
Original Research Article

The Code of the School: Investigating the Age at Which the "Code" Begins to Influence School Violence Among Students

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Abstract: Exclusionary disciplinary practices are increasingly implemented in schools, frequently without addressing the underlying causes of student violence. The concept of the “code of the school” describes how certain students transform school suspension into a protective strategy to gain respect and avoid victimization. This study features qualitative interviews from four Illinois communities: Normal, Bloomington, Peoria, and Chicago. The research conceptualizes student violence as a reaction to insufficient school safety measures, which may leave students feeling vulnerable and responsible for their own security. The findings indicate that fifth grade represents a critical turning point, as some students begin to use violence defensively. Additionally, the results identify the school bus as a prevalent setting for bullying and suggest that the social dynamics associated with the “code of the school” may also be present in international school contexts.

Keywords: Age, Code of the School, School Violence, Students

Introduction

School violence refers to aggressive behaviors, including physical, verbal, and psychological acts, occurring in school settings that cause harm to students or interfere with educational processes (UNESCO, 2019). Research consistently shows that school violence and bullying remain serious concerns across countries and age groups (UNESCO, 2019; Modecki et al., 2014). Many scholars have further indicated that peer relationships and the social climate of schools, including peer pressure, group norms, and interactions between victims and perpetrators, play an important role in shaping students’ involvement in aggressive and violent behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Swearer et al., 2010). While schools were once seen as havens for students, data on suspension and expulsion rates show

that students are being sent to jail or prison due to minor offenses (Smith, 2015; Bell et al., 2022).

The Code of the School is an informal social norm that regulates violence in public schools and encourages students to use violence to protect themselves from being bullied by other students (Bell, 2019). Students' keen awareness of their vulnerability due to the shortcomings of existing safety measure compels students to adopt the code. Nevertheless, beyond formal rules, students follow an informal "school code" made up of peer expectations about respect, status, retaliation, and self-defense. These unwritten rules can encourage or prevent violent behavior, depending on what the peer group values (Anderson, 1999; Gottfredson, 2001; Jones, 2009). Moral disengagement and students' motivation to defend victims are key mechanisms shaping bystander behavior in bullying situations (Thornberg et al., 2023). Though past research has documented the age at which students use violence as a defense mechanism, most of these studies have been done in the United States, focusing on white Americans, with very limited explicit attention to race or cultural variation such as African American (Dodge, 1980; Olweus, 1993; Crick & Dodge, 1994). In the absence of reliable safety measures, students may perceive their environment as unsafe and constantly assess the risk of being bullied or harmed. This sense of vulnerability can push them to adopt defensive or aggressive behaviours for self-protection rather than seeking help from school authorities. As a result, weak or inconsistent safety systems can increase fear and contribute to higher levels of conflict and violence among students (Astor et al., 2002; Cornell & Mayer, 2010). To address this gap, the study seeks to examine at what age do students begin to use violence as a self-defense mechanism in school and also how do parents influence a child's decision to use violence. Findings from this research will provide insights into the developmental and familial factors that contribute to school violence, thereby informing policies and interventions that can reduce harmful behaviors and promote safer learning environments.

Literature Review

The historical context of school violence

Early scholarly discourse did not frame violent behaviors within schools as a distinct problem but instead subsumed them under broader concerns of juvenile delinquency and youth deviance (Cohen, 1972; Unnever, Colvin, & Cullen, 2004). Prior to the 1960s, behaviors such as fighting, vandalism, and truancy within schools were largely interpreted as manifestations of juvenile delinquency rather than institutional or systemic problems (Cohen, 2011). Schools were perceived as mechanisms for social order, and violence was viewed as a deviation from normative behavior caused by poor discipline or weak moral upbringing. The 1960s and 1970s marked a critical turning point as sociological and psychological research began to examine violence within schools more systematically. During this period schools began to be viewed as social systems rather than mere instructional systems, with increasing recognition that such practices could improve or mitigate violent behaviors. Recent literature also incorporates the concept of structural violence, originally introduced by Galtung (1969), to explain systemic inequalities such as

poverty, discrimination, and exclusionary disciplinary practices that normalize harm within schools. Studies have demonstrated that harsh disciplinary environments and inequitable policies contribute to cycles of violence and reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2011). Historically, the study of school violence has evolved from moralistic and individualistic explanations to multidimensional, context-sensitive frameworks. Current scholarship recognizes school violence as a socially embedded phenomenon influenced by power relations, institutional practices, and broader cultural forces (Hong & Espelage, 2012).

Zero-tolerance Policies in Schools

Zero-tolerance policies refer to rules that mandate automatic and severe consequences such as suspension, expulsion, or referral to law enforcement for defined behaviors, without allowing discretion based on age, motivation, or situational factors (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Zero-tolerance policies in schools have been widely implemented to address student misbehavior, yet empirical evidence supporting their effectiveness is limited among African American students. Zero-tolerance policies systematically and disproportionately harm African American students through racially biased disciplinary practices (Bell et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). For instance, Bell et al. (2015) reported that in the Chicago Public School system, African American boys represented 23% of the student population, but 44% went on suspensions and 61% on expulsions. These policies effectively criminalize student behavior, creating an inhospitable school environment that pushes students toward the school-to-prison pipeline (Lightfoot et al., 2021). One major factor contributing to this is the frequent use of zero-tolerance policies in public schools. Exclusionary practices such as suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests remove students from the learning environment, disrupt academic engagement, and increase exposure to law enforcement, which may contribute to long-term involvement in the justice system (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019). The evidence suggests zero-tolerance policies are fundamentally anti-Black, systematically undermining educational opportunities for African American students. Longitudinal research further demonstrates that early exposure to harsh disciplinary practices is associated with increased aggression over time, which raises concerns that zero-tolerance may inadvertently reinforce aggressive response as adaptive or necessary for self-protection (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008).

Research Questions and Objectives

The research questions for the study are: 1) At what age do students begin to use violence as a self-defense mechanism in school? 2) At what age do students first experience bullying in school 3) How do parents influence a child's decision to use violence?

Method

This study used qualitative phenomenological qualitative study, specifically, a semi-structured interview approach was used. The study recruited participants through in-person recruitment. Face-to-face recruitment was used because the researcher was

unfamiliar with the participants, allowing eligible individuals to be identified and recruited immediately upon meeting the study criteria (Mason, 2017). The study also used snowball sampling. Generally, each participant received a recruitment flyer so they could distribute it to others interested in the study. The recruitment flyer contained the following: A brief description of the study, the criteria for participants and Information that each participant would receive a \$25 gift card upon completion of the research. Each student participant's parents and each parent participant were specifically asked if their child had been suspended for fighting. Interviews were conducted with ten African American elementary and middle school students and ten African American parents for twenty participants. This study included an equal number of male and female participants. Six students were recruited from a Chicago public school, while the remaining four were recruited from Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. The student claimed that they were expelled for defending themselves. Six mothers and four fathers were present among the parents. The three parent participants were recruited from Chicago, and the seven parent participants were recruited from Bloomington-Normal. The criterion for sampling did not include children to match with their parents for the interview. In the case where both child and parents wanted to participate in the study, both were interviewed separately. In the case where both parents were interested in the study, both were interviewed separately. The study sought ethical clearance from IRB-Illinois State University; IRB-2022-488.

Participants

A total of 10 students and 10 parents participated in the study, with pseudonyms used to maintain their confidentiality. Among the students, five were females and five were males, representing elementary, middle, and high school. With the majority of students attending middle school (i.e., six students). The sample included students with both lower suspension histories (1–2 suspensions) and higher suspension histories (3–5 suspensions), providing a range of experiences relevant to the study of school disciplinary policies and student behavior. Geographically, students were from Chicago, Bloomington, and Normal. On the other hand, the parent participants consisted of 7 females and 3 males who had most of their children in middle school, with few in elementary school. The children of these parents have experienced 1 to 4 suspensions. Parents were geographically located in Chicago, Bloomington, Peoria, and Normal reflecting a suburban perspective.

Name of students (Pseudonym)	Gender	Year	Number of Suspensions	City
Elena	Female	Middle school	3	Chicago
Randy	Male	Middle school	2	Bloomington
Hannah	Female	Middle school	1	Bloomington
Myles	Male	High school	5	Chicago
Lydia	Female	Middle school	1	Chicago
Micah	Male	High school	3	Normal

Skai	Male	Middle school	3	Chicago
Brayden	Male	Middle school	2	Chicago
Anna	Female	Elementary	1	Chicago
Angela	Female	Elementary	2	Chicago

Parent Participant Table:
Figure 2

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Child's Year	Number Suspensions	of City
Mama Gee	Female	Middle School	4	Peoria
Mama Vera	Female	Middle School	2	Bloomington
Mama Joy	Female	Elementary	1	Normal
Papa Jay	Male	Elementary	2	Bloomington
Mama Jane	Female	Middle School	2	Bloomington
Mama Esther	Female	Middle School	3	Bloomington
Mama Lily	Female	Middle School	1	Bloomington
Papa David	Male	Elementary School	1	Bloomington
Mama Edna	Female	Middle school	3	Chicago
Papa Danovo	Male	Middle school	3	Chicago

Data Analysis

Data protection and participant confidentiality were carefully maintained throughout the study using pseudonyms. Student and parent participants completed separate semi-structured interviews that explored the age at which students first used violence as a self-defense mechanism and the age at which they first experienced bullying in school. Two student–parent matched pairs participated in the study, and students and parents were interviewed separately to prevent influence on responses. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, with duration adjusted to account for the students' ages. All interviews were audio-recorded with verbally informed consent obtained prior to recording. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the steps taken to protect their data. Audio recordings were securely stored, transcribed, and manually coded using open and focused coding techniques to identify emerging themes. Following transcription and analysis, all audio recordings were destroyed to further protect participant confidentiality.

Research Question 1

At what age do students begin to use violence as a self-defense mechanism in school?

Failure of the traditional school safety measures

Interviewer: How do you feel about the school safety measures?

Mama Gee: The school is doing a good job, but the zero-tolerance policy is causing the problem. My baby, daughter has been suspended for fighting back. I've had teachers come to me to talk to me and let me know my children may be having problems. You know sometimes they may tell you things in confidence that you don't know that your child might be having a problem and it is not the child's fault.

(Mama Gee, Middle school students' mother, Suspension 4 each, Peoria)

Immediately after asking how she felt about the school safety measures, I asked her to explain how she thinks the school safety measures can be improved

Interviewer: How do you think school safety measure can be improved?

Mama Gee: When they remove zero tolerance policy

Interviewer: What other ways do you think the school safety measures can be improved?

Mama Gee: it is also instructors and counselors; I mean, it all goes together as a team and if everybody is not working and you get some teachers who, if they look at you, just do the assignment and that.....**(Mama Gee, Middle school students' mother, Suspension 4 each, Peoria)**

Mama Gee's statement suggests that in certain situations, a zero-tolerance policy may overemphasize slight offenses, like minor disturbances in the classroom. This can divert attention and resources from serious safety concerns like bullying or violent threats. In her situation, the zero-tolerance policy was rigid, allowing little discretion or consideration of her daughter's circumstances. This can have unintended consequences, such as punishing students who are victims of bullying or harassment. A zero-tolerance policy may place too much emphasis on punishment and not enough on prevention. Schools, for example, may need to address the root causes of such behavior, such as mental health issues or access to firearms, rather than punishing students who engage in fighting. While a zero-tolerance policy may appear to be a simple way to maintain school safety, it is critical that elementary and middle schools ensure that it is implemented in a way that is effective and appropriate for the school and its students. Mama Gee's statement shows that some parents are not in support of the rigidity of the zero-tolerance policy in schools, but it is still implemented in public schools.

Similarly, Elena's statement proved how the failure of the school safety measures led to suspension. Elena stated clearly that if the teacher had intervened when she was bullied verbally, she would not have used physical violence. She asserts that the teacher did intervene later after she had stabbed the boy.

Interview: How do you feel about the school safety measures?

Elena: Let me tell you a story: I first moved to a predominantly white neighborhood. My mom was divorced. A girl who would tease me, and I got a missing assignment slip, so anytime a student does their homework, they get a slip, and they have to get the parent's signature to acknowledge that they didn't do it for the child. If so, I had left a tip at the desk, and so he kept reaching for it, and then I had my pencil in my hand, and I ended up stabbing him in the hand. It wasn't intentional because he was trying to grab the pencil. You know how many times I got into these situations. So, it was in second grade when I got my grandma's sewing needle from her house. I don't even recollect why I grabbed a sewing needle, but I brought it to school. You know you're not allowed to bring weapons to school, and I ended up stabbing a boy because he was teasing me, and the teacher did nothing. **(Elena, Middle school student, suspension 3, Chicago)**

Elena's statement suggests that teachers who only respond to physical altercations are waiting for a problem to occur before acting, rather than working to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. Also, the statement emphasizes that teachers who only respond to physical altercations may be unaware of other issues concerning school safety, such as bullying, harassment, or substance abuse. By failing to address these issues, they endanger students. In addition, teachers may lack the necessary training and resources to address classroom safety concerns. If they have not received adequate training, they may be unable to recognize and address safety concerns in a timely and appropriate manner. Furthermore, teachers who only respond to physical altercations may use punishment excessively to address safety concerns. While punishment is sometimes necessary, it should not be the primary focus of school safety measures. Counseling, mediation, and conflict resolution can all help to keep a safe and healthy learning environment. Elena's statement suggests that teachers must take a proactive approach to school safety, addressing physical altercations and other safety concerns as they arise. In addition, a commitment to providing a safe and supportive learning environment for all students, as well as adequate training and resources.

When I asked how she feels about the school safety measures, she said she does not feel protected which is line with how Mama Gee feels like about the school safety measures

Interview: How do you feel about your school environment?

Elena: I do not always feel protected like, from a verbal and physical standpoint.

(Elena, Middle school student, suspension 3, Chicago)

Elena and Mama Gee's statements describe how the students are left to protect themselves and the school disciplinary policies can be overly harsh and unfairly punish students who defend themselves or are bullied. Due to Elena and Mama Gee's experiences, they may be concerned that the guidelines will result in disproportionate punishment for minor offenses because they do not consider each incident's unique circumstances.

Mama Vera, a middle school mother who lives in Bloomington, shares her grievance on how the school safety measures are not fair to students of color.

Interviewer: How do you feel about school safety?

Mama Vera: They are not fair to kids of color. Just be fair all the way around it, because you have rich and white kids in the school. I just have a strong issue with that. You have only one black person on the board. We are not represented. They only one black face on the board. They have been getting away with that, and they act like that is the protocol. If you feel the quarter, that's all. For over 7 years, there has not been diversity in the educators. It felt as though. The superintendent is responsible for this. She will keep deferring the answer. We lack the trust of the community. It is just to make people shut up. **(Mama Vera, mother of Middle School student, Bloomington)**

Like Mama Gee and Elena, the statement of Mama Vera provides illumination on what African American students face and their disconnection with school officials due to the lack of diversity in board and school officials. This makes it difficult for students to report issues to teachers because the students and parents do not feel represented. Data from the National Education Policy Center supports my findings and demonstrates that school zero-tolerance policies disproportionately affect students of color, in particular Black and Latinx students (Skiba et al., 2011). This is a result of discriminatory implementation, over-surveillance, subconscious bias, and a dearth of resources in schools with large minority populations (Skiba et al., 2011). According to one study, black students were more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled for the same behavior (Van Dyke et al., 2022). Furthermore, scholars found that black girls were disciplined disproportionately for behavior that was not considered a violation for white girls, such as "talking back" or "disrespect" (Wun, 2016). These findings highlight the importance of schools addressing potential inequities in disciplinary practices and ensuring that all students are treated fairly and equitably. In addition, there is a need for diversifying the school board so that parents and students of color will feel represented.

Research Question Two: At what age do students first experience bullying in school?

The following participants provided a vivid example of how relying on a peer network helped them escape bullying in school. Three students expressed their need to rely on their friends for support against bullies and how that prevented them from being targeted by the bullies. One student participant explained how he was bullied when his friends were not around to support him. Upon interviewing Randy, a middle school student, who stated that he was not bullied because his friends provided him support.

Interviewer: Do you feel your friends protected you from bullies?

Randy: Yes, my friends, they have my back. I said I have not been bullied before, because my friends protected me if I have any issue. **{Randy, Middle school student, 2 suspensions, Bloomington}**

Randy's statement suggests that he could have been bullied if he did not have friends or if he did not have friends who had his back. This shows how some students end up getting bullied because they did not have anybody to protect them from the bully. As such, when the student is bullied and the student tries to fight back, that student gets

suspended because the teacher or the school authorities may not know what triggered the fight. The reliance on peer networks is because of the failure of the school safety measures because children as young as elementary school age and middle school age do not have to look for friends to protect them in school.

Myles is a high school student who got bullied because he did not have friends to rely on for support. His experience shows the need for students to make the right friends for protection in unsafe school environments. His statement shows that he did not have friends at the time he was bullied, but later he made friends to protect himself from the bully.

Interviewer: Did you ever rely on your friends for protection against bullies?

Myles: No, I never did that.

Interviewer: Did you have friends in school?

Myles: Around the time when I was bullied? No, I didn't really have friends.
(Myles, High School students, 5 suspensions, Chicago)

Myles' statement emphasizes the need for peer support against bullying. Like Randy, Myles' statement echoes the need for friendships in school. Bullying can be a difficult and distressing experience for students, and one way to cope is to seek peer support. According to research, having a support system that includes peers can help reduce the harmful effects of bullying. According to Bradshaw et al. (2014), having a supportive peer network can help mitigate the adverse effects of bullying. According to the study, students who reported having supportive peers had better mental health outcomes and were less likely to experience depressive symptoms. Furthermore, students who felt safe and supported by their peers had more potential to feel safe and supported at school. Peers can offer various types of assistance, such as emotional support and problem-solving assistance. Supportive peer relationships are important for reducing the negative effects of bullying. Wentzel (2017) notes that peers can "provide empathy, reassurance, and a sense of belonging," highlighting the emotional side of support. Davis and Nixon's (2010) large study found that bullied students benefit most when peers listen, spend time with them, and show care and solidarity. In addition to emotional support, peers help friends find practical solutions or come up with ways to deal with bullying. Overall, these studies show that peer support helps students become more resilient and reduces the impact of bullying.

Skai, a Middle school student, explained how he was not bullied because he had friends who protected him from being jumped on.

Interview: Did you rely on your friends for protection?

Skai: For sure, that's why I always hang around them.

Interview: Did you think your friends protected you from getting bullied?

Skai: Yea, they did jump a lot of people in that school, they've never jumped me

Interview: What do you mean by jumped?

Skai: A lot of people beat on you. That never happened to me. I knew all the popular people, so I did not get bullied. **(Skai, Middle school student, 3 suspensions, Chicago)**

Skai's statement shows how the school was unsafe and everybody was getting jumped on but due to his reliance on peer network, he avoided being attacked. Ttofi et al. (2011) also discovered that peer interventions could effectively reduce bullying behavior. According to the study, when students intervened in bullying situations, the likelihood of the behavior continuing decreased significantly. This implies that peers can also play an active role in preventing and dealing with bullying in the classroom. The friends of Skai really did protect him from being bullied. Skai also stated that he knew the popular kids, which also helped prevent him from being bullied.

Name (Pseudonym)	Grade level	Age student first got bullied	Age at which students begin to use violence
Elena	Middle school	Third grade	Fifth grade
Randy	Middle school	Third grade	Fourth to Fifth
Hannah	Middle school	Second grade or third grade	Fourth grade
Myles	High School	Fifth grade	Eighth grade
Lydia	Middle School	Fifth grade	Sixth grade
Micah	High school	Third grade	Ninth grade
Skai	Middle school	Fifth grade	Sixth grade
Brayden	Middle school	First grade	Third grade
Anna	Elementary school	Third grade to Fourth grade	Fifth grade
Angela	Elementary school	First grade	Fifth grade

Name (Pseudonym)	Grade level of their children	Age their child first got bullied	Age at which their child begins to use violence to fight back
Mama Gee	Middle School	First grade	Fifth grade
Mama Vera	Middle School	Fifth grade	Fifth grade
Mama Joy	Elementary School	Third grade	Third grade or fourth grade
Papa Jay	Elementary School	Fourth grade	Fifth grade
Mama Jane	Middle School	Fourth grade	Fourth grade or fifth grade

Mama Esther	Middle School	Fourth grade	Fifth grade or sixth grade
Mama Lily	Middle School	Kindergarten	Third grade
Papa David	Elementary School	Fourth grade	Eighth grade
Mama Edna	Middle School	Fifth grade	Fifth grade
Papa Danovo	Middle School	Second grade	Third grade

Research Question Three: How do parents influence a child's decision to use violence?

Role of parents in the code's adoption

During the interview, students' participants stated how parents influence their use of violence in school. Six parents' participants stated how they encouraged their children to use violence only as a self-defense mechanism. The study's findings are in line with the findings of the scholar who proposed the code of the school. Bell (2021) findings suggest that the code of the school is a transfer of knowledge via parents who are aware of the street code. Parents significantly influence their children's behavior and attitudes, including how they understand and navigate the "street code." Hirschi & Gottfredson (1983) discovered two ways parents could influence their children's behavior: socialization and control. In the context of the street code, parents can set rules for their children to follow, such as avoiding certain areas or not associating with certain people.

Mama Gee, a middle school mother who lives in Bloomington shares how she teaches students how to use violence as a self-defense mechanism.

Interview: Have you told your child to use violence as a self-defense mechanism?

Mama Gee: My son was you know when I let you know if I had to discipline, he respected that I told him to fight back, and he pretty much said what.

At what age did you son fight back?

Mama Gee: He fought back in his fifth grade; I told him to fight back. When someone is bullying him, what do you want him to do?

Interviewer: How has violence influenced your child's behavior?

Mama Gee: I tell the school, if they don't do anything you let me know, I will come and talk to the school you what I'm saying. She was walking down the hallway she had a book and a band instrument in the other hand the girls just walked up and threatened her to join the gang but she refused and was bullied by the girls. When I was told what happened they said she don't have the right to defend herself that's where I'm at. **(Mama Gee, Middle school students' mother, Suspension 4 each, Peoria)**

The statement by Mama Gee suggests that parents who establish clear rules and expectations for their children's behavior at home are more likely to have children who adhere to the code of the school. Parents can help shape their children's understanding and adherence to the code of the school. The statement by Mama Gee suggests that she only

supports her son to use violence when he is being bullied. Parents can help shape their children's understanding and adherence to the code of the school. Parents significantly influence their children's attitudes toward conflict and violence.

Papa Jay, a father of an elementary school student who stated that he always told his son to avoid violence but, in a situation, when it becomes inevitable to avoid being bullied, he has the right to defend himself.

Interviewer: What advice did you give to your child?

Papa Jay: I always advice my child to avoid conflict with people. I told them to leave that place and report to the teacher. In a situation where someone tries to slap you, you need to fight back. There is no time to report in certain situations. You must react but positively. We call that in French, “*légitime défendre*” that means the right to defend themselves in a dangerous situation. That happen **(Papa Jay, a father of an elementary school students, suspension 2, Bloomington)**

Papa Jay's account highlights how some families' **international backgrounds** shape their perspectives on school safety and self-defense. When asked what advice he gives his child, Papa Jay explained that he encourages avoiding conflict whenever possible by leaving the situation and reporting it to a teacher. Papa Jay's statement suggests that parents perceive school responses to conflict as delayed or insufficient, leading them to instruct their children to defend themselves when immediate harm is unavoidable. His decision to express this concern in French, his mother tongue, underscores the seriousness of the issue and reflects how cultural and international frameworks inform parental guidance on violence, safety, and survival within school settings.

Papa Danovo, a father of a middle school student who stated that he told his children that when someone puts their hand on them, they must defend themselves else the bullying would continue.

Interviewer: Do you tell your child to fight the bully?

Danovo: I tell my children if somebody put their hands on you, put your hands on the person back. I feel uncomfortable saying that but if you don't do that, they will keep bullying you. If nobody touch you can't first the person. If you don't defend yourself, they will be doing it until you defend yourself. You have the freedom to say what you want with your mouth, but you don't have the freedom to touch me. I told my son to fight, and I know they would suspend him but at least that kid won't fight him again. **(Papa Danovo, a father of a Middle school student, Suspension 3, Chicago)**

Papa Danovo suggests that although he feels uncomfortable about recommending violence to his children, they need it. His recommendation emphasizes that if there is physical violence, the child may need to defend themselves. His statement emphasizes how bullying continues when no action is taken and that parents are aware that bullying goes on in their children's school. Danovo, like most parents, due to the lack of alternatives, advises his son to use violence only when other students use violence against him. He stated that if

other students verbally bullied his son, his son could ignore them because everybody had a right to say what they wanted.

Discussion

Results from the study indicate that most students are unaware that they were bullied, so it is quite difficult to conclude the age at which students begin to get bullied in school. Most of the parent participants also stated that their children were not being bullied. It is common for children to struggle to identify when their peers are bullying them. Possible misunderstanding of bullying or a belief that the behavior is normal or acceptable because it originates from a known person. Children may hesitate to report bullying out of concern that doing so will harm their friendships or cause their peers to ostracize them. Parents and teachers must educate children on the different types of bullying and encourage them to speak up if they feel mistreated. This may involve teaching children to recognize the signs of bullying, such as name-calling, exclusion, and physical aggression, and giving them coping strategies. In addition, parents and educators can create a safe and supportive environment where children feel comfortable discussing their experiences and seeking help when necessary. This can include encouraging open communication, providing resources for counseling and support, and implementing anti-bullying measures. From the data collected, the age at which students begin to use the "code" in school is from 10-11 years or grade five. Most respondents concluded that this is the age at which they understood the importance of fighting back. Most of the parent participants indicated how they influence their children in using the school code; however, they concluded that grade five or 10-11 years was when children realized the importance of using the "code of the school". The student participants added that they use the "code" to increase respect and social status in school due to the failure of the school safety measures. Some of the students in the study stated how everybody in their school was using violence; hence the code of the school was the only way they could navigate the school environment. These students relied on their friends for support against bullies, and they also admitted the influence of parental advice in using the "code." Although the study is consistent with Bell et al. (2022) study that analyzed the relationship between the street and school codes, most students stated that their community did not influence their use of violence. However, their use of violence was because of institutional deprivation. Institutional deprivation includes school safety measures' failure, forcing students to rely on their friends for support against violence. Nevertheless, several parent participants stated they lived in a community influenced by the street code before moving to their Normal and Bloomington. Some parent participants stated that they were escaping physical violence in their previous communities but are currently experiencing racial violence.

Finally, the *Code of the School* should not be taken for granted by teachers, parents, and school officials, as students develop this violent behavior due to institutional deprivation in some public schools. Consistent with the findings of some scholars, African American parents are aware of their children using the "code"; however, these parents guide their children on when and how to use physical violence. The findings suggest that all four fathers interviewed recommended physical altercations in school. One of the mothers stated

that her husband recommended violence to their children. Thus, the findings show that for schools to reduce the rate of school violence, school officials must establish a relationship with fathers on how to deal with bullying. Schools can recommend to fathers not to advise their children to use physical altercations in school as this would only lead to suspension and expulsion.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that student violence is situated within a broader social context shaped by inadequate institutional protection, peer hierarchies, and familial experiences of frustration and mistrust. Rather than representing simple misbehavior, students' narratives suggest that fighting often serves as a survival strategy in environments perceived as unsafe and lacking support. Parents experience considerable emotional strain as they attempt to balance respect for school authority with the imperative to protect their children from harm.

Recommendation

These findings have significant implications for policy and practice. Reducing school violence necessitates moving beyond punitive, exclusionary measures that may exacerbate mistrust. Schools should instead focus on strengthening school climate, enhancing responsiveness to bullying, and fostering relationships characterized by fairness, care, and procedural justice. More broadly, this study highlights the importance of acknowledging the lived experiences of students and families. When young people perceive that institutions are unable or unwilling to protect them, they may adopt alternative survival strategies, even when these entail risk.

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