Rights, responsibilities and school climate

School climate is an area well worth investing in, particularly in relation to students' sense of belonging and connectedness, says bullying prevention expert, KEVIN PETRIE.

AT the time I enrolled to complete a research degree through La Trobe University, I envisioned myself studiously confined to the topic I had selected, i.e. 'school bullying'. And indeed, much of the past four years has been spent in this endeavour. As time has passed, however, a number of associated areas have begged for attention, including school connectedness, belonging, student-teacher relationships, peer popularity, aggression, and an old favourite, behaviour management.

Growing interest in behaviour management

My interest in behaviour management, as it relates to school bullying, was initially coincidental, rather than intentional. Professor Ramon Lewis, my principal supervisor, has long been associated with classroom management, having authored numerous publications, including his latest book, *The developmental management approach to classroom*

behaviour. In addition to researching and writing, Professor Lewis has maintained a direct involvement with a number of schools in Melbourne, assisting with strategies to improve approaches to behaviour management.

I became involved in his work primarily through necessity: I needed income to support my recently acquired student status, and Dr Lewis's research team required an additional person to collect data. During the process of visiting over 60 schools and some 500 classrooms, I became increasingly interested in the approaches being implemented. I dubbed it: 'the rights and responsibilities program', though to be honest, this was one of a number of strategies used.

My own study, meanwhile, continued to focus squarely on the relationship between bullying/victimisation, school climate and peer popularity. The correlation between positive school climate and a reduction in school bullying has been well documented. Evidence has also been found supporting the role that social status motivation plays in the behaviour choices of adolescents. What surprised me within the literature, however, was the strength of influence that behaviour management strategies have been found to exhibit on school climate and bullying prevalence. It has been demonstrated, for example, that schools that are more inclusive in their approach to behaviour management, that avoid authoritarian techniques and include student voice as an integral part of the decision-making process, report increased levels of positive school climate, and lower levels of bullying/victimisation.

Importance of school climate

With school climate becoming an area of interest world-wide, a number of programs have been developed for the purpose of directly improving this domain, though it should be noted that only a few have demonstrated any significant effect. It was at this point in my study that the question arose; if indeed behaviour management strategies are known to have a direct effect on school climate, what impact might be expected from a 'rights and responsibilities' program? Since a number of the schools who had agreed to be part of my bullying research had already been involved in Dr Lewis's 'rights and responsibilities' program, it seemed straightforward to add this component to my study. I wondered if, perhaps, the program would demonstrate a significant impact in improving school climate.

Unilateral agreement is necessary

One of the key aspects of Ramon's program is developing a set of rights and responsibilities that the classroom teacher and the students unilaterally agree to. The emphasis is on students taking individual and collective responsibility for the behaviour that occurs within the classroom, and on teachers avoiding aggressive approaches to managing

behaviour. This aspect of rights and responsibilities, and the extent to which it had become embedded in individual classrooms, was measured using five questions within the student survey. In the tradition of quantitative analysis, an internal reliability test was performed, determining that the scale demonstrated good internal consistency and could be deemed a valid measure.

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Data for my study were collected from 59 regular grade 5-6 classrooms within 20 urban and rural schools in Victoria. Through self-report survey procedures, students provided information on their experiences with bullying at school, answered questions related to school climate, and participated in a sociometric exercise to determine student peer-status within each classroom.

When the impact of a rights and responsibilities program on school climate aspect was examined, the results were surprising. Analysis revealed that the implementation of a rights and responsibilities program accounted for around one-third of the variation in school climate between classrooms. In other words, the greater the success of classrooms in incorporating a rights and responsibilities program into the fabric of classroom practice, the more positive were the measures of school climate.

I would suggest that Professor Lewis was not as surprised as was I. Through his own research, he had already observed the positive difference that inclusive techniques make on student attitudes and behaviour. There is evidence that these techniques have a significant impact on the development of pro-social attitudes and on the sense of connectedness that students report towards school, and towards teachers and peers.

Student involvement

Results from the current study indicate that efforts aimed at increasing the participation of students in classroom management, and in ensuring that discipline systems are viewed by students as fair and participatory, will equate with substantial increases to positive school climate, and in less bullying/victimisation. In considering this

implication, three areas, in particular, deserve attention: school power-structures, student-teacher relationships and belonging-connectedness.

School power structures

A 'rights and responsibilities' program discourages an authoritarian approach, insisting that students participate, along with teachers, in the formation and implementation of behaviour management procedures. It has been demonstrated that teachers who use more inclusive disciplinary techniques have students who take more responsibility for their actions and for those of their peers.

A number of researchers have identified hierarchical and authoritarian relationships as key factors in the maintenance of bullying. Similarly, student perception of the authority structure as democratic, rather than authoritarian, has been shown to be a major predictor in the unwillingness of students to stand by and ignore a peer's plan to act dangerously.

It is therefore important for schools to ensure that students are involved in a positive and meaningful way to the development and maintenance of behaviour management guidelines. Schools in which students believe the rules to be fair, and where their sense of powerlessness and alienation from teachers is reduced, report a reduction in levels of delinquent behaviour and victimisation.

Student-teacher relationships

There is evidence that when student participation in decision-making is encouraged and where coercive techniques are avoided, student-teacher relationships are greatly strengthened. These positive student-teacher relationships have, in turn, been found to influence the classroom behaviour of students.

A meta-analysis of over 100 studies into behaviour management has found that teachers who possess high quality relationships with their students experience 31% less behavioural difficulties in the classroom. As one researcher points out, the teacher needs to have developed a relationship with a child to the degree that the student is confident that, even when dealing with misbehaviour, the teacher has their best interests at heart.

Interestingly, positive student-teacher relationships have also been found to have a positive impact on a student's relationship with his or her peers. There is evidence that children who are involved in conflict relationships with teachers may be less motivated to display pro-social behaviour with each other. It is therefore important for schools to find ways to work collaboratively with students, developing policies and procedures that are viewed by both students and staff as inclusive and fair. Fostering a climate in which everyone feels a sense of shared responsibility is largely built through the ongoing daily interactions between students and teachers.

Belonging and connectedness

Students are more likely to be of supportive of, and to show a commitment to, a school's goals and guidelines when they have had an active voice in their formation. The sense of belonging and connectedness that students experience result in significant changes to their behaviour. Students who feel that they belong and who are positively involved in the classroom, are more likely to demonstrate an acceptance of authority and to display an ability to regulate their own behaviour in the classroom. In a study that investigated cases of lethal school violence in the United States, the conclusion was reached that, in each case, a lack of cohesion between students and teachers was evident. This conclusion has been shared by a number of other researchers, who have found that school connectedness, out of all variables, has the most significant relationship in predicting behavioural outcomes and is thus considered a key protective factor against deviant behaviour.

Some have suggested that, as a society, we have neglected the importance of connectedness and are now in the process of rediscovering our psychological need for meaningful belonging. Evidence appears to support the view that even the proliferation of electronic communication devices has not solved this problem, but rather has created another context in which adolescents feel (as author Sherry Turkle has coined) 'alone together'. With the decline in cohesiveness among many families and communities, schools should consider themselves at the forefront of fostering belonging and building youth identity. Greater attention may need to be given to measuring, monitoring and positively impacting the sense of connectedness and belonging that students have towards their peers, teachers, and school life in general.

Conclusion

Schools are not looking for something else with which to stretch their already limited supply of time. It appears, however, that school climate is an area well worth investing in, and that time spent in measuring and monitoring climate on a regular and ongoing basis is time well spent. For those on the lookout for a strategy that will positively impact school climate, a 'rights and responsibilities' program has much to recommend it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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