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2008

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Bullying and Aggression on the School Bus: School Bus Drivers' Observations and Suggestions

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School violence, school bus, school bus driver, bullying, aggression, school administrators.

Abstract

Every school day bus drivers are responsible for transporting children safely over many miles, yet they are rarely polled for their opinions or contributions to school safety. School bus drivers are in a unique position to inform the discussion on aggressive behavior during the school day. This exploratory study collected information from school bus drivers about student behavior on their buses and drivers’ perceptions of school administrators’ interest in their input. Thirty bus drivers from suburban and rural school districts in upstate New York participated in this action-research inquiry. Data were gathered from surveys and semi structured individual interviews. Participants provided recommendations to school personnel to decrease bullying and aggressive behavior on the buses.

Introduction

School bus drivers are often the first and the last school personnel to come in contact with students during the school day. They are in a unique position to contribute to our understanding about student violence and aggression based on their observations. Although their first charge is to drive safely, they are called on to deal with incidents of harassment, bullying, and other forms of violence during the ride. They interact not only with students but also with parents, school administrators, and teachers. Bus drivers have a distinct perspective on who and what contributes to school violence or school safety. This exploratory study investigates school bus drivers’ observations on aggressive behavior on buses, their perceptions about school administrators’ interest in their input, and the drivers’ suggestions for improving school safety and the climate on buses. While there is a great deal of interest in the topic of bullying at school, one area of research that has been largely ignored is aggression at the beginning and end of the school day—on the school bus. This is basically an under supervised part of the school day, increasing the chances of children engaging in or witnessing bullying or other violent behavior (Doll, Murphy, & Song, 2003; Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). A few studies have focused on the types and nature of school bus bullying (Allen, Young, Ashbaker, Heaton, & Parkinson, 2003; Raskauskas, 2005) but school bus drivers are rarely involved in the discussion. Some research has specifically addressed various aspects of school busing concerns (deLara, 2000, 2002; Howley, 2001; Howley & Howley, 2001; Killeen & Sipple, 2000; Thurman, 2000) and school bus culture (Jewett, 2005). However, drivers’ perceptions of their experience of bullying on the buses as well as their ideas for improvement have been neglected—an important resource since they are the only adults present on school buses. Of the approximately 24 million children who are transported each weekday in the U.S. (National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services, NASDPTS, 2005), it is not unusual for rural and some suburban school bus drivers to carry students from kindergarten through high school on the same bus. This is referred to as “double routed” (Howley, 2001), and while it may make sense economically, it subjects younger riders to the behaviors of older children. Many of these behaviors may be inappropriate for younger riders to witness (Jewett, 2005). Children who ride the bus to school may be targeted directly for harassing and abusive behavior on the bus and others are subjected as observers (Allen et al., 2003; deLara, 2002; Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Meyer & Astor, 2002). Raskauskas (2005) found that approximately [end of page 49] two incidents of bullying occurred on each bus ride and that a full bus and undersupervised conditions are prime environmental factors for bullying. Another contributing variable is that during the bus ride, children are able to see the living accommodations of one another. According to some research, this provides ample opportunity to harass and torment those who seem to have less (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000).

Bullying Prevalence, Definitions, and Impact

Bullying among students is a recalcitrant problem in U.S. schools (American Association of University Women, 2001; Devine & Lawson, 2004; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001) as well as abroad (Smith, 2003). In the U.S., prevalence varies depending on the definition and type of bullying being discussed. However, between 30% and 80% of all students in the U.S. are
typically acknowledged to be involved as bullies, victims, onlookers, or some combination (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2001; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Over 90% of students who are gay or lesbian are bullied during the school day according to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (Harris Interactive and GLSEN, 2005). Sexual harassment, in particular, appears to be rampant among students in U.S. secondary schools (AAUW, 2001; Finneran, 1998, 2002; Grube, 2003), with 80% of students reporting personal sexual harassment and half of all students admitting that they sexually harass others (AAUW, 2001). Sadly, educators and other school personnel contribute to this phenomenon through bullying students or by not intervening (AAUW, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Shakeshaft, 2004). While there is some research investigating bullying on the school bus (Allen et al., 2003; deLara, 2002 Raskauskas, 2005), more is needed to establish prevalence rates separate from other venues during the school day. A complex form of aggression, bullying needs to be taken seriously and should not be considered harmless (Astor, 1995; Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). Most schools in the U.S. have adopted the definition of bullying first proposed by Olweus (1993). This definition states that for an action to be considered bullying it must be chronic and perpetrated by one or more individuals with more power than the victim. However, other research is beginning to question this definition by asking students [end of page 50] directly for their definitions of what constitutes bullying and aggressive behavior (Fatum & Hoyle, 1996; Garbarino & deLara, 2002) and by looking more deeply into systemic variables that support aggressive behavior by children (see Astor, Benbenishty, & Marachi, 2004; Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Interestingly, while a few school districts take a systemic approach in their assessment of behavioral problems on the school bus (Hirsch, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 2004), the majority of school districts do not. Most see the problems on the school bus as standing alone, independent of the rest of the school day. The continuum of bullying and aggression during the school day “ranges from psychological intimidation (e.g., group exclusion, starting rumors, sexual gestures) to verbal abuse (name-calling) to physical abuse (hitting, kicking, inappropriate touching, sexual abuse) to life-threatening violence (threatening with a weapon, attempted homicide or suicide)” (deLara, 2006, p.335). In a recent study of three rural schools, 82% of students reported experiencing some form of bullying at least once in the three months preceding the inquiry (Dulmus, Theriot, Sowers, & Blackburn, 2004). In research conducted with high school students, more students reported being fearful of their peers on the school bus than they were during any other time of their school day (deLara, 2000; 2002). Media reports indicate that the nature and frequency of the problems on school buses are increasing (Williamson & Aratani, 2005). Some research supports that the most frequent form of bullying or inappropriate behavior witnessed by bus drivers is sexual harassment, such as middle schoolers describing sex acts to first-graders (Allen et al., 2003). Sexual harassment and sexual assaults on school buses are a concern because they are among the fastest-growing forms of school violence, according to Professor Robert Shoop at Kansas State University. He advises, “Sexual harassment is a much more serious issue in public schools than most people have been willing to admit and it’s much more likely to occur in unsupervised venues like buses or bathrooms” (Williamson & Aratani, 2005, p. B01).

Consequences for Drivers

Children are not alone in being bullied, intimidated, or worse on the school bus. Bus drivers, too, report aggressive behavior towards them (personal communication, Jim Ellis, Pupil Transportation Safety Institute, PTSI, 9-15-05). The first murder of a school bus driver took place on March 2, 2005 when Joyce Gregory was shot and killed by a student on [end of page 51] her bus in Tennessee. A 14-year-old boy was angry because the driver reported his use of smokeless tobacco and his anger led to homicide. The school bus transportation industry has begun a comprehensive investigation to see what can be done to prevent a similar event from happening in the future (School Bus Fleet, 2005).

Legal Issues

School administrators must be concerned not only for the safety of children in their charge but also for the local, state, and federal legislation that governs issues of safety. A district’s funding resources may be impacted as a result of violations. Bullying in the form of sexual harassment during the school day was addressed in the legal decision of Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education. In that case, the Supreme Court found “any school receiving Federal money can face a sex-discrimination suit for failing to intervene energetically enough when a student complains of sexual harassment by another student” (Gorney, 1999, p. 44). [See Title IX (Federal Title IX of the Education Amendments (1972), US Code, vol. 20, section 1681 (P.L. 92–318)]. The Eden Prairie, Minnesota case is typically cited as one of the first of its kind where a school district was not vigilant enough in protecting a 7-year-old from name-calling and unwanted touch on the school bus and at school (see Murdock & Kysilko, 1993, 1998). The district
was forced to pay restitution to the family and this set an important precedent for other school districts (Committee for Children, 2005). Sometimes, legislation and obligation can collide. At the same time that administrators must protect students from harassment and bullying, they must also protect the rights of privacy for students and their families under the Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA), otherwise known as the Buckley Amendment (20 USC S. 1232g, S. 1232g.). Currently, New York State has a law pertaining to student information that is an amendment to Vehicle and Traffic Law VT 375.20. It requires information to be carried on the bus at all times about students with disabilities. However, parental consent must be obtained first for each student. The law is in part the result of a long battle with the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to sanction the sharing of safety critical information about students with transporters. Prior to this amendment, the NYSED did not share the nature of the child’s disability with transportation personnel (personal communication with Jim Ellis, PTSI, 9-29-05). [end of page 52]

The Purpose

School bus rides with little direct supervision may result in inappropriate behavior by some children. Bus drivers observe and interact with students each school day, yet there is very little research investigating their opinions and experiences. This study was conducted to collect information from school bus drivers about their observations of student behavior on the buses, their perceptions of school administrators’ interest in aggression on the bus, and their suggestions for decreasing bullying or other aggressive behavior.

Method

Procedure

A cover letter describing the research and survey were distributed to school bus drivers in attendance at a workshop required by New York State on general bus safety issues. Thirty drivers from two rural and two suburban school districts completed the survey and volunteered for individual interviews. During all phases, drivers were able to consent or decline to participate freely. The two rural school districts met the criteria for “rural” used by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The study fulfilled all requirements of the university’s Internal Review Board.

Participants

A convenience sample of 30 bus drivers representing two suburban and two rural school districts was obtained for this exploratory study. The drivers’ experience ranged from 2 months on the job to more than 20 years. The range in age of the bus drivers was from 38 years to 58 years with a mean age of 49. The average years of bus experience was 7.7 with a range that included neophytes of 2 months to the very experienced of 29 years. The ratio of female to male was 3:1. All respondents were Caucasian. All but one had participated in training specifically for school bus drivers dealing with children’s illnesses or disabilities and emergency medical procedures. Seventeen drivers had received some kind of training on how to deal with disruptive, aggressive children on the bus. Drivers transported students from kindergarten through grade 12 and most drove a combination of routes (e.g., high school, middle school, and alternative [end of page 53] school or K-12 both a.m. and p.m. along with one activity bus) Approximately 5% of the students in each of the four school districts were minority students and the mean of students eligible for free or reduced lunch program was 30%. The demographics of school district size and socioeconomic status of students’ families were roughly equivalent among the four districts.

Instrumentation

This inquiry was a mixed-methods study utilizing an action-research and ecological/general systems theory framework. Action research is iterative and lends itself to discovering trends and meaning from the participants (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Action research has been gaining popularity in public school education because of its underlying philosophy of democracy and empowerment (Cranton, 1996). General systems theory informs us that the whole is always greater than the sum of its individual parts (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Consequently, for schools as systems, this means viewing various groups and subsets as contributing to the overall functioning of the system (Allen-Meares, 2004). For this study, the bus drivers, the students, and the school administrators were conceptualized as active members of the system. The study was interested in some of the
interactions among them from the bus drivers’ perspective. Quantitative data were collected through a survey focused on drivers’ observations on school bus bullying and aggression, drivers’ perceptions about school personnel on this topic, and drivers’ suggestions for improvements. Qualitative data were collected through the surveys and individual interviews. The survey was distributed to a convenience sample of school bus drivers and was intended to elicit their observations of bullying on the bus as well as their suggestions for decreasing it. Participants were asked to comment on their experiences with school administrators on the issue of school bus bullying. Bullying was not defined for the participants in order to elicit the broadest possible responses. The survey consisted of 16 Likert-type questions, 7 yes-no questions, and 11 open-ended questions. Basic demographic information was requested including number of years driving school bus and type of routes traveled. Several questions were asked to determine the drivers’ observations of bullying and other aggressive behavior. The responses were framed in a 4-point Likert-like scale (Never, Once in a while, Often, Every day). An example of a typical question was: “How often does [end of page 54] bullying occur on your bus?” Several questions were posed to determine the drivers’ perceptions of interest by school personnel in bullying on the bus. One example: “Do you feel that school personnel are interested when you want to make a report of trouble on the bus?” For the questions that explored drivers’ perceptions of school administrators’ interest in their input, a 4-point response scale was used (Not at all, Somewhat, Often, Always). The survey included open-ended questions such as “Are there students who are chronic problems on your bus? If yes, please explain.” “What do school officials do about these students?” “Why did you become a school bus driver?” Qualitative data were gathered through the open-ended questions on the surveys and in the individual interviews with the bus drivers. The interviews used a semi-structured format lasting approximately 45 minutes each. Transportation managers in two of the districts and pupil transportation industry specialists were also interviewed for this inquiry.

Analysis

Because of the size of the sample for this study, the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Because the research was iterative, data collected from the surveys and from the interviews were presented, in aggregate, to bus drivers, transportation managers, and transportation industry personnel for their feedback. Qualitative data were analyzed using action research, grounded theory, and interpretivist approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1990; Tesch, 1990; Wolcott, 1994). The survey and semi-structured format interview were pilot tested with transportation managers and transportation industry personnel prior to the start of the study. Trustworthiness of qualitative data is dependent upon credibility, authenticity, and coherence (Greene & Caracelli, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To ensure credibility, authenticity, and coherence, member checks were employed by presenting the data as they were collected to the school bus drivers as research partners. During member checks, the drivers would confirm or revise the findings and voice their own interpretations. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), subjectivity can be minimized through member checks with research partners. To further substantiate credibility, authenticity, and coherence, triangulation was practiced. As stated above, aggregated data were presented to transportation managers and transportation industry personnel, also, as a form of triangulation. [end of page 55] Two colleagues with a background in the area of education and transportation reviewed the findings and interpretations. Triangulation is another mechanism that is helpful for maintaining coherence in the qualitative data analysis. Action research and interpretivist approaches were employed in looking at the data gleaned from the individual interviews. The concepts of dealing with real-life problems, data collection for the possibility of change, and participation of stakeholders in the research process are the essence of the action research model (Cranton, 1996; Greenwood & Levin, 1998) and were central to this project. Action research is a co-generative learning process in which the “outsiders” are the researchers who facilitate the process of learning with the “insiders” or stakeholders who own the local issue or problem (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In this study, the school bus drivers were the insiders viewed as having the expert knowledge on the critical issue of aggression on the school bus. Interpretivist inquiry is exploratory and iterative allowing that there may be more than one way of viewing an issue or a problem. Questions in the semi-structured interviews were guided by knowledge that came forward during interviews with the school bus drivers. In an interpretivist inquiry, what is meaningful emerges from the data; consequently, the process is dependent on the perspective of the participants and is inductive (Schultz & Hatch, 1996). During the process of the inquiry, the school bus drivers actively engaged in the interpretation of all collected data. The aggregated data were reported to each driver at the conclusion of the individual interview. At that point, their opinions were solicited about what had been gathered from their colleagues. Following a grounded theory approach, qualitative data were classified and categorized using a constant comparative strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After transcription of the individual interviews, themes emerged and were categorized guided by both categorical analysis strategies and by analysis of content.
Results

Because of the small sample size of this exploratory study, this article reports some quantitative data but focuses primarily on the results of the qualitative data. All of the drivers reported that bullying and aggression took place on their buses and most considered these behaviors problematic. [end of page 56] According to the drivers, bullying and other forms of violence on the school bus can be put into two categories that describe the parameters of the problem:
1. Behavior of Students and Parents
2. Perceptions by Drivers of School Administrators

Behavior of Students and Parents

Types of Bullying Behavior: Drivers observed verbal bullying, psychological intimidation, physical bullying, fights, and sexual harassment. Verbal bullying was noticed by 90% (27) of the drivers and psychological intimidation by 70% (21). Eight drivers reported physical bullying and fights on their buses and 6 (20%) said they observed sexual harassment. Though most of the drivers said they heard the students call each other “faggot” or “gay” on a regular basis, the drivers did not consider this sexual harassment. They said: “The kids say that all the time; they don’t mean anything sexual by it.” The rural bus drivers, in particular, saw children who came to school every day with dirty faces and dirty clothes. Drivers observed first hand what children had to put up with from other students. These children became the most prominent and easiest targets for chronic bullying and harassment. One driver with five or six minority children on each bus said: “It’s more acceptable to be mixed-race than to be ‘a smelly kid’.” “One family I had was bullied for years; it wasn’t the kids’ fault. The parents let them get on the bus with filthy clothes, dirty faces, and their hair uncombed” (Female driver, 16 years experience, K-12 rural routes). In the example above, the bus driver, the family, and the principal eventually solved the problem together by busing the children into school before the other students so that they could bathe at school. They had no running water at home. The driver cited this as a good example of how bus drivers can provide information to school administrators and work effectively as part of the safety and violence prevention team. Frequency and Intervention: In terms of frequency, 70% (21) of drivers reported that bullying and other aggression happened once in a while. The other 30% said bullying occurred often on their buses. Drivers who said bullying occurred every day also said they intervened to stop it [end of page 57] on a daily basis. Those who said bullying occurred once in a while said they only needed to intervene once in a while to curtail aggression on their bus. Drivers believed that they were quite vigilant about student behavior. Only one quarter believed that bullying occurred on their bus that went unnoticed by them. “It’s not always bullying, sometimes it’s just meanness. I have to pull over the bus 3 times a week for low blows like kids saying to each other ‘Do you ever wash your hair?’ or ‘You smell.’ They say it and they mean it, most especially to the really poor kids, the ones from way out or from the trailer parks” (Female driver, 15 years experience, K-12 rural routes). More than half of all participants reported that, in general, bullying occurred daily on buses. As the majority of drivers said bullying occurred on their own buses only once in a while, it is possible that drivers believe their peers have more difficulty with bullying behavior than they do personally.

Chronic Concerns: Drivers were asked if any students were chronic concerns for them. There were some students who tended to be problematic on the bus as bully, victim, or both. Students classified as victims were: “the poor kids,” “the kids from trailer parks,” and “kids with disabilities (either physical or emotional).” Consequently, those with disabilities and the poorest children were at the greatest risk of all types of bullying during the bus rides, according to the drivers. (The finding that children with vulnerabilities, e.g., emotional, physical, and learning, are victimized during the school day is consistent with other research studies; see Mishna & Alaggia, 2005.) Children who were physically neglected by their families were bullied on the school bus. Students were tormented for their disheveled appearance and poorly kept clothing. Often, children with special emotional needs were both targeted for bullying and acted as bullies themselves. The drivers also indicated that the following students acted as bullies on the bus (ranked by drivers in descending order): those with emotional problems, athletes, unpopular students, special education students, and middle school students. Further, they specified that hostile verbal exchanges were the norm and that physical fights were just as likely between girls as between boys.

Strategies to Moderate Bullying and Aggression: In general, when asked what they did to interrupt or prevent violence on their buses, the bus drivers had a variety of strategies. The strategies they used were to: [end of page 58]
1. Seat children close to the driver who are susceptible to bullying or being victimized;
2. Separate children who are fighting or having difficulty and assign seats;
3. Be “aware of everything” and watch for the moods and signs of troubled kids;
4. Talk with bullies about being respectful on the bus;
5. Intervene before anything happens, and discuss the day with the kids;
6. Maintain a good relationship with each child;
7. Ask about interests and hobbies;
8. Try to engage potential bullies in positive conversations; and
9. Above all, talk to the students with respect. Basically, their specific strategies build on the inner strengths of aggressive children and distract them from disrespectful, disruptive behavior. When these interventions failed or where there was a serious or ongoing problem, the drivers reported this to their transportation managers and to school administrators. One rural driver shared her sense of exasperation trying to explain to students the relationship of respectful behavior to safety on the bus. She communicates to the students: “It isn’t ok to treat me with disrespect.” To which, she often hears: “Well, you haven’t earned my respect.” Holding Parents and Students Accountable: To decrease bullying and violent behavior on the school buses, both before and after school, drivers believed both students and their parents must be held accountable for their actions. When students didn’t treat the drivers with respect, drivers stated this impaired their ability to control the behavior of individual children on the bus, and sometimes affected overall bus climate. When students behave badly, drivers suggested school administrators should:
1. Involve parents immediately;
2. Hold parents accountable for their child’s poor behavior on the bus;
3. Take quick and decisive action;
4. Be prepared to involve the police at times;
5. Label assault when an action is assault; and
6. “Stop handling it (assault) internally.”

Bus drivers asked for specific training and workshops on how to deal with parents who do not accept that their own child has any responsibility for problem behavior on the bus. One driver said: “I would like to know how to get parents to take ownership of their child’s negative behavior and work from there” (female driver, 1 year experience, suburban route). One female driver with 19 years of rural K-12 experience said, “The teachers in our district are going to have a Stress Management Workshop Day. I think that would be a good idea for the kids, too. And the bus drivers really need it. Sometimes the kids bully me!”

Perceptions by Drivers of School Administrators

Interest of Administrators: When asked if school administrators were interested in what happened on the buses or made an effort to find out, the great majority (90%) of the drivers responded “somewhat” to these questions. Similarly, the majority of drivers (70%) believed that school personnel were only “somewhat” interested when they reported trouble on the bus. In the qualitative portion of the study, the drivers included the teachers as only somewhat interested in reports about problems on the bus. This was an area of major concern for the drivers. Drivers with less experience expected school administrators to take an active interest in what happened on the school bus. Drivers with more experience no longer seemed to have the expectation that administrators would be interested but were frustrated at what they perceived to be their inattention to problems on the school bus. Several drivers confided that they had stopped filing discipline reports due to lack of response from school administrators. This leaves significant information on certain individuals and collective problems on buses out of circulation in the system. The majority of poor marks were directed to middle school and high school administrators regarding their level of concern and follow up on bus bullying. Drivers complained that school administrators at the middle and high school levels rarely took their referrals for disciplinary action seriously. However, approximately one quarter of the drivers believed that elementary school administrators and teachers were interested in problems on the bus and that they provided good follow through about the drivers’ concerns. Principals at the lower grade levels often took immediate action on the referrals and provided needed feedback to the drivers, according to the participants.

Support from Administrators: About one third of the drivers said their school administrators were not supportive of their efforts to control bullying on their buses. They cited principals’ lack of follow up as evidence for their lack of support for the drivers’ efforts. Approximately one third of the drivers thought school principals could do a much better job of providing support to them and the last third said school administrators were supportive and reinforced their efforts to control bullying. When the bus drivers were asked if school officials did anything about students who chronically caused problems on the bus, 20% (6) answered “not at all” and 20% (6) answered “often.” The other 60% (18) answered “sometimes.” No one answered “always.” This may be indicative of a problem or it may indicate that the drivers were not aware of follow up that occurred by school officials after a problem was reported. The majority of the drivers expressed disappointment and dissatisfaction that school administrators did not
hold accountable students who were consistently problematic. “Kids are less respectful now; they don’t care what they say to you. You could say the kids bully me!” (Female driver, 21 years experience, suburban routes). To reduce chronic problems, the bus drivers were in agreement that there should be minimum standards for good behavior on the bus. Two drivers recommended that districts implement programs in Pre-K and 1st grade that teach children the difference between respectful interactions and hurtful behavior. All of the bus drivers suggested that administrators set clear expectations, at the beginning of the school year, for behavior on the school bus. Several drivers put forward the idea of having a recognizable school authority figure actually board the buses to delineate the rules. It was seen as a good way to set out appropriate conduct for the students. Further, they recommended that administrators communicate the specific follow up actions that would be taken by the school for failure to meet the behavioral standards. This was considered to constitute a show of solidarity of school administrators with the bus drivers.

One-way Communication and Legislative Prohibitions: The majority of participants agreed that communication between drivers and school administrators needed improvement. The study participants reported that there was a disconnection between the information shared among the Transportation Manager or Supervisor of the district, school personnel, and the transporters. This information-sharing was often only one way (from the drivers) and drivers said this represented a serious problem in communication. Further, drivers reported that school administrators did not provide enough, or consistent, follow up on discipline [end of page 61] referrals. An important ongoing issue for these drivers was that school districts expect bus drivers to deal with many serious health problems of the children on their routes. These problems include anaphylactic shock due to severe nut allergies or diabetes, seizures due to epilepsy and other neurological disorders, etc. At the same time, the districts did not give drivers enough information about children with special needs because of emotional or family problems. They stated that this information is necessary to provide safety to individual children and to maintain a calm atmosphere on their buses. One veteran driver offered a powerful example. He disclosed that a boy he had driven every day for 4 years got off his bus one day and didn’t show up the next at the bus stop. When this driver, with 10 years experience on rural routes, asked the other students, “Where’s Jim [not his real name] today?” The students responded, “He’s dead. He committed suicide.” The driver was shocked and his shock has been compounded by the fact that in the years that have elapsed since the incident, no one from the district has ever contacted him about this traumatic event. The driver said repeatedly during the interview, “I was the last person from the school to ever see him.” He was able to ascertain later that the boy had been experiencing a great deal of bullying in school. Though this bus driver prided himself as someone the kids could come to, the boy never gave a hint of his unhappiness. Thus, without any information from the school before the fact, there was no way for the driver to be aware or vigilant for similar situations that might have occurred on the bus. Without any information after the fact, there was no way to make sense of what happened or to consider any way to help prevent a similar tragedy in the future. Although the state education department mandates bus drivers take continuing education courses each year for such things as peanut allergies and other physical conditions, drivers were not given information on the psychological well-being of the children in their charge. Despite the fact that this is the result of federal and state legislation to protect the privacy of children and families (Family Educational Right to Privacy Act, Buckley Amendment), 20 U.S.C. Section 1232g (2005), the drivers believed it is an indication that they are held in poor regard by their school districts and are not really considered to be part of the educational team. This is a controversial issue based on boundary concerns. The drivers believed that they needed more information to do their jobs effectively for all of the children. At the same time, families have the right to [end of page 62] privacy. The drivers are called upon to be medical responders, but the definition of what constitutes medical need appeared unclear to them at times.

Supervision: Drivers described the difficulty of safely transporting the children and supervising them at the same time. Creative ways to provide more supervision on the school bus such as soliciting volunteer adult riders or implementing a “Buddy System” were suggested. A “Buddy System” pairs older, responsible students who volunteer to mentor younger ones specifically for the time on the bus. This model works well in terms of academic mentoring or tutoring and could be applied to the sociocultural environment of the bus that younger students have difficulty navigating.

School Safety Team: Only 6 of the 30 drivers said they were included in the school districts planning efforts to reduce bullying. This seemed particularly distressing to the drivers. As the first and the last school employee to see a child during the school day, the drivers believed they had an opportunity to connect with children. They cited their role as a unique way to make a contribution as part of the school team to prevent violence. Aggressive behavior can be interrupted if it is caught and dealt with early enough, according to the participants’ experience. To do so effectively means improved communication among all stakeholders, but particularly between transporters and school administrators. Teamwork, according to the drivers, consists of back up, follow up, and participating as part of an ongoing team charged with school safety planning.
Discussion

Bus drivers considered bullying on the bus a significant problem. They indicated that bullying and other forms of violence occurred on their own bus routes and that bullying and aggression were problems on their own bus routes. They concurred that bullying and aggression were problems on school buses in general. Drivers cited several categories and types of bullying or aggressive behavior on their buses. They pointed to verbal bullying and psychological intimidation as the most prevalent forms of aggression in their experience. Though sexual harassment, physical bullying, and physical fighting were cited as problematic also. In terms of frequency, they said it is important for administrators and educators to be cognizant of the fact that bullying and other forms of aggressive behavior are occurring on school bus rides much of the time. An interesting finding from the research was that drivers did not consider words such as “faggot” or “gay” that were used repeatedly by the students to be sexual harassment. Another important result was that only a small portion of the drivers were involved as members of their district’s overall school safety planning efforts. The bus drivers were able to enumerate their own strategies to curtail bullying and they put forward several suggestions for working together with school administrators. The suggestions addressed student behavior and also expressed driver concerns with the behavior of administrators that fell along a continuum from inadequate communication to ineffective or inconsistent follow-up on discipline. Responses from the drivers point to a systemic problem. Though it is the students’ behavior that is the focus for adults, the data indicate that bullying and aggression on the bus may be perpetuated inadvertently by the actions or inaction of all school stakeholders.

Limitations

The drivers in this study provided valuable information and suggestions for reducing bullying and aggression on school buses. However, this exploratory study involved a small convenience sample of bus drivers in upstate New York. Clearly, a larger sample of drivers is required before any generalizability of themes can be claimed. Due to the small number of participants in this study, results may be indicative of problems on suburban and rural school buses or merely a reflection of local school district issues. The school bus survey is in development form and because of its limited distribution, reliability and validity cannot be determined at this time.

Conclusion

This study presents the school bus drivers’ voice on the critical issue of bullying or aggressive behavior on the school bus and proposes that their perspective and input are critical to the resolution of these concerns. This small inquiry indicates that creative solutions and practices can be devised to interrupt chronic bullying and aggression on the school bus. The school bus drivers had numerous suggestions to offer and, individually, they implemented practices they considered effective. The study demonstrates that school districts need to establish policy that includes school bus drivers in ongoing discussion and planning efforts for safe schools. Typically school bus drivers are the only adults present on school buses. For effective anti-bullying programming, more research with school bus drivers, utilizing mixed-methods inquiry including surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews, is needed. Following this small exploratory study, a larger group of participants representing all levels of experience and various types of school districts is called for. Comparing and contrasting the input of drivers from rural, suburban, and urban schools would add to the literature on the phenomenon of bullying and aggression on the school bus. This study begs the questions: Are there bus routes where the issue of bullying is marginal? If so, does the driver’s experience or personality play a major role? What are the practices and programs utilized in school districts that are successfully minimizing bullying or other forms of aggression on their school buses? A large comprehensive comparative study may provide information that could be applied more generally to school bus anti-bullying practices and programs. The psychological consequences of bullying on children (e.g., anxiety and depression) are well established in the literature (Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005; Rigby, 2000; Sleet, 1995; Salmon, James, & Smith, 1998; Storch & Brassard, 2003). From this study the following questions arise: What, if any, is the effect of school bus bullying and aggression on a child’s willingness to attend school? On school absences? On a child’s ability to concentrate at school? The possible impact on school attachment and school achievement as a result of witnessing bullying episodes or being victimized directly is worthy of future research. In order to access this, subsequent research needs to investigate students’ perceptions of safety on the school bus and their experiences of bullying or aggression. School bus drivers are critical to the understanding and remediation of these potential problems. From their own understanding of children, their own creativity, and from listening to fellow drivers, the school bus drivers generated strategies they found useful in controlling some forms of problematic behaviors on the bus. Many of the strategies the school bus drivers used to interrupt or prevent bullying and aggression derived from their own resources, assets, and inner strengths as well as
those of the children, e.g., asking about interests or hobbies. Taking a strengths-based approach in future studies looking for solutions to aggressive behavior on the bus could make an important contribution to the literature on this topic. Investigating these strategies for efficacy could reveal useful data for successful program planning. The drivers in this study identified parents’ unwillingness to hold their children accountable for disrespectful behavior as a significant concern contributing to problems on the school bus. Some parents behaved defensively and hampered driver efforts to effect changes on the bus, according to the drivers. Parents have a unique perspective on school bus issues from their children’s comments and experiences. Parents should be involved as concerned stakeholders in district-wide dialogue about school bus behavior issues and need to be included in future research studies. School administrators’ lack of interest or follow through on problematic behaviors, according to the bus drivers, was a major concern. Convening collective discussion groups for school bus drivers, transportation managers, and school administrators could reduce this criticism. In attempting to do their jobs well, school bus drivers need and should be afforded full support from school administrators. All school personnel, e.g., bus drivers, transportation managers, school administrators, and teachers, can profit from more effective communication. One-way communication is not beneficial in solving systemic problems. The school bus drivers emphasized the issue of respect—adults treating children with respect and teaching children, from the first days of primary education, how to behave respectfully towards others. Drivers cited children with disabilities and children who were poor as chronic targets of bullying and aggressive behavior on the bus. School programs promoting tolerance for difference may not be extending their reach to the school bus ride or should be evaluated for this venue. Though not all school districts or administrators consider the teaching of respect to be under the purview of public education, effective programs aimed at conveying these principles may contribute to a safer bus ride for all students. Bus drivers observe interactions between and among students that perhaps no one else will see during the school day. Therefore, they are in a unique position to identify types of bullying and other aggressive or inappropriate behavior that take place during their part of the school day. They can help prevent this behavior not only on their buses but also potentially during the rest of the day through the implementation of effective communication mechanisms with school personnel. Further, as a portal into the school day, school bus drivers can be an integral part of the school safety planning effort in every school district.

References


