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Fidelity of Implementation of a State Antibullying Policy With a Focus on Protected Social Classes

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Abstract

Bullying threatens the mental and educational well-being of students. All states have enacted antibullying laws. This study surveyed 634 educators about the implementation of the North Carolina School Violence Prevention Act, which enumerated social classes protected from bullying: race, national origin, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, appearance, and disability. Results showed that local antibullying policies most often included race as a protected class and least often included sexual orientation and gender identity. More educators had been trained on bullying based on race than any other social class. Students were more often informed that bullying based on race was prohibited and were least often informed about prohibitions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Reporting, investigating, and remediating bullying was highest for racial bullying, followed by disability bullying, and was lowest for bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Keywords

Bullying; fidelity; implementation; law; policy; school

Bullying in schools is a pervasive and ongoing threat to the mental health and school success of students. A meta-analysis of 21 U.S. studies showed that on average 18% of youth were involved in bullying perpetration, 21% of youth were involved in bullying victimization, and 8% of youth were involved in both perpetration and victimization (Cook, Williams, Guerra, & Kim, 2010). In addition, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which started measuring bullying victimization in 2009, has shown that the prevalence rate has remained at 20% since that time (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016). Involvement in bullying has been linked with a number of deleterious outcomes including absenteeism, low academic performance, depression, suicidal thoughts and behavior, anxiety, psychosomatic problems, externalizing behavior problems, and violent and criminal behavior (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010; Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Kim & Leventhal, 2008; Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009;

Reijntjes et al., 2011; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Ttofi, Farrington, & Losel, 2012; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011a, 2011b). Thus, although victims tend to suffer more consequences from bullying, both bullies and victims are negatively impacted by many of the same mental and educational problems.

Given the prevalence of bullying and associated deleterious outcomes for students, schools have employed interventions to address bullying, including policy interventions. In order for an intervention to accomplish its intended effects, it must first be implemented with a high degree of fidelity (Carroll et al., 2007). In the context of policy, fidelity refers to the extent to which a policy is implemented as intended based on the directives expressed in the policy. This study reports findings from an examination of the fidelity of implementation of a state antibullying law.

Definition of policy intervention

Policy is one of several intervention approaches that have been developed to reduce bullying. Other intervention strategies have included teaching empathy and respect to students through classroom lessons, maintaining constant adult supervision throughout school settings, and collaborating with parents about aggressive student behavior. A *policy* is a system of principles created by governing bodies or public officials to achieve specific outcomes by guiding action and decision-making. In education, policies can be formal or informal. Formal policies include federal laws enacted by Congress, state laws enacted by state legislatures, state policies adopted by state boards of education, and local policies adopted by local boards of education. Informal policies include regulations established by school principals, as well as classroom rules and procedures established by teachers. Policy interventions may be advantageous because they are broad, system-level interventions that can influence student, teacher, and administrator behavior as well as school organizational practices (Hall, 2016).

Historical overview of bullying policy

In the United States, policies were first used as a strategy to reduce bullying in 1999 after the shootings at Columbine High School. This tragedy was one of the biggest news stories of 1999, and 68% of Americans reported that they followed coverage of the event closely (Pew Research Center, 1999). One of the leading explanations for the attack centered on evidence that the shooters had been bullied repeatedly for years and that the attack was part of their revenge (Garrett, 2003). The tragedy at Columbine sparked a rise in public awareness and concern about bullying, student violence, and school safety (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Muschert & Peguero, 2010). Just months after Columbine, Georgia became the first state to enact an antibullying law (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). Other states followed suit, and currently all 50 states have antibullying laws, which apply to over 98,000 K–12 public schools, with the goal of protecting over 50 million students from involvement in bullying (Snyder & Dillow, 2013; Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2015). Elements typically contained in these laws include the following: Purpose of the policy; applicability or scope of the policy; prohibition of bullying behaviors; requirement for districts to implement policies; procedures for reporting and investigating

bullying incidents; consequences for bullying perpetrators; communication of the policy to students, parents, and employees; and training for school personnel on bullying intervention (DHHS, 2015). Despite the widespread adoption of antibullying policies, research on the implementation and effectiveness of these interventions is limited.

Variability in the implementation of bullying policies

Researchers have documented considerable variability in the fidelity of implementation of policy interventions for bullying through educator reports across many states. For example, 51%–98% of educators reported that their school systems had adopted a local antibullying policy in compliance with their state's policy (Hedwall, 2006; Jordan, 2014; MacLeod, 2007; Robbins, 2011; Smith-Canty, 2010; Terry, 2010). In terms of training and notification regarding bullying policies, 46%–94% of educators reported receiving training on the policy (Bradshaw, Wassdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2013; Hedwall, 2006; Holmgreen, 2014; Robbins, 2011; Smith-Canty, 2010; Terry, 2010), and 56%–84% of educators reported that students were notified about the policy (Holmgreen, 2014; Jordan, 2014; LaRocco, Nestler-Rusack, & Freiberg, 2007; Robbins, 2011; Smith-Canty, 2010). Regarding school procedures, 60%–94% of educators indicated that their school maintained procedures for reporting bullying (Holmgreen, 2014; LaRocco et al., 2007; Robbins, 2011), 78%–92% of educators indicated that their school had procedures for investigating reports or complaints about bullying (Holmgreen, 2014; LaRocco et al., 2007; Smith-Canty, 2010), and 52%–80% of educators indicated that their school provided mental health assistance to students involved in bullying (Hedwall, 2006; Holmgreen, 2014; Smith-Canty, 2010). These findings show that implementation fidelity varies across study locations and policy components.

Protected social classes and bullying policy

Even less is known about differential implementation of bullying policies that include protection of social classes (e.g., race, national origin, sexual orientation, and disability status). A protected class is a group of people with a common characteristic who are legally protected from discrimination or harassment on the basis of that characteristic. Several federal laws enumerate protected social classes. These protections can be applied to various areas of society, including voter registration, education, employment, and housing. For example, the protected classes enumerated in the Fair Housing Act of 1968 included race, color, sex, national origin, and religion. Thus, discrimination in the sale, rental, or financing of housing based on these characteristics was prohibited across the United States. This law was needed to redress historical discrimination in housing that confined African Americans to impoverished neighborhoods with substandard schools (O'Brien, 2009).

State laws can also enumerate protected classes, and there is evidence of lower rates of discriminatory or bias-based bullying within schools with antibullying policies that enumerate protected classes. For example, six studies compared schools with an antibullying policy that explicitly prohibited bullying based on sexual orientation and schools with policies that did not specifically address bullying based on sexual orientation. Findings from these studies demonstrated that students in schools with policies prohibiting bullying based on sexual orientation reported lower rates of homophobic bullying, more school personnel

frequently intervening when homophobic comments were made in their presence, and more school personnel being effective in their responses to homophobic bullying (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Phoenix et al., 2006). Currently, 42% of state antibullying laws enumerate protected classes (DHHS, 2015).

The inclusion of protected social classes in antibullying policies is important because certain population groups are more likely to be targeted for and thereby suffer the consequences of bullying. For example, a large, national study found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents were 1.5–2 times more likely to be bullied than heterosexual adolescents (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010). Bullying is often motivated by prejudice toward disadvantaged or stigmatized groups who have little to no choice about the identity or characteristic for which they are targeted (Elamé, 2013). Research demonstrates that the following population groups experience high rates of bullying victimization: students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ; Berlan et al., 2010; Kosciw et al., 2012); students with disabilities or special health needs (Carter & Spencer, 2006; Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2010; Van Cleave & Davis, 2006); students who are overweight or obese (Gray, Kahhan, & Janicke, 2009; Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2010); students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Tippett & Wolke, 2014); students who are immigrants or the children of immigrants (Peguero, 2008, 2009; Qin, Way, & Rana, 2008); and students who are members of certain racial/ethnic groups (e.g., American Indian, multiracial, Pacific Islander, and White; CDC, 2016).

Current study

Given that certain students are more likely to be targeted for bullying based on their identity or personal characteristics, enumerated policies may ameliorate patterns of victimization in which youth who are vulnerable or members of minority groups are targeted for bullying. Nonetheless, 42% of state antibullying laws enumerate protected social classes (DHHS, 2015), and no studies have investigated if antibullying policy components have been implemented consistently across student population groups in schools with enumerated policies. This study begins to fill this gap by examining educators' perceptions about the extent to which the School Violence Prevention Act of 2009 (SVPA), a state antibullying law, was implemented as intended in North Carolina (NC). The SVPA (2009) is comprised of a number of components typically included in bullying policies and an enumerated statement of protected classes, which included race, national origin, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, academic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical appearance, and disability (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011).

Methods

Policy design

The policy evaluated in this study, the SVPA, was signed into law on June 23, 2009. In the law, bullying was defined as verbal, written, electronic, or physical actions that induced fear of harm or created a hostile environment for a student. Such behaviors were prohibited as

well as bullying behavior based on actual or perceived race, color, ancestry, national origin, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, academic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical appearance, and disability. The law applied to behavior on school property, at school-sponsored functions, and on school buses. School personnel who witnessed or possessed information about bullying were required to report incidents to the appropriate school officials. On the other hand, students and school volunteers were encouraged but not required to report bullying incidents.

The law also required that school districts adopt their own local antibullying policies by December 31, 2009 and train their employees on the policy by March 1, 2010. Each local policy had to include the provisions described above in terms of the definition of bullying, prohibition of bullying behaviors, enumeration of protected classes, scope of the policy, and bullying reporting requirements as well as other components: behavioral expectations for students and school personnel, procedures for reporting bullying incidents, identification of a school employee designated to investigate reports of bullying, procedures for investigating reports, prohibition of reprisal or retaliation against individuals who reported bullying incidents, consequences and appropriate remedial actions for students who committed acts of bullying, plans to publicize and disseminate the local policy, inclusion of the local policy in student and employee handbooks, and inclusion of the local policy in employee training.

The quality of the content of policies shapes their capacity to effectively reduce bullying. For example, a policy may require that all school personnel receive training on bullying intervention, and research shows that antibullying training is beneficial (Howard, Horne, & Jolliff, 2001; Lund, Blake, Ewing, & Banks, 2012; O'Brennan, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2014). Thus, a policy that requires annual employee training would have superior content than a policy without this requirement, given the evidence. Using a content analysis approach, two evaluations of the SVPA were completed: One by investigators through the U.S. Department of Education and another by a multidisciplinary university research team. First, the SVPA contains 13 out of 16 (81%) of key policy components identified by the U.S. Department of Education in a national examination of state antibullying policies (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). Second, a study found that the SVPA included 67% of protective factors identified in the literature as associated with reduced bullying behaviors, risk of victimization, or consequences from bullying (e.g., definition of bullying that is comprehensive and includes different forms of bullying behaviors, requirement that districts develop local policies with involvement from community stakeholders, dialogue with parents of affected students, and periodic assessment of bullying; Weaver, Brown, Weddle, & Aalsma, 2013). The protective factor score for the SVPA was in the top 15% of state policy scores. These findings suggest that the content of the SVPA is good in that a majority of its components can potentially reduce or prevent school bullying.

Study design

This study was a cross-sectional survey of educators administered in November and December 2010, a year after school districts were required to develop and implement local antibullying policies. Because school-level educators are the primary implementers of education policy, we surveyed members of the NC Association of Educators, a statewide

professional association of educators and school employees in NC. The survey was announced in an e-mail message sent through the association's membership listserv. The e-mail invitation contained a brief description of the survey, stating that it was focused on bullying; was optional and anonymous; and could be completed in 15 min. The e-mail also contained a link to the welcome and informed consent page of the online survey. Participants initially completed several demographic questions and were asked to identify the school and district in which they worked, followed by items concerning the implementation of the SVPA. No material incentives were used to solicit participation. This study received institutional review board approval from the authors' university, and ethical standards were followed in the conduct of this study.

Participants

Of the approximately 5,000 educators who were invited to participate, 664 responded to the survey. However, some participants did not fully complete the survey. Thirty participants were excluded because they did not complete the survey beyond the demographic items or because they worked in private schools, to which the SVPA does not apply. Thus, a total of 634 participants were included for data analysis, which was 13% of the educators invited to participate. Participants included 634 educators: 78% teachers, 10% education support professionals, 4% school administrators, 4% school counselors, 3% school social workers, and 1% school nurses. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the sample was 79% White/Caucasian, 17% Black/African American, 2% Hispanic/Latino/Latina, 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 3% multiracial/multiethnic. The sample included 84% females and 16% males. These sample demographics are closely aligned with statewide representative demographic data of NC K–12 public school teachers, which shows that 81% of teachers were White, 16% were Black, 1% were Hispanic/Latino/Latina, 1% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 1% were Asian, 80% were female, and 20% were male (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

The grade levels at the schools where participants worked varied with 40% in elementary schools, 23% in middle schools, 30% in high schools, 3% in elementary–middle schools, 3% in middle–high schools, and 1% in K–12 schools. In terms of the geographic area of participants' schools, 62% were in small town or rural areas, 23% were in urban areas, and 15% were in suburban areas. These figures are similar to those among all NC K–12 public schools: 51% were elementary schools, 18% were middle schools, 21% were high schools, 5% were elementary–middle schools, 3% were middle–high schools, and 2% were K–12 schools (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2012). And in terms of geographic area, 63% were in small town or rural areas, 25% were in urban areas, and 12% were in suburban areas. Respondents were employed in 93 (81%) of the 115 school districts in NC.

Survey measure

The survey was designed by four people who were involved in advocating for the passage of the SVPA (i.e., one educator, one parent, and two researchers). The survey items were constructed based on the content of the SVPA and assessed the implementation fidelity of nine policy components. As outlined next, three items focused on general training on the law and knowledge about bullying reporting procedures, and six items focused on

implementation fidelity across the eight protected social classes (i.e., race, national origin, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical appearance, and disability status). These social classes were enumerated in the SVPA and represent groups who are often targeted for bullying.

Employee training on the policy—Participants were asked whether or not they had received training on the SVPA, with response options of *yes* and *no*.

Employee knowledge of bullying procedures—Participants were asked how often they knew whom to report incidents of bullying to at their school, with response options of *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *most times*, and *always*.

Student knowledge of bullying procedures—Participants were asked how often students at their school knew whom to report incidents of bullying to, with response options of *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *most times*, and *always*.

Inclusion of protected classes in the policy—Participants were asked to identify which social classes were explicitly protected from bullying in their school's local policy. Participants could select *I don't know* for the item or select *yes* or *no* beside each of eight social classes. The sequential order of the eight social classes in the survey items mirrors the order in which they were listed in the SVPA policy document.

Employee training about protected classes—Participants were asked if they had received training about bullying based on the eight social classes, and participants could select *I don't know* for the item or select *yes* or *no* beside each of the eight social classes.

Student knowledge of protected classes—Participants were asked if students in their schools had been informed that bullying was prohibited based on certain social classes. Participants could select *I don't know* for the item or select *yes* or *no* beside each of the eight social classes.

Employee reporting of bullying incidents—Participants were asked how often employees at their school reported witnessed bullying incidents based on the eight social classes to the designated school official. Response options included *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *most times*, and *always*.

Investigation of reports of bullying—Participants were asked how often school officials investigated reports of bullying based on the eight social classes. Response options included *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *most times*, and *always*.

Remedial action for bullying perpetrators—Participants were asked how often appropriate remedial action was given to students who perpetrated bullying based on the eight social classes. Response options included *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *most times*, and *always*.

Results

The data were analyzed using SPSS (version 21). Descriptive statistics were calculated to examine the extent of implementation of the various components of the SVPA 1 year after its passage. Results show that 37% of educators had received training on the SVPA and 63% had not. When asked how often they knew whom to report incidents of bullying to, 1% of educators indicated never, 1% indicated rarely, 7% indicated sometimes, 16% indicated most times, and 75% indicated always. When asked how often students knew whom to report incidents of bullying to, 0% of educators indicated never, 4% indicated rarely, 19% indicated sometimes, 37% indicated most times, and 40% indicated always.

Table 1 shows response percentages for the inclusion of protected social classes in educators' local policies, training received by educators about social classes protected from bullying, and informing students about social classes protected from bullying. A series of Cochran's Q tests were used to detect significant differences in implementation among the eight protected social classes using the proportion of yes versus no responses, and results showed that there were significant differences across the social classes in terms of inclusion in the local policy, $\chi^2(7, 462) = 148.45, p < .001$; training received by educators, $\chi^2(7, 498) = 52.12, p < .001$; and informing students, $\chi^2(7, 445) = 198.42, p < .001$.

Post-hoc analyses were performed using a series of McNemar symmetry chi-square tests with Bonferroni adjustment to examine differences between responses for all possible combinations of social class pairs. As shown in Table 3, race was most likely to be included in local antibullying policies. After race, gender was the class most likely to be included in local bullying policies, followed by national origin and disability class. Sexual orientation and gender identity were the least likely to be included. In terms of employee training, race was the only social class that was significantly higher than all other classes, which suggests that aside from race, educators have not received substantial training on addressing bullying based on national origin, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical appearance, and disability. Students were most likely to have been informed that bullying based on race was prohibited, followed by national origin, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability status. Students were least likely to have been informed that bullying was prohibited based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Table 2 shows the mean responses for three policy implementation actions by school personnel: reporting bullying incidents, investigating reports of bullying, and administering appropriate remedial consequences for bullying perpetrators. A series of one-way repeated measures ANOVAs were used to compare mean responses across the eight protected social classes. Out of the 24 variables, 16 were normally distributed and 8 were skewed; however, ANOVA is robust to deviations from normality. Mauchly's test of sphericity examined the sphericity assumption for one-way repeated measures ANOVA and showed significant results, thus, the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied in each ANOVA to correct for the violation of this assumption. The ANOVA results showed that there were statistically significant differences across social classes in personnel reporting of bullying incidents, $F(3.84, 1893.08) = 14.35, p < .001$; investigating reports of bullying, $F(4.28, 2068.12) = 12.90, p < .001$; and taking remedial action with bullies, $F(3.92, 1940.48) = 12.10, p < .001$.

Bonferroni post hoc pairwise comparisons were used to identify significant differences in mean responses among the social classes; these results are shown in Table 3. In terms of reporting bullying, race-based incidents were significantly more often reported by educators than all other social classes except disability. Bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity were least reported to officials. In terms of the investigation of reports of bullying, race-based incidents were more frequently investigated than all other social classes except national origin and disability. Except for socioeconomic status, bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity were significantly less often investigated compared to all other classes. In terms of remedial action with students who bullied others, action was significantly more often taken when bullying was based on race than all other social classes except disability. In addition, remedial action was significantly more often taken when bullying was based on national origin versus sexual orientation and gender identity, and when bullying was based on disability status versus socioeconomic status, physical appearance, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the extent to which the SVPA was implemented as intended in schools, with a particular focus on implementation actions related to the eight protected social classes. Overall, the results suggest that the SVPA was not implemented with a high degree of fidelity in schools 1 year following its enactment.

Training on the policy

Most educators had not received training on the SVPA. Educators at the school level (i.e., principals, assistant principals, teachers, education support professionals, psychologists, counselors, social workers, and nurses) are tasked with implementing education policy on a daily basis with students and their colleagues; thus, training these educators is a first and requisite step in the implementation of a new policy (Fowler, 2013). Training helps guarantee that educators understand the requirements of a new policy and can act accordingly. In a national study, receiving training on implementing a bullying policy was positively associated with school staff comfort intervening in discriminatory bullying (O'Brennan et al., 2014). Training on the SVPA may have fallen short because funds were not allocated for training by the state. The creation of a law is often a completely separate process than the allocation of funds to implement a law.

Knowledge of bullying reporting procedures

In addition, one-quarter of educators did not always know whom to report bullying incidents to in their schools. This lack of knowledge might have resulted from a lack of coordination and/or communication at the school in terms of clearly designating the person(s) responsible for receiving bullying reports. Principals or assistant principals are typically responsible for receiving and investigating reports of bullying; however, school psychologists, counselors, and social workers are sometimes the designated employees (LaRocco et al., 2007; Smith-Canty, 2010). Designated employees may need additional training on proper follow-up with those involved in bullying.

Most educators reported that students did not always know whom to report bullying incidents to in their schools. Although the SVPA required local bullying policies to be included in student handbooks, the findings suggest that additional required routes of communication and dissemination are needed to adequately reach students. Other methods that have been used to publicize bullying policies include teachers reviewing the policy with students during classroom orientations at the beginning of the school year, posting signs about the policy around the school, reviewing the policy at a school-wide assembly, posting the policy on school and district websites, sending notices to parents, and discussing the policy at PTO/PTA meetings (Holmgreen, 2014; LaRocco et al., 2007; Robbins, 2011; Smith-Canty, 2010).

Implementation related to protected social classes

The findings also suggest that the SVPA is not being implemented consistently across the protected social classes. Results showed inconsistent inclusion of protected classes in local antibullying policies despite the legal mandate to include all eight social classes. These results are somewhat similar to the inclusion of social classes in state antibullying laws. Of the 21 state antibullying laws that enumerate protected classes, 100% include race, 100% include sex or gender, 95% include disability, 95% include national origin, 90% include sexual orientation, 67% include gender identity or expression, 38% include socioeconomic status, and 38% include physical appearance (DHHS, 2015). Policies that enumerate protections based on social characteristics are necessary to reduce discriminatory bullying. However, the mere adoption of a policy with enumerated protections is not sufficient. Policies must be created with evidence-based components, supported with resources, implemented consistently and faithfully, paired with evidence-based intervention programs and practices, and administered with sufficient oversight by officials.

Results also showed that most educators had not received training on addressing bullying motivated by prejudice. Among educators who had received training on discriminatory bullying, significantly more educators had been trained on bullying based on race than any other social class. In a national study, the area in which teachers indicated that they were most in need of additional training on intervening in prejudicial bullying was when it was based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (Bradshaw et al., 2013).

In addition, some educators reported that their students were not informed about the prohibition of bullying based on any one of the protected classes. Students were most likely to have been informed that bullying based on race was forbidden, and students were least likely to have been informed that bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity were forbidden. Similarly, implementation of reporting, investigating, and remediating bullying behavior was highest for bullying based on race, followed by bullying based on disability. Bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity showed far lower rates of implementation fidelity in these domains.

These differences in implementation may reflect a wider concern about racism, particularly in the form of racial harassment, in K–12 education and a lower level of concern with discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Of searches in the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Education Full Text databases,

over 2,000 records for the term “racism” were returned but less than 400 records were returned for the terms “heterosexism” or “homophobia.” Although educational disparities persist for many social groups, there may be broader levels of consensus about the importance of some forms of discrimination and corrective actions needed compared to others. In addition, educators may have been more inclined to address bullying based on race and disability due to numerous federal laws that apply to schools and mandate protections based on race and disability (e.g., Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973). Aside from the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 and Executive Order No. 13672 regarding employment in the federal workforce, sexual orientation and gender identity are not included as protected classes in any federal legislation.

In addition, lower levels of policy implementation actions concerning sexual orientation and gender identity may have been due to negative attitudes among educators toward LGBTQ people. In a national study, 51% of LGBTQ students reported that they had heard homophobic remarks from school personnel, and 55% of LGBTQ students reported that they had heard negative remarks about gender expression from school personnel, which may be particularly offensive to transgender students (Kosciw et al., 2014). Also, 42% of students reported that educators did not intervene when homophobic remarks were made in their presence, and 59% of students reported that educators did not intervene when negative remarks about gender expression were made in their presence. These findings suggest that many educators may hold anti-LGBTQ attitudes and do not know how to or do not care to intervene in instances of anti-LGBTQ harassment.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the use of convenience sampling; thus, caution should be taken when generalizing these results. Another possible limitation was the low response rate, which may entail nonresponse bias. However, a low response rate does not necessarily lead to nonresponse error, and there are examples of surveys with lower response rates that were as accurate as or more accurate than those with higher response rates (Keeter, Kennedy, Dimock, Best, & Craighill, 2006; Krosnick, 1999). The representativeness of a sample is more important than the response rate (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000), and the demographics of participants in this study were closely aligned with those among the population of NC K–12 public school teachers. Another potential limitation was that there may have been selection bias because educators who took the survey may have been more interested in bullying, and therefore, may have been overly critical in their assessment of the implementation of the SVPA, a law designed to reduce bullying that was supported by the professional association, which we sampled from. Another limitation related to measurement issues. Questions about investigating incidents of bullying and carrying out appropriate remedial actions with students is often spearheaded by school administrators; however, our sample was primarily teachers who may not have had accurate knowledge about these actions. Similarly, one survey question asked educators about students’ knowledge of protected classes in the local policy; however, we did not have student participants. Finally, there may have been social desirability bias because educators were

reporting on issues related to their colleagues, their workplaces, and their own behaviors regarding bullying among their students.

Future research

In future studies, researchers should collaborate with state departments of education or public instruction in surveying educators about bullying and state-led intervention efforts. Such collaborations could provide larger and more representative samples. In addition to school personnel, students should be included as participants to gain their understanding of policy implementation actions within schools. Finally, research on bullying policy implementation should be longitudinal as implementation is an ongoing and evolving process, and data on implementation should be analyzed with outcome data on rates of bullying to ascertain the relationship between fidelity of policy implementation and the primary outcome of bullying in schools.

Implications for policy and practice

Together, findings from this study and the associated empirical literature have implications for policy and practice related to bullying. First, statewide bullying policies should enumerate protections for a range of social classes, especially those who are frequently targeted for harassment. According to Justice Anthony Kennedy in *Romer v. Evans* (1996), “enumeration is the essential device used to make the duty not to discriminate concrete and to provide guidance for those who must comply.” Moreover, research shows that enumerated antibullying policies are connected with lower rates of victimization among vulnerable students and better intervention by school personnel (Hall, 2016). Nonetheless, the inclusion of enumerated language in a policy alone is insufficient to protect marginalized groups from bullying—consistent implementation is needed. Second, districts should be held accountable for adopting local antibullying policies in compliance with state laws. In the hierarchy of education policy, district policies should align with state law (Mead, 2009). Approximately 43% of state antibullying laws require districts to submit their local policies for review by the state (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). Third, legislators should allocate funds to facilitate policy implementation. Funds could be used to provide adequate training to school personnel; develop materials to use for policy communication and dissemination; and appoint personnel in state departments of education, district offices, and schools who are responsible for coordinating antibullying efforts. Fourth, educators must receive training about bullying policy requirements and how to intervene in discriminatory bullying against any social group, even those whom educators may hold negative attitudes toward (e.g., LGBTQ students, undocumented immigrants, and obese students). All students deserve to be protected and feel safe at school.

Finally, school bullying policies should consist of specific language about requirements, such as the amount and format of training about bullying required by school personnel, multiple ways schools should publicize policies, time frames in which personnel must report and investigate bullying incidents, and the use of remedial actions with students involved in bullying (e.g., serious one-on-one talks, referral to the principal’s office, referral to the intervention room, loss of privileges, detention, referral for mental health services, and functional behavioral assessments and behavioral intervention plans). Simply passing a law

will not ensure that it will be put into action as intended. Policymakers and school officials must provide sufficient resources and guidance to promote successful policy implementation and protect students from bullying.

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Fidelity of implementation of bullying policy components regarding protected social classes (percentages).

Table 1

Item stem	Race		National origin		Gender		Socio-economic status		Sexual orientation		Gender identity		Physical appearance		Disability status		I don't know
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
My school's policy prohibits bullying based on someone's:	78.0	2.4	74.2	6.3	75.6	4.9	72.6	7.8	70.6	9.9	66.4	14.1	72.5	8.0	73.7	6.8	19.5
I have received training about bullying regarding:	39.2	47.6	32.8	54.0	35.4	51.4	35.2	51.6	34.1	52.6	32.4	54.4	34.5	52.3	33.3	53.5	13.2
Students are informed that bullying is prohibited based on:	68.6	9.1	63.9	13.8	64.0	13.7	62.0	15.7	56.7	20.9	53.9	23.7	64.2	13.4	63.2	14.5	22.3

Mean values for bullying policy implementation actions by school personnel across protected social classes (standard deviations in parentheses).

Table 2

Item stem	Race	National origin	Gender	Socio-economic status	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Physical appearance	Disability status
School personnel report incidents of bullying based on:	4.21 (0.87)	4.15 (0.93)	4.14 (0.92)	4.12 (0.95)	4.08 (1.02)	4.06 (1.05)	4.12 (0.96)	4.20 (0.89)
School personnel investigate reports or complaints of bullying based on:	4.33 (0.97)	4.29 (1.01)	4.26 (1.05)	4.24 (1.05)	4.19 (1.14)	4.17 (1.16)	4.25 (1.03)	4.31 (1.00)
Appropriate remedial action is given to students who bully others based on:	3.95 (1.05)	3.91 (1.09)	3.89 (1.10)	3.87 (1.10)	3.85 (1.17)	3.84 (1.17)	3.87 (1.11)	3.94 (1.10)

Note. Response options were coded as 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *most times*, and 5 = *always*.

Table 3

Pairwise comparisons of social classes across bullying policy implementation components.

Comparison ^a	Included in local policy ^b	Employees were trained ^b	Students were informed ^b	Employees reported incidents ^c	Incidents were investigated ^c	Remedial action taken ^c
Race versus national origin	*	*	*	*		*
Race versus gender	*	*	*	*	*	*
Race versus socioeconomic status	*	*	*	*	*	*
Race versus sexual orientation	*	*	*	*	*	*
Race versus gender identity	*	*	*	*	*	*
Race versus physical appearance	*	*	*	*	*	*
Race versus disability	*	*	*			
National origin versus gender						
National origin versus socioeconomic status						
National origin versus sexual orientation	*		*	*	*	*
National origin versus gender identity	*		*	*	*	*
National origin versus physical appearance						
National origin versus disability						
Gender versus socioeconomic status	*					
Gender versus sexual orientation	*		*	*	*	
Gender versus gender identity	*		*	*	*	
Gender versus physical appearance	*					
Gender versus disability						
Socioeconomic status versus sexual orientation			*			
Socioeconomic status versus gender identity	*		*			
Socioeconomic status versus physical appearance						
Sexual orientation versus gender identity	*		*			
Physical appearance versus sexual orientation			*			
Physical appearance versus gender identity	*		*		*	
Disability versus socioeconomic status					*	*

Comparison ^a	Included in local policy ^b	Employees were trained ^b	Students were informed ^b	Employees reported incidents ^c	Incidents were investigated ^c	Remedial action taken ^c
Disability versus sexual orientation	*		*	*	*	*
Disability versus gender identity	*		*	*	*	*
Disability versus physical appearance				*		*

^aThe first social status in each pair had the higher level of implementation in terms of mean value or proportion of *yes* versus *no* responses when significant differences were detected.

^bBased on post hoc McNemar symmetry chi-square tests with Bonferroni adjustment.

^cBased on Bonferroni post hoc comparisons following one-way repeated measures ANOVAs.

* $p < .05$.