Examining the Links Between School Climate and Student's Experiences with Bullying

Jessica Trach[1], Matthew D. Lee[1], Reky Groendal[1], Shelley Hymel[1] & David Smith[2]

University of British Columbia[1], University of Ottawa[2]

a place of mind
UBC

SEED SOCIAL EMOTIONAL EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH GROUP

ABSTRACT

Bullying is a social problem that impacts the entire school community, including children who are involved as bullies, victims, *and* bystanders. The present study investigated the degree to which elementary students' gender, grade level, and perceptions of school climate predicted the frequency of their experiences with bullying. Results of a series of multiple regression analyses indicated that school climate predicted a significant and substantial proportion of variance in elementary students' experiences with bullying, with the diverse aspects of school climate differentially impacting students' self-reported bullying experiences.

BACKGROUND

Bullying is a form of intentional and repetitive, peer-directed aggression involving a power imbalance between the perpetrator(s) and victim(s) (Olweus, 1994; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003) that usually takes place within a group context (Salmivalli, 1999; 2001). Experiencing violence at school as a bully or victim has been shown to have significant, negative, and long-term effects on young people's physical and psychological well-being (Card, Isaacs & Hodges, 2007; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Smith, Cousins, & Stewart, 2005). Numerous school-based anti-bullying programs have been developed that attempt to address this problem from an ecological-system or whole-school approach, although the evidence regarding the effectiveness of such efforts has been mixed (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004; Ttofi, Farrington & Baldry, 2008; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). While there has been some research suggesting that a positive school climate is connected to the prevention of problem behaviours (Berkowitz, & Bier, 2005; Cogen, 2001; Greenberg et al., 2003; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Najaka, Gottfredson, & Wilson, 2001), the relationship between school climate and bullying remains largely unexplored.

The present study examined the hypothesis that the reported frequency of students' experiences with bullying depends on the established social climate of the school. Specifically, this study explored the links between students' gender, grade, and their perceptions of various aspects of school climate and their experiences as a bully, victim, and/or witness to bullying at school during the current school year.
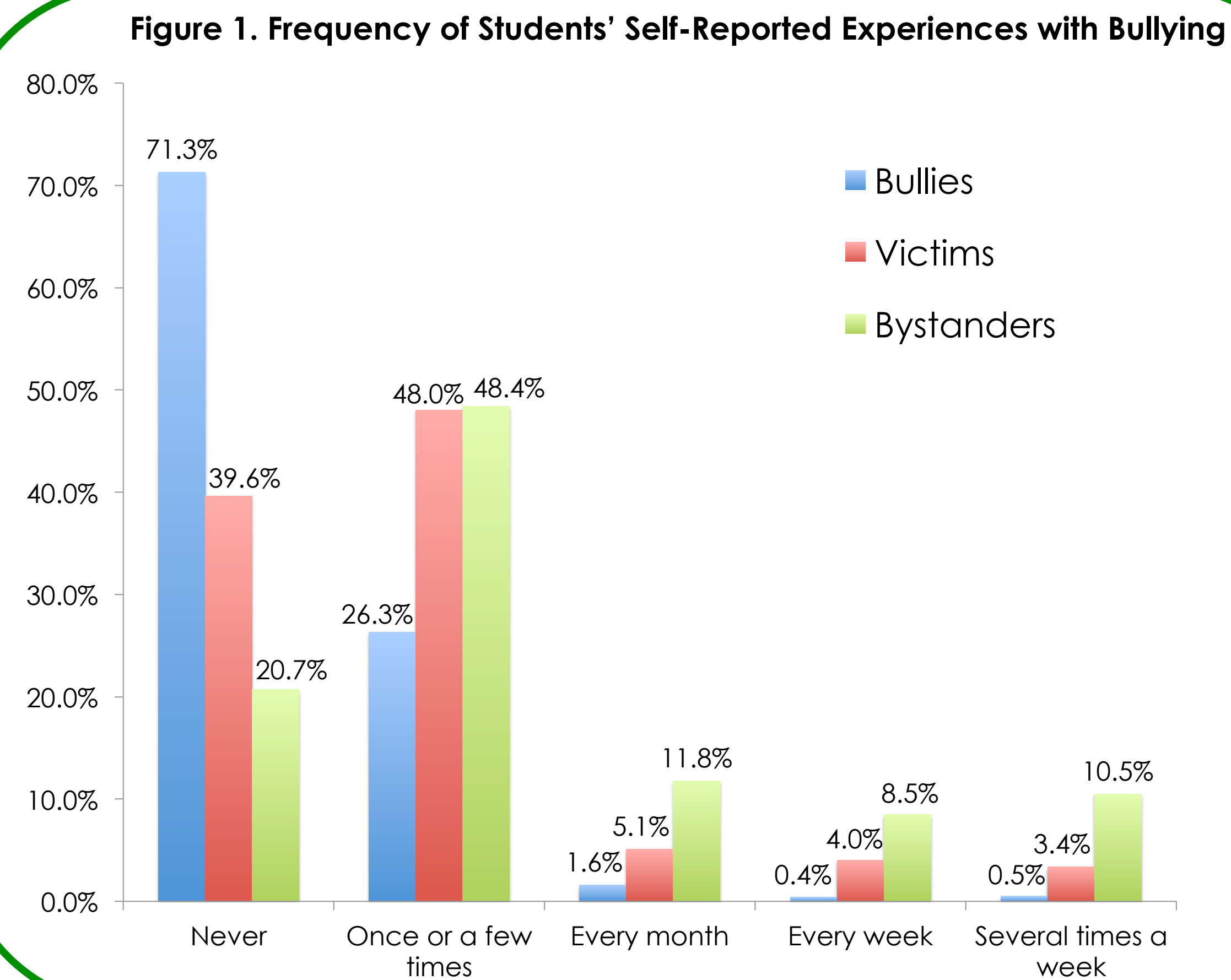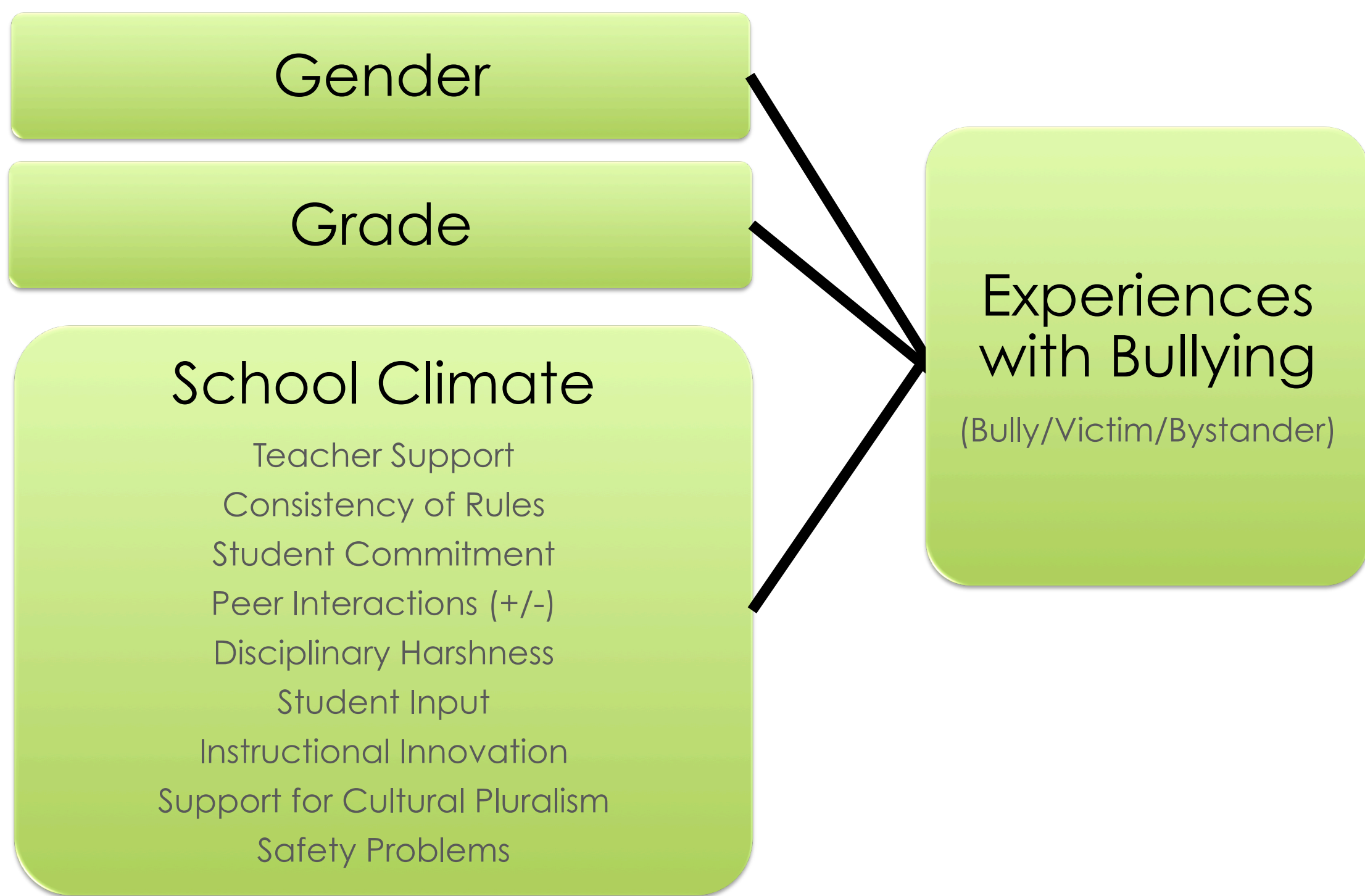
METHOD

The sample consisted of 1,367 pre-adolescents in grades 4 to 7 (46% male, 45% female, 9% did not report their gender; mean age = 11.0 years). Participants completed the "Inventory of School Climate—Student" (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger & Dumas, 2003), a psychometrically robust measure that includes 10 indices of school climate: Disciplinary Harshness (α=.78), Negative Peer Interactions (α=.82), Positive Peer Interactions (α=.80), Structure and Clarity of Rules (α=.72), Student Commitment to Achievement (α=.87), Teacher Support (α=.74), Instructional Innovation (α=.76), Student Participation in Decision Making (α=.70), Support for Cultural Pluralism (α=.76), and Safety Problems (α=.74). Bullying experiences were assessed using single, self-report items that measured the frequency of involvement as a bully, victim, and bystander (1=never to 5=several times a week). Students were asked to report on bullying that occurred "this school year" for these questions.

Gender, Grade, School Climate (Teacher Support, Consistency of Rules, Student Commitment, Peer Interactions (+/-), Disciplinary Harshness, Student Input, Instructional Innovation, Support for Cultural Pluralism, Safety Problems) → Experiences with Bullying (Bully/Victim/Bystander)

Figure 1. Frequency of Students' Self-Reported Experiences with Bullying

RESULTS

Figure 1 depicts students' self-reported experiences as bully, victim and witness, with over 1/4 indicating that they bullied others *at least once or a few times* and nearly 2/3 reporting that they were victimized *at least once*. Finally, almost 80% of students reported witnessing bullying *at least once* during the school year.

Results of multiple regression analyses (α=.017 with Bonferroni correction) indicated that perceptions of school climate significantly predicted bullying, $F_{(12, 1353)}$=18.29; victimization, $F_{(12, 1354)}$=43.98; witnessing, $F_{(12, 1354)}$=41.80. Gender and grade accounted for a relatively small proportion of variance in bullying experiences, but students' perceptions of school climate accounted for 8%, 27%, and 24% of the variance in their reports of bullying, victimization, and witnessing, respectively.

Specific school climate indices differentially predicted student's self-reported bullying experiences. Student reports of **Negative Peer Interactions** and **Safety Problems** predicted higher levels of reported bullying, victimization, and witnessing. Students who rated **Student Commitment to Achievement** higher were less likely to report bullying others or witnessing bullying. Student perceptions of **school rules as consistent and clear** were also associated with lower levels of bullying. Student reports of harsh school discipline were predictive of lower levels of victimization.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The current study examined individual differences in students' perceptions of school climate as related to their concurrent experiences with bullying and victimization at school. Results demonstrated that a school's social climate, including the values, behaviour, and interpersonal relationships of its members, is an important factor that plays a substantial role in school-bullying problems. Specific areas of school climate that should be considered in the development and implementation of school-wide anti-bullying interventions include the quality of students' peer relationships and achievement orientation, school rules and disciplinary approaches, and students' perceptions of safety at school. Future research should examine these relationships using statistical techniques such as hierarchical linear modeling that account for the nesting of students within schools, as well as the effect students experiences with bullying have on their perceptions of school climate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

	Bullying				Victimization				Witnessing			
	R^2_{Chng}	β	t	sp^2	R^2_{Chng}	β	t	sp^2	R^2_{Chng}	β	t	sp^2
Step 1												
Grade		-.08	-3.22*	.00		.05	2.00	.00		-.06	-2.39*	.00
Gender		.16	6.08*	.02		.03	1.40	.00		.12	4.99*	.01
R^2_{Chng}	.06				.00				.03			
Step 2												
Teacher Support		-.02	-0.46	.00		-.03	-0.79	.00		-.01	-0.35	.00
Negative Peer Interactions		.01	3.17*	.01		.22	7.83*	.03		.30	10.83*	.06
Student Commitment		-.01	-3.02*	.01		-.06	-2.14	.00		-.13	-4.43*	.01
Disciplinary Harshness		-.00	-0.01	.00		-.09	-3.06*	.01		.01	0.48	.00
Positive Peer Interactions		-.03	-1.04	.00		-.03	-0.96	.00		.05	1.71	.00
Instructional Innovation		.05	1.60	.00		.01	0.23	.00		.04	1.34	.00
Support for Cultural Pluralism		-.01	-0.40	.00		.04	1.27	.00		.04	1.40	.00
Consistency and Clarity of Rules		-.09	-2.60*	.00		.00	0.06	.00		-.02	-0.68	.00
Student Input in Decision-Making		-.02	-0.49	.00		-.05	-1.53	.00		-.01	-0.44	.00
Safety Problems		.11	3.89*	.01		.39	14.59*	.11		.23	8.60*	.04
R^2_{Chng}	.08				.27				.24			
R^2_{Total}	.14				.27				.27			