Multi-Dimensional Model for Explaining the Relation between Victimization and Sense of Safety at School

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Ph.D. Thesis

Submitted to the Senate of Bar-Ilan University

Ramat-Gan, Israel   October, 2017

Abstract

One of the adverse implications of violence at school is its harm to students' sense of safety (Barrett, Jennings & Lynch, 2012). This occurrence leads to both lack of adjustment and damage to emotional, academic and social development (Hughes, Gaines & Pryor, 2015). The present study engages in three indicators of a sense of safety at school: perception of risk, fear and behavior of avoidance as a reaction to violence at school, while emphasizing the school context and the educational climate. The challenge model of the resilience theory served as the theoretical framework of the study .

The empirical literature which deals with victimization of violence at school distinguishes between direct victimization which students experience in a direct way and indirect victimization which students have observed or heard. Another distinction is between types of violence: verbal, social and physical and victimization of severe violence which encompasses sexual harassment and sexual abuse, use of weapons and more. Yet a further differentiation is between types of victimization: repeated victimization whereby students become victims of the same type of violence time after time and multiple victimization, namely students are victims of different types of violence. The present study explores for the first time the entirety of the victimization types indicated above in order to investigate the sense of safety (in the three indices) of students at school .

A review of the scientific literature illustrates, as mentioned, that sense of safety is not one-dimensional and is measured in three different areas: emotional, cognitive and behavioral. Accordingly, the reference to the sense of safety in the present study is manifested by these three components. Thus, the study examines the students' fear, perceived risk, and avoidance of school or areas thereof as a result of exposure to violence .

It is noteworthy that previous studies have indicated a complex relation between exposure to violence and harm to the sense of safety. The implications for different students are not uniform and comprehension of violence requires reference to the victimization features of both the students and the school. The overarching hypothesis of the present study is that the relation between victimization and a sense of safety can be understood with reference to the school context in general and the

school climate in particular. Based on findings discussed in the empirical literature (Gregory et al., 2010), the present study distinguishes between the social-personal aspects of the school climate (e.g., relationships between the students, among the students themselves and among the teachers as well as an atmosphere of respect, care and sharing) and the structural aspects (e.g. rules definition and enforcement as well as physical aspects associated with resources, cleanliness and the appearance of the school) .

The hypothesis of the present study was that a positive school climate might constitute a resilience factor when facing violence in school. In this respect, one of the models presented by the empirical literature for explaining the resilience processes is the challenge model (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). This model advocates that minimal exposure to risk situations is necessary for the development of resilience.. Hence, exposure to risk to certain degree is more beneficial than non-exposure at all, as opposed to a too extensive exposure which undermines the resilience. Consequently, from a theoretical point of view, the present study focuses on the examination of the challenge model for the purpose of explaining the relation between exposure to violence at school and a sense of safety. Moreover, the school climate was put at the center of the study, investigating a model according to which an educational climate is a moderating variable. Consequently, in schools with a positive climate, the contribution of violence to the damaged sense of safety is lower than in schools with a negative climate .

To be more specific, three main objectives underlie the present study:

Propose a model by means of which one can explain the students' sense of safety and to examine the relation between exposure to violence in a direct and indirect way; various types of victimization (verbal, physical and social); various patterns of victimization (repeated victimization versus multiple victimization) and cognitive, emotional and behavioral indices of a sense of safety.

Examine the contribution of the school context to the explanation of the relation between victimization and a sense of safety as well as the hypothesis whereby the school climate has a positive moderating effect on the relation between victimization and a sense of safety .

Corroborate the compliance of the challenge model of the resilience theory to the explanation of the students' sense of safety as a result of violence. That is, on moderate levels of victimization, a positive climate plays a more crucial role than in situations of high or low victimization level .

The research method was based on the sampling of 1213 students of the 6th, 8th and 10th grade learning in 42 classes in 42 schools at the Ministry of education's central Haifa and Tel Aviv districts. These students were asked to respond to a series of structured questionnaires (e.g. exposure to direct and indirect violence, sense of safety and school climate). These questionnaires were used in previous studies and were found valid and reliable. The data analysis was based HLM as school climate was found to be nested.

The research findings corroborate the challenge model of the resilience theory for the explanation of the relations between exposure to violence and a sense of safety. Moreover, putting the school context in general and the school climate in particular at the focus of the relation, allows to better understand the contribution of the school context to the effect of exposure to violence on students' sense of safety. The research findings illustrate that in schools with a positive climate, the higher the rate of direct victimization, the lower the extent of fear of victimization. Conversely, in schools with a negative climate, the higher the rate of direct victimization, the greater the extent of fear of victimization. This finding indicates a resilient factor of the school climate. Furthermore, the findings distinguished between emotional reactions (fear), cognitive perceptions (risk perception) and behavioral aspects (avoidance behavior). The findings also show that direct violence contributes more than indirect violence to the explanation of the sense of safety; the rate of victimization of violence (repeated victimization pattern) contributes more than the multiple victimization pattern (various violence types) to the explanation of the sense of safety; and verbal bullying have a considerable impact on undermining the sense of safety and it is more extensive than in relation to verbal violence. Findings related to age and gender are also discussed.

All the research findings put together create a picture which reflects the complexity of the relation between exposure to violence and a sense of safety in many

and varied aspects. They offer for the first time a model which explains the non-linear relation between exposure to violence at school and a sense of safety.