School personnel social support and nonsupport for bystanders of bullying: Exploring student perspectives

Laura Wood *, Jennifer Smith, Kris Varjas, Joel Meyers

The Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate, and Classroom Management, Department of Counseling and Psychological Services, Georgia State University, 30 Pryor Street, Atlanta 30303, Georgia

ABSTRACT

Defending behaviors by bystanders in bullying situations have been associated with decreases in the frequency and negative effects of bullying incidents. The current study utilized qualitative methodology to investigate the role of perceived school personnel support and nonsupport in students' decisions to display defending behaviors. Forty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with upper-elementary ($n = 26$) and middle school ($n = 20$) students in the southeastern United States. Qualitative data were analyzed using constant comparison and a recursive inductive-deductive approach. The findings resulted in the conceptualization of a combined social support-nonsupport framework that provides details about the source, description, evaluation, and perceived effects of different types of support and nonsupport bystanders receive from school personnel. Unique contributions to the literature included expanding the sources of support and nonsupport to consider school personnel other than teachers, providing descriptions and evaluations of support and nonsupport specific to bystanders, and demonstrating an overlap between various types of support and nonsupport reiterating the need to consider both supports and nonsupports concurrently. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

Researchers have highlighted the positive effects of social support across a wide range of areas including coping with stressors (e.g., Tanigawa, Furlong, Felix, & Sharkey, 2011), physical health (e.g., Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981), and psychological well-being (e.g., Demaray & Malecki, 2002). The specificity hypothesis states that social support is more beneficial if it targets the problem being solved and considers the context and source of support (Cohen & McKay, 1984). One critical problem that may benefit from targeted social support is bullying, defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as "any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated" (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7). Research on social supports specifically in the context of school-based bullying has focused primarily on supports for victims to decrease the negative effects of victimization (e.g., Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009; Tanigawa et al., 2011). However, many researchers (e.g., Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008) have

---

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: laurawood210@gmail.com (L. Wood).
  Action Editor: Sherrie Proctor.

highlighted the importance of defending behaviors (e.g., telling a teacher, standing up to the bully, befriending the victim) from those students not directly involved in the bullying situation (often referred to as bystanders; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). There is limited research available that addresses how school personnel can play a role in supporting these defending behaviors. The current study explores student perceptions of the types of social support and nonsupport provided by school personnel to bystanders and how students report that these behaviors affect their perceived ability and willingness to respond to bullying.

1.1. Social support and nonsupport: conceptual frameworks

Several conceptual frameworks have been posited to better understand the concept of social support (e.g., Barrera & Ainlay, 1983; House, 1981; Tardy, 1985). Tardy (1985) offered a comprehensive framework that researchers continue to use for measuring, assessing, and researching social support (e.g., Malecki & Demaray, 2001). In his model, Tardy emphasized five aspects of social support that should be addressed: *direction, disposition, description/evaluation, network,* and *content. Direction* refers to whether the support is being received or given. *Disposition* differentiates between the availability of support and the actual use of support. *Description/evaluation* refers to whether details are being provided about what the support looks like or if the effectiveness is being evaluated. *Network* refers to the context of the support that is given or received (e.g., family, close friends, neighbors, co-workers, school-personnel) and characteristics of individuals within the context. *Content* refers to the type of support. In relation to *content*, Tardy (1985) referred to a typology proposed by House (1981) that includes four types: *emotional* (e.g., trust, empathy, love), *instrumental* (e.g., helping behaviors such as providing time and skills), *informational* (e.g., advice and suggestions), and *appraisal* (e.g., evaluative feedback such as "Great job!").

Compared to social support, there has been limited research investigating the conceptual framework of nonsupport. In a qualitative study by Neufeld and Harrison (2003), the authors proposed a model of the types of nonsupport that participants experienced while caring for an ill family member. Based on their analysis, nonsupport was conceptualized to consist of *unmet expectations* and *negative interactions. Unmet expectations* included unfulfilled or missing offers of assistance (i.e., help was not offered or offered but never acted upon), unmet expectations specifically for social interactions (i.e., lost contact with friends who no longer understood their experience), mismatched aid (i.e., the support given was not the support that was needed), and incompetence of helpers (i.e., the support given was not adequate to help the caregiver). *Negative interactions* included disparaging comments, conflicts, and criticism.

Considering nonsupport concurrently with support can help to obtain a more complete picture of a social context (Kiperman, Varjas, Meyers, & Howard, 2014) and provide insight into interactions between various types of support and nonsupport. This is important in both research and practice in order to account for and target a wider variety of social factors that influence outcomes. However, currently, there is no comprehensive support-nonsupport framework in the literature. The current study offers a more comprehensive picture of the social supports and nonsupports school personnel provide to bystanders in bullying situations.

1.2. Bullying at school: bullies, victims, and bystanders

The effects of being bullied can be severe and long lasting including reduced life satisfaction (e.g., Gini et al., 2008), difficulties in school (e.g., Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013), increased risk for future victimization (e.g., Adams & Lawrence, 2011), and suicidal ideation (e.g., Skapinakis et al., 2011). Much of the research investigating reasons for bullying and related interventions has focused on the victim, the bully, or the association between the two. However, bullying occurs in a wider social context and it is important to consider the role of other individuals not directly involved in bullying (Swearer & Doll, 2001). Other participants, often referred to as bystanders, have been categorized into four different roles (Salmivalli et al., 1996): defender (e.g., stand up, tell teacher), outsider (e.g., ignore/avoid situation), reinforcer (e.g., watch/laugh at situation), and assistant (e.g., join the bullying). Researchers have emphasized the positive effects of defending behaviors. For example, a student reporting a bullying incident to a teacher was a stronger predictor of teacher intervention than the teacher actually seeing the situation (Novick & Isaacs, 2010). The presence of students exhibiting defending behaviors in a classroom has been associated with decreased frequency of bullying (Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Peer support in bullying situations can decrease feelings of blame towards the victim (Gini et al., 2008), increase the sense of general school safety (Gini et al., 2008), and mitigate negative emotional effects (Flaspohler et al., 2009).

Based on the impact of bystander actions in bullying situations, researchers have begun discussing what leads to defending bystander behaviors (e.g., Oh & Hazler, 2009; Rock & Baird, 2012; Summers & Demaray, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012) and exploring intervention options that promote defending behaviors (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). The bystander intervention model (Latané & Darley, 1970) has been applied to the behaviors of bystanders of bullying at school (Nickerson, Aloe, Livingston, & Feeley, 2014; Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). In the bystander intervention model, it is proposed that there are five sequential steps that result in bystander action. In order to take action, an individual must: (a) notice the bullying, (b) interpret the situation as an emergency that requires intervention, (c) assume responsibility for intervening, (d) know what actions to take and how to intervene, and (e) have enough self-efficacy and confidence to implement the intervention.

Focusing within the bystander intervention model, researchers have emphasized the importance of exploring factors related to students' knowledge of what to do as well as their perceived ability and willingness to respond. In the current article, perceived ability refers to the belief that one is capable of performing the defending behaviors, similar to the concept of self-efficacy