school safety initiatives in the US.

Germany is second to the US in attacks targeting schools and has had hundreds of threats of violent acts in schools. In response, a group funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research developed a threat assessment program, Network Against School Shootings (NETWASS). This program is derived from the Virginia Threat Assessment but adapted to the German schools' organizational structure and limited school resources (no school psychologists or school resource officers) (Leuschner et al.,

2017). With the analysis of every school shooting in Germany, leakage of violent intentions to a third party occurred (Bondü & Scheithauer, 2014) which is seen as an urgent opportunity to detect students who may need significant sustainable interventions and support.

The NETWASS project trains teachers to be more aware of and attentive to indications of early intervention with their students and recognition of psychosocial crisis and potential warning signs for violence in their students. Efforts to foster a positive climate in which students are willing to share sensitive information with teachers when a classmate threatens to commit a crime are also prioritized.

While threat assessments have developed in other countries, there are no known international resource centers or clearinghouses to support these efforts.

SAFETY ASSESSMENT

A safety assessment is a comprehensive mental health consultation done at the school's request for students who do not pose an imminent threat of targeted violence, but whose behavior raises concerns that they could become violent (Rappaport, Flaherty, & Hauser, 2006; Rappaport, Pollack, Flaherty, Schwartz, & McMickens, 2015). The method (developed by the first author) is consistent with guidelines developed by Cornell, Sheras, and colleagues (2009). This assessment model involves review of school records including, but not limited to, the incident report, academic transcript, and, if applicable, any psychological testing or Individualized Education Program (IEP). It involves discussions with school personnel and other involved mental health professionals, a psychiatric interview with the referred student, and a separate interview with his or her family or guardians. The emphasis is to understand the context of the identified students' behavior, evaluate risk factors, determine if the student is safe to return to school, and mobilize resources to address the needs of the student and family (Rappaport et al., 2015). This approach evaluates whether the student's threatening behavior is a symptom of a mental illness, explores conflicts between the staff and the student, examines how school climate may be fueling the crisis, and addresses relevant family factors. This analysis can help educators generate a thoughtful treatment plan that identifies resources to improve students' functioning rather than resorting to immediate expulsion.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The study took place in an urban school district in a Northeastern city in the United States, with approximately 6,000 students enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade. Forty five percent of families served by the district are low-income as defined by receiving free or reduced lunch, and 27% speak a first language other than English. On

average, 25-40 students in the district, or about .5% of the student population, are referred for safety assessment each year. These referrals do not include students who are at immediate risk, who are handled through a separate process involving psychiatric emergency services and/or police. Thus those referred for safety assessments represented a relatively small percentage of students, who were referred by the Office of Special Education or the Superintendent because the cases were sufficiently complicated and/or school staff were panicked or reached an impasse and they wanted the support of outside mental health clinicians (psychologists or psychiatrists). The school district had a system in place to evaluate students who had made threats but were not considered immediately dangerous, although it was not consistent across schools and they did not implement a consistent way of evaluating threats or training for all personnel, as recommended by Cornell and Sheras (Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009; Cornell et al., 2018).

The study participants came from a pool of 61 students (48 M, 13 F) who had participated in safety assessments between 2008-2013 and were in 6th through 12th grade at the time of the original assessment. The lead author attempted to contact all of the original 61 participants and was able to reach 16 students and their families. Four families out of sixteen opted not to participate, and 12 students and 13 family members (for a total of 25 interview participants) gave informed consent and completed the study. The research team compared the participants with the larger pool of students with respect to threats and evaluation reports and judged the participants to be representative of the threat type and symptom severity seen in the larger pool.

Reasons for safety assessments included assaults, possession of a knife, and threats made or posed (directly or indirectly) to an adult or peer. Behaviors that were deemed threatening included escalating explosiveness; swearing at a teacher or threatening to harm a teacher or student (four students); destroying property in the classroom (one student); fighting with peers (two students); injuring staff; engaging in inappropriate sexualized behavior (one student); and posting threats on the Internet (three students). Box 1 provides an example of the reason for a participant's referral for safety assessment. Incidents involving student drug or gun possession on school grounds or threats of targeted school violence were *not* included since the school district policy is to exclude the student from school and pursue police involvement.

Box 1. Case Example: Michael

Michael is a 13-year-old boy. Safety assessment was prompted when an elementary behavior teacher saw a Facebook interchange between Michael and another student, Phil. Phil asked Michael if he should do a “shoot out” for a video he was making, and Michael responded, “The real way to be noticed is to get a gun and shoot people, then everyone will know who you are.” The police were called. Michael's backpack was searched and “violent” pictures were found. The school was already concerned following an incident earlier in the year when a teacher saw that Michael had searched “how to make a pipe

bomb” on a school laptop. Michael had a history of behavioral difficulties throughout elementary school, including changing schools following one incident of fighting. He was hospitalized between 3rd and 4th grade after threatening his mother with a knife.

Eleven of the 12 student research participants who were included in the study were male. At the time of the safety assessments, their ages ranged from 12 to 18 ($M= 15.3$). At the time of follow-up between six and 40 months later ($M= 17.2$ months), they were between 14 and 20 years old. Participants were mixed African-American and White (3), Puerto Rican and White (1), Bangladeshi (3), European-American (2), African-American (1), Cambodian (1), and Haitian (1).

When students gave permission, their parent(s) were also interviewed. Thirteen parents of ten student subjects were interviewed, (seven single parent mothers and three mother-father pairs). Of the three students who were over 18, two elected not to have family members interviewed.

PROCEDURE

NR, the lead author, a child and adolescent psychiatrist consultant to the school district, either conducted the original assessments (six students) or supervised the psychologists or psychiatrists conducting the original safety assessments (six students). She conducted all the research interviews of students and their families. Research interviews took place at the participants’ convenience, either at their home or at a school-based health center in their community. Each participant received \$50 following completion of the research interview. NR interviewed students and parents separately, except in one situation where both parents were interviewed together in their home. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded, videotaped and then transcribed. The semi-structured branching interview questions (the student version shown in Table 1, the parent version addressed the same issues) were used as a guide, with the interviewer free to ask follow-up questions tailored to the interviewees’ individual narratives. Research questions were derived from extensive review of existing literature and its perceived gaps, as well as the first author’s experience with safety assessments. The protocol was reviewed and approved by the Cambridge Health Alliance’s Institutional Review Board for Human Investigation. Informed consent was obtained from students over 18 and all participating parents. Informed assent was obtained from students under 18 years old.

Table 1. Interview Questions for Students

1. Can you tell me about the event that led to your evaluation (for safety assessment)?
2. Now I'd like to ask you about what school was like. Can you tell me about that?
3. I'm interested in knowing what things were like with your family before the evaluation. Going back to that time, can you describe what was going on in your family?
4. We're going to think back to the experience you had with the evaluation. What do you remember about that?
5. What advice would you give if you met a child who was having a tough time in school like you did? What advice would you give to teachers facing a similar situation? What advice would you give to other parents facing a similar situation?
6. How have things been going since the evaluation?
7. After your evaluation, did you receive any professional help for any difficulties with your feelings or behavior?
8. How do you see yourself in the future?

DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the research team. The research team included, in addition to the lead author, a psychologist who was an investigator in the Safe School Initiative study (Fein et al., 2002), an experienced child psychiatrist-school consultant, a psychology post-doctoral fellow, and a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify themes related to our research questions, with a focus on factors that contributed to the safety incident and insights about what could have been helpful in preventing threatening behavior or improving the experiences of the students and families involved. First, members of the research team (except for the lead author) developed a crafted profile for each student and their family. Crafted profiles are condensed accounts of the experiences described in the interviews, written in the first person and using the participants' words to preserve the original voice (Seidman, 2013). These summarized the students' and parents' experiences before, during, and after the safety assessment. The team discussed each of the interviews and crafted profiles to identify themes that were most salient to our research questions (Seidman, 2013). These themes were then used to construct a codebook (a compilation of each theme and its description). Initial codes included broad areas of interest related to students' and families experience of the safety incident, experience of the safety assessment, support or services accessed, and recommendations or advice for students, parents, and schools related to how to effectively address such issues. This codebook was used to analyze all of the original interviews to identify any text in the transcripts relevant to the themes. A holistic-content approach (Lieblich,

Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) to coding was used, coding each complete interview one at a time and taking into account the context of the full interview when coding. This stage of coding was conducted using NVivo (QSR, 2014), a qualitative analysis software program. Three members of the research team conducted the coding. Coding was then reviewed and discussed by the full research team. The codebook continued to be refined throughout the coding process, with any revisions to the themes discussed and agreed upon by the research team. Once all interviews were coded, two members of the research team (including the lead author) reviewed the coded text to identify themes that were most salient to school policy and practice.

Validity and Reflexivity

Reflexivity consists of the researchers reflecting on their roles and interaction with the research process, with the purpose of increasing validity and ensuring that conclusions reflect participant experiences, as opposed to any preconceived assumptions of the researchers (Finlay & Gough, 2003). This process was especially important since the PI was involved in conducting the safety assessments. All researchers on the data analysis team engaged in ongoing reflexive discussions, with a focus on giving privilege to the voices of the students and families rather than prior research findings or the goals of the school and the safety assessment consultation.

The range of experience on the research team, particularly the inclusion of researchers who were not involved in the data collection, served to increase the validity of the conclusions. The team provided external auditing of the analysis process, results, and data interpretation to ensure that themes presented below were consistent with the participants' experience.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data yielded six distinct themes relevant to this study. Three of these involved perceptions of problems in the school environment, and three involved insight about what was or could have been helpful to the students and their families.

THE STUDENTS' BEHAVIOR

All of the students had a history of conflict with school authority, and the incident that prompted the assessments occurred against a backdrop of recurrent oppositional and defiant behavior. Some students recognized their contributions to conflicts, for example, as one student noted, "I didn't like anybody to feel like they had power over me." They acknowledged difficulty managing their anger and how sometimes their behavior could be intimidating to school staff.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Power struggles among students and teachers. From the student's perspective the school's response to their behavior exemplified a power struggle in which the student felt adults were ineffectively or inappropriately asserting their power.

First she (the teacher) got mad at me for some trivial thing, because I was not submitting to her silliness. She kicked me out of her class. She was 'Why didn't you bring me a [pen]?' because I had broken a [pen] of hers... I was like, 'It's not my responsibility. You have more than enough.'

This incident culminated in the student's suggesting that the teacher look at a very provocative website that included advocating killing teachers.

Parents and students felt criticized, misunderstood, and labeled. Parents worried that their child would be labeled or judged as a "bad kid." Many families felt blamed for their child's transgression. A parent felt the school assumed "his father left...that's why he's acting like this." Another parent commented that she felt "stabbed in the back by the school" and as if the school was "intentionally trying to ruin" her child. Parents also expressed concern that negative labels would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Many students reported feeling misunderstood and judged on the spot. A student observed, "There are three sides of the story...there's that person's side, the other person's side, and there's the truth. If you're not going to listen to both sides, you'll never be able to get to the truth." Statements included, "She never asked me if I was joking or not"... "she never gave me a chance." (This safety assessment was initiated because the student had said under his breath that he wanted to kill the teacher.) "My teacher accused me on the spot ... She screamed it out for the whole hallway to hear. I felt disrespected and offended. I tried to defend myself on the spot. She didn't really believe [me]."

Disciplinary procedures were perceived as unfair. Parents and students alike felt the school assumed the student was guilty until proven innocent. A theme that emerged strongly across the majority of parent and student interviews was unfairness and lack of transparency in the disciplinary procedures. A mother said that the process seemed to be done "secretly in an attack." Another parent said the haste and intensity of the school's reaction, "There should be, perhaps, a process, you know, instead of everyone going full DEFCON 4 [military alert]." Terms used to describe the process were "maddening" "perfunctory" and "a waste of time with the conclusions preordained." A parent said that when her son was accused of sexually inappropriate behavior with another student that "It wasn't a good school for him to be at...I don't know if he was (accused) for his color...like the teacher who made the big deal about it...put words on that girl's mouth...asked her to write something."

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT.

Parents wanted a more collaborative and individualized disciplinary process, and one parent called for “ten percent tolerance,” rather than zero tolerance. The district does not, in fact, have a zero tolerance policy but it is very revealing that parents and students perceive it that way. A student suggested having a “concierge” in the school or an objective third party whom students could consult when conflicts occur.

Avoiding power struggles. Students felt teachers needed to be less reactive to provocations, with one student suggesting they act as a comedian might with hecklers and “be laid back and humorous.” There was a tendency for the students to minimize their contribution as they focused on school staff’s reaction to a seemingly trivial altercation without recognizing that their prior behavior had primed the teacher’s reactions, or how intimidating their actions could appear.

Other students emphasized the importance of giving students time to cool off. One student advised, “Don’t get too close. Give them [students] space...You can’t beat up on a person if they’re mad.” Similarly, another student suggested teachers to “just let [students] sit for a while. Don’t keep on berating them.” While parents acknowledged their children’s role sometimes in provoking conflicts, they also wanted school staff to avoid engaging in power struggles. A few parents said that school staff were more likely to confront children of color. Some parents recognized when they felt powerless, they avoided contact with the school or stonewalled the school’s attempts to engage them.

Understanding students who struggle behaviorally and emotionally. Students and parents called for teachers to increase their understanding of children who test limits, make provocative comments, or have emotional difficulties. One parent urged the school to “try to help the students who are having a tough time, help them as much as you want, as much you can.” Parents advised teachers to seek support when working with challenging students. One parent said that teachers should not be afraid to admit that they may not understand a child who struggles, but that they should not “reject” children with emotional disorders. One student urged school staff to keep an open mind. “I’m a troublemaker but all bad kids know that they deserve a second chance ... If they get the second chance and they have the opportunity to take that second chance, they would take it and do better.” A mother shared that she understood how hard it could be to manage her son at school, as she also knew how scary he could be at home. However, she felt strongly that if a school positively understood her son’s acting out behavior, he could succeed academically.

POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF THE SAFETY ASSESSMENT

Perceptions of the consultant’s role. A number of the parents felt that the safety assessment provided “an experience to tell [their] story” to someone who did not judge them, and “calmly took in the information.” and as a result they felt less defensive. One parent reported that during the assessment she “felt so heard.” A parent said the safety assessment was different from other interactions with the school because “it wasn’t like

I needed to protect my son [from the assessor’s judgments]”.

Although many of the students had only vague memories of the safety assessment, some described it as being positive and none described it as negative. Even though the level of confidentiality was not absolute, students still valued a one to one discussion rather than their usual experience in the school’s disciplinary process where they felt there was a general lack of privacy. “What I’d say to administrators is that if [the students are] going through a hard time, there’s a reason. They might be very closed off about it. Like [it’s better] only telling one person, not telling everybody because they don’t want everybody to know.” Another student emphasized that the assessor gave him choices about therapy referral. This was particularly important since he noted that throughout most of the disciplinary process, “I couldn’t choose nothing.” Moreover, both students and parents frequently reported that the student started meeting with a mental health professional following the assessment.

Fostering supportive relationships with staff. Although not all students had supportive relationships with a school staff member prior to the school crisis, those who did emphasized how the relationship helped them navigate the crisis. These students described the importance of having a teacher who was “by your side regardless.” Some students acknowledged that a teacher gave them faith in their ability to overcome a major setback and redirect their trajectory. For example, one student said a teacher encouraged him “to have higher expectations” for himself and “to prove everyone wrong.” A student who had a long history of outbursts with teachers was suspended for disrespecting a favorite teacher. She described how this teacher engaged her in a repair process, approaching her after the suspension and acknowledging that the student probably was angry at her, “We just kind of settled it from there. And I realized [the teacher] really did want the best for me, too.” Students talked about needing space at times and yet also wanting teachers to “sit with them,” which speaks to their developmental ambivalence about both needing adults for self-regulation and yet wanting to be independent. These findings underscore the foundational importance and risk prevention of fostering a safe school environment where every student feels positively connected to at least one caring and responsible school adult.

DISCUSSION

Results of this study provide insight into the experiences of students and families referred for safety assessments. Students and parents often felt misunderstood, judged, and frustrated by a system that they perceived as unfair. This is an important finding as one of the major conclusions of Dewey Cornell and his team was that students’ perceptions of fairness of rules was a critical predictive factor in school climate (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015).

At the same time, many participants highlighted the buffering effect of support provided during these times of crisis, including the role of the consultant in the safety

assessment as well as caring relationships with school staff. Parents also provided guidance about how their experiences could have been improved or even prevented through greater understanding of their children's challenges, strategies to avoid power struggles, and a more flexible and individualized disciplinary process.

In previous research, Rappaport and colleagues found many students who demonstrate provocative and aggressive behavior struggle with emotional disorders and or trauma histories (Rappaport, Flaherty, & Hauser, 2006). This was also true of these students in this study. Sometimes students *make* threats that can seem scary out of context but do not actually *pose* a threat, and rather, demonstrate signals of distress or developmental immaturity (Fein et al., 2002). Two major themes emerged that have important implications for practice. First, both students and families emphasized the important role of supportive relationships with teachers. The literature substantiates teachers' roles in facilitating student adjustment and academic achievement (Sabol & Pianta, 2013; Aspen Institute, 2017), particularly for students who demonstrate emotional and behavior challenges (AERA, 2013; Stipek & Miles, 2008). The participants' perspective underscores critical importance of supporting ongoing adult/educator learning to address the needs of these students whose behavior can be challenging (Aspen Institute, 2018). Second, the responses of the study participants validated the role of the mental health consultant as a mediator. Parents viewed the assessment process as a chance to be heard in a nonjudgmental climate. Indeed, the safety assessment in and of itself was an intervention, as it created an opportunity to find common agreement and create a dialogue and facilitate a mental health referral to address underlying student difficulties. Mental health clinicians can play a key role in helping educators understand what is being communicated by the student's behavior (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012). The consultant needs to provide scaffolding to these vulnerable students and to facilitate continuity of care in the community in a culturally responsive way (Lever, Bradshaw, & Owens, 2014; O'Malley, Prusan, Rodriguez, Xiong, & Swartz, 2018). Table 2 outlines the consultant's role in supporting the school, students, and families.

TABLE 2. Roles of the Engaged Clinician

1. Facilitate communication between the school and the student and family to support the student's needs
2. Understand how the discipline process may reinforce the student and family's feelings about systemic discrimination and provide context for the threat. Explain the discipline policy and assessment process to the family
3. Help the school understand the supports the student needs
4. Connect the student to a supportive school adult
5. Assess and diffuse power struggles
6. Reduce stigma and shame by having the student and family recognize where they have choice in the safety plan and facilitate accessing culturally appropriate responsive care.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

The Challenge for Schools

Understanding the students' experience and the families' sense of marginalization does *not* preclude setting limits and enforcing clear and consistent consequences for unacceptable behavior. Confronting students and families in a way that is perceived as shaming can exacerbate harmful power struggles (Baumrind, 2013; Gregory et al., 2010). Employing a problem-solving approach that includes all parties involved in the conflict can create emotionally supportive relationships that encourage learning (Greene, 2008). There is evidence that when educators take an empathic stance and invite families and students to share their perceptions and objections, the students' defiant behavior decreases (Espelage et al., 2013).

Consultants can help schools in these efforts and can work with them to preempt the need for safety assessments by bolstering their prevention efforts, creating strategies on school-wide, instructional, and relational levels that support individual students and create a positive environment for the entire school community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cohen, 2012; Goodrum, Woodward & Thompson, 2017).

LIMITATIONS

This study has a number of limitations. The study was conducted with twelve students and thirteen family members. Although a larger and more diverse subject pool would have strengthened the results (Baker & Edwards, 2012), this sample size allowed an in-depth evaluation of the participants and an exploration of their subjective experiences in a way in which a study that pooled data from a large sample could not do. We were able to identify recurring themes, and draw upon the participants' experiences to make recommendations to the schools.

Nevertheless, the generalizability of these results is limited because the sample pool was only derived from one urban public school district. The sample was not randomly chosen, and the lead author who conducted the follow-up interviews was also a supervisor or conducted the initial safety assessments of the participants. This may have influenced interviewees' responses or increased potential for selection bias. However, it may also have encouraged vulnerable students and families to share their experiences in greater depth, thus providing nuances and themes often lost in larger samples. It is also possible that students and families who had more positive experiences of the safety assessment were more likely to agree to be interviewed in this study. Finally, the retrospective nature of the study allowed the participants to reflect on their experience and have a better sense of their longitudinal trajectory, but the accuracy of their past accounts may have been compromised.

Future Directions/Next Steps

This study represents an important first step in examining students' and families' perspectives on the safety assessment and their recommendations — in one of the student participant's words, the “third side of the story.” At the same time, future research would benefit from inclusion of the perspectives of administrators and teachers as well. Further, more research needs to be done to examine the experiences of students and families of color who have undergone safety assessments, including exploring the unique challenges and stressors they face in the context of systemic racism. It would also be beneficial to understand more about what was lacking in therapeutic interventions and how to best address students' needs. Longitudinal data would also be beneficial to examine how students' and families' perspectives on the safety assessment may change over time.

CONCLUSIONS

This study offers a unique opportunity to hear the voices of students and families sharing challenging and personal experiences from a population that is typically difficult to reach. Little research has focused on the perspectives of those students who undergo safety assessments. The findings can be used to enhance schools' approach to working with students and families with complex needs. The results provide guidance on how to most effectively respond to students who may appear to pose a threat. Ultimately the results underscore the importance of developing preventative strategies to avoid arriving at a point of crisis.

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