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Disciplines
Educational Sociology | Elementary Education | Place and Environment | Sociology

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To Tell or Not to Tell: Student Responses to Negative Behavior in Elementary School*

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the factors that influence fifth grade student decisions regarding whether or not to report negative interactions to adults. Data from observations and interviews with students and adults show that there are many factors influencing the reluctance to tell on others. Among them is a school context in which verbal attacks are downplayed and telling is seen as ineffective and stigmatized. This context prevents bystanders from reporting what they have observed and places those with a lack of social support at a significant disadvantage when dealing with negative behavior.

Introduction

The past 20 years have brought an increased focus on negative behavior, or the wide range of interactions that students consider to be "mean," in schools. Although some dismiss bullying and other forms of aggression as a normal part of the school experience, the association between these behaviors and suicides and school shootings, as well as a host of other negative effects, reveals the importance of addressing these interactions (Carney 2000; Ghandour et al. 2004; Takizawa, Maughan, and Arseneault 2014). To do so, newer anti-bullying texts place an emphasis on reporting and intervention (Meyer 2016), yet within schools there is a continued reluctance on the part of students to report these behaviors to adults (Smith and Shu 2000; Garpelin 2004; Oliver and Candappa 2007). Further, adults sometimes downplay or ignore these interactions even when they are reported or directly observed (Garpelin 2004; Oliver and Candappa 2007; Thomson and Gunter 2008).

In this paper I examine the factors that influence fifth grade student decisions regarding whether or not to report negative interactions (commonly referred to as "telling") to adults. In doing so, I address three gaps in the literature. First, data from my observations and interviews with students and adults allow us to better understand the combined roles that students and adults play in creating a school context in which telling is not seen as a worthwhile response to negative interactions between students. In this context, adult responses lead students to believe that telling is often ineffective. I find that student decisions, then, depend heavily on the perceived severity of an interaction (with physical attacks being perceived as more severe than verbal attacks) and a targeted student's social support network (including whether they have friends who will support them inside or outside of the disciplinary process). Thus, because both adults and students

stigmatize telling, those with a lack of social support face a large disadvantage when dealing with negative behavior.

Second, examining this context provides important insight into bystander responses to negative behaviors, which have been emphasized in anti-bullying programs (Meyer 2016). Although researchers have studied the various roles that bystanders take on, research is lacking on the ways that the students involved, either directly or indirectly, make sense of these interactions and decide whether or not to tell an adult in a given situation. I find that bystanders are hesitant to place others in situations that they themselves would not want to be in. Additionally, the potential for being labeled a "tattle tale" and the hassle associated with serving as a witness while adults attempt to reconstruct what has occurred appear to outweigh the rewards associated with helping a fellow student, especially when that student is not a friend.

Finally, these findings highlight the different ways that students respond to physical and verbal attacks. While definitions of bullying (e.g. Olweus 1993) recognize that verbal attacks can be just as harmful as physical ones, I find that there are a number of factors in these schools that prevent verbal attacks from being addressed. These include the difficulty of detection by adults and, perhaps more importantly, the fact that both students and adults downplayed the seriousness of verbal attacks in these schools, despite evidence that the accumulation of verbal attacks can have long-term consequences for victims (Newman 2004; Sue 2010). Combined, these findings suggest that rather than wondering why students would choose *not* to report negative behavior within this context, a better question to ask is why they *would*. Considering this question can allow schools to take action in order to increase reporting and intervention.

Negative Behavior in Schools

Researchers have explored a wide range of negative interactions among peers, including studies of bullying (e.g., Ambert 1995; Sullivan, Cleary, and Sullivan 2004), teasing and insults (e.g., Fine 1987; Eder 1991; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995), exclusion from higher status groups (e.g., Eder et al. 1995; Adler and Adler 1998), and sexual harassment (e.g., Eder et al. 1995; Renold 2002). Definitions of bullying in the research literature are frequently based on the work of Dan Olweus (1993:54), who defined bullying as being "exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. Also implied in bullying is an imbalance in strength (an asymmetric power relationship): the student who is exposed to the negative actions has difficulty defending him/herself and is somewhat helpless against the student or students who harass." In the development of this definition, researchers have argued that these actions can take the form of verbal abuse, physical (and attempted physical) abuse, or indirect abuse through hand gestures, facial expressions, or systematically ignoring, excluding, or isolating an individual (Olweus 1993; Ambert 1995; Sullivan, Cleary, and Sullivan 2004).

Despite the prevalence of this definition of bullying, many find a broader focus on negative behavior better captures the range of problematic interactions in schools. For example, Finkelhor et al. (2012) note that the Olweus definition excludes peer aggression that occurs only once or between equals and that power imbalance is difficult to define and varies by context. For these reasons, sociologists studying interactions related to bullying often avoid the use of this term. Merten (1997), for example, explores "meanness," Faris and Felmlee (2011, 2014) focus on "aggression," Garpelin (2004) examines "victimization," and Shepherd and Paluck (2015) discuss "drama." In line with these varying definitions, Finkelhor et al. (2012) argue that researchers should broaden their focus to emphasize peer victimization and aggression, including bullying as well as one-time interactions, sexual assault, dating violence, and gang violence.

The expansion of research beyond the traditional definition of bullying is also important because the definitions of bullying held by those in schools may differ from those used by researchers (Harger 2016). Although they use different terms, these approaches share the important recognition that negative interactions can take multiple forms including physical, verbal, and nonverbal behavior. As a result, in this paper I use "negative behavior" as an umbrella term to capture the wide range of interactions that students consider to be "mean" in the school context.

The Importance of Student Reactions

In a crowded cafeteria or on a large playground, negative behavior can be difficult to detect. Research on bullying, for example, finds that adults do not directly observe most bullying behavior (Craig and Pepler 1997; Craig, Pepler, and Atlas 2000). Indeed, one of the most fundamental ways that students exert control in school is through secondary adjustments (Goffman 1961) such as hiding behavior from teachers (Corsaro 1985, 2003). In addition to students hiding their negative behavior (Hamarus and Kiakkonen 2008), many of the coping strategies that students use to deal with negative behavior, such as avoiding aggressors and hiding negative emotional reactions make negative behavior harder to detect (Gamliel et al. 2003; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011).

Beyond the difficulty of detection by teachers, MacDonald and Swart (2004) identify a culture of secrecy in schools in which students did not report behaviors, contributing to a continuation of aggression. Students may also avoid reporting behaviors because they fear being viewed as a "squealer" by teachers or peers or because they do not trust teachers to keep the things they tell them confidential (Garpelin 2004). Similarly, others have found that students do not believe that reporting bullying to teachers is an effective way of solving their problems

(Lloyd and Stead 2001; Oliver and Candappa 2007). The views of these students are supported by Merten (1997), who found that junior high school teachers view peer harassment among girls to be a part of "natural" development that they should learn to deal with without teacher intervention.

Recognition that teachers are unlikely to observe negative behaviors directly has contributed to an increased emphasis on reporting and intervention (Meyer 2016). Sullivan et al. (2004:15), for example, argue that bystanders are a crucial part of the "bullying triangle" along with bullies and victims. Additionally, O'Connell, Pepler, and Craig (1999) found that an average of four peers viewed schoolyard bullying episodes, giving them a great deal of power in shaping the context of an interaction. While some of these bystanders take on roles as sidekicks or reinforcers who actively support negative behavior through assistance, laughter, or other feedback, many adopt outsider roles and passively observe the behavior, while a small group of defenders actively attempt to help the victim (Sullivan et al. 2004). Although researchers such as these have studied the various roles that bystanders take on, research is lacking on the ways that the students involved, either directly or indirectly, make sense of these interactions and decide whether or not to tell an adult in a given situation.

Because adults do not observe most negative behavior in schools, student decisions in these moments have important consequences for disciplinary practices. In this paper I use participant observation and interviews with fifth grade students, teachers, staff members, and principals at two elementary schools to examine the factors that influence student decisions to tell or not to tell. I find that these decisions are influenced by a general stigma against telling and "tattle tales," perceptions of certain attacks as "minor," desire to avoid showing weakness, the disciplinary process itself, and an effective "golden rule" in which some students avoid putting

others in situations that they would prefer to avoid themselves. Adults contribute to these decisions not to tell because of their perceived ineffectiveness in resolving problems and in terms of punishing the appropriate students. Adults also contribute to the stigma against telling and differentiate between "more serious" and "less serious" behaviors by often downplaying verbal attacks. In addition to these factors, student decisions about whether or not to tell on others were influenced heavily by their interpersonal relationships, with friendship providing protection against negative behaviors, against being told on, and against punishment. In order for students to view telling as worthwhile in this context, then, they must perceive attacks as "really bad," attacks must continue over time, or students must dislike the student they are telling on.

Setting and Methods

The data in this study are part of a larger study of peer interaction among fifth grade students (10-11 years old) in two elementary schools: Hillside[1] and Greenfield Elementary. Located in a rural Midwestern city of about 15,000 people, each school provides education for about 240 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Students at both schools are largely white and from middle- or working-class families. At Hillside Elementary 98% of students are white and 30% receive free or reduced-price lunches, compared to 97% and 41% at Greenfield Elementary. During my data collection there were 45 fifth grade students in two classrooms at Hillside and 37 fifth grade students in two classrooms at Greenfield. The fifth graders in both schools were in their last year of elementary school and many had attended school together since kindergarten.

During the 2007-2008 school year I conducted over 400 hours of participant observation at the two schools combined. Before beginning my observations, I sent a Study Information

[1] Pseudonyms are used for all names and places.

Sheet to the parent or guardian of each student detailing the procedures of my general observations in the classroom, at recess, and at lunch. Using passive consent, this sheet explained that parents who did not want their children to be included in my observational data should return the study information sheet to me. The parents of four students at Hillside Elementary and one student at Greenfield Elementary returned this sheet and these students were not included in my field notes or analyses.

Following Fine and Sandstrom's (1988:55) discussion of ethical issues in research with preadolescents, I allowed my participants to "express their own indigenous meanings," even when these meanings were outside of the rules set by adults. Given the focus of my research, a particularly important ethical issue I faced was what to do when I witnessed negative student interactions. Although a number of researchers report planning to intervene when physical harm seems possible (Corsaro 1985, Eder et al. 1995, Adler and Adler 1998), I was forbidden from doing so at both schools because of the school district's concern for potential lawsuits. While I was not told to report on smaller violations, in highly serious cases I was instructed to get the attention of an adult who could deal with the situation. While I witnessed a number of punches, kicks, shoves, and insults, I never witnessed a fight that needed to be broken up, allowing me to generally avoid being seen as an authority figure.

Toward this end, I modeled my interactions with students on Corsaro's (1985) atypical adult and Eder et al.'s (1995) quiet friend roles. I did this by setting myself apart from other adults – students and teachers alike were surprised when I went to classes like music with the students rather than spending this time in the teachers' lounge – and by typically remaining quiet and participating only to the degree necessary for acceptance as part of the group. The students demonstrated their acceptance of me in a number of ways, such as ensuring that the teachers

included me in classroom games and activities, asking me to protect objects for them, and teasing me. Students also repeatedly demonstrated that they did not view me as an authority figure by participating in behavior that could get them in trouble, such as swearing or hitting each other, in my presence but stopping these behaviors when other adults came near. In interviews, several adults also commended me on my ability to be accepted by their students.

In addition to participant observation, I also interviewed 53 of the 82 fifth grade students, the four fifth grade teachers, both principals, and four school staff members who were frequently present during lunch and recess. All fifth grade students were invited to participate in interviews and interviews were completed with all who returned signed parent and student informed consent statements, including two of the students I had not been allowed to observe. In total, I interviewed 24 of 37 fifth grade students at Hillside Elementary and 29 of 45 at Greenfield Elementary. Student interviews typically lasted for 25-30 minutes and took place during periods of free time approved by the teacher in empty classrooms where other students could not see or hear the interviews in order to preserve confidentiality. Examples of interview questions that were most relevant to the current study include "Can you think of a time when you saw one student being mean to another student?", "What do you think you would do if somebody was mean to you?", and "How do you decide when to tell on somebody for breaking the rules?" In general, I asked students a number of follow-up questions related to their answers to help me gain a better understanding of their responses and decision-making processes.[2]

Adult interviews were typically 50-60 minutes in length. In these interviews I sought to understand the process that adults followed when students reported behavior to them. As a result, I asked them to "Walk me through your thought process and what you would do if a student

[2] The IRB insisted that questions about direct student involvement in situations remained hypothetical. For a more detailed examination of the IRB's effects on this and other studies of children, see Harger (2017).

came up to you and said that somebody else was calling them a name," as well as what they would do if a student reported that somebody else was pushing them and how these responses would differ if they had observed the behaviors themselves. I followed this by asking them to explain a specific recent situation in which they "had to deal with a problem between students" and further questions about how they determined if situations were serious or benign.

In my data collection I used an interpretive approach, viewing individuals as active agents who are influenced by social structures but take an active role in counteracting or modifying these structures (Mehan 1992; Eder and Nenga 2003). This approach allowed me to examine the ways that both students and adults actively construct shared understandings in these schools that influenced decisions of whether or not to tell. Because patterns in student decision-making regarding telling were similar in both schools, and I observed similar amounts of negative interactions in both schools, I discuss students from both schools together in my analyses. Similarly, the themes that emerged in my data were present for both male and female students so I do not compare results by gender.

While many quotes in this paper come from student interviews, data from participant observations with students and interviews with adults were important in assessing the reliability of my data. Studies with multiple researchers conducting data collection and/or analysis often include measures of intercoder reliability to ensure that the data were collected and coded in the same manner across researchers (Rust and Cooil 1994; Davey, Gugiu, and Coryn 2010). Given the scale and scope of the larger research project in which I collected and analyzed all data myself, calculating a measure of inter-coder reliability was not feasible. However, I rely on the triangulation of information from observations and interviews with students and adults to assess the reliability of my data.

This was accomplished in three ways: First, following Eder and Fingerson (2002), the participant observation portion of my data collection preceded interviewing and was used to ground interview questions and observe communicative norms and patterns while developing a general understanding of the school culture and rapport with students. This allowed students to honestly discuss their responses to negative interactions, as evident in the number of students who reported that they would not immediately tell a teacher, which would be the expected answer if students were merely attempting to provide the "appropriate" response. Second, my observations allowed me to verify that student reports reflected actual student behavior (Morse et al. 2002; Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Finally, my observations and adult interviews allowed me to situate student reports within the broader school context. For example, students reported a reluctance to tell adults about negative interactions because of the hassle of being involved as a witness for adults and this practice was clearly evident in my observations and discussed by adults in my interviews with them.

Together, data from my observations and interviews with students and adults allow us to better understand the combined roles that students and adults play in creating a school context in which telling is not seen as a worthwhile response to negative interactions between students. In the analysis below I first explore the contexts in which students stated that they would *not* report behaviors to adults. Next, I explore which situations motivate students to tell *despite* a school context in which telling is viewed as negative. Finally, I consider the roles that friendships play within this context. I argue that there are a large number of reasons for students not to tell and that these decisions depend heavily on the perceived severity of an interaction and a targeted student's social support network. This places students with a lack of social support at a

disadvantage and emphasizes the seriousness of physical attacks while downplaying the need to address verbal attacks.

When Not to Tell

In interviews, only about a quarter of students reported that their initial response to a student being mean to them would be to tell a teacher or other supervisor. Telling on others was similarly rare in my observations. The rarity of telling makes it especially important to understand the reasons that students avoided this response. Moreover, because adults did not witness the majority of negative interactions, student decisions *not* to tell prevented adults from being aware of, and thus addressing, these behaviors. Interview data provide insight into student justifications for not telling, which are supported by my observations. These justifications include: a general stigma against telling and "tattle tales," perceptions of certain attacks as "minor," the desire to avoid showing weakness, the disciplinary process itself, and an effective "golden rule" in which some students avoid putting others situations that they would prefer to avoid themselves. These justifications are reinforced by the fact that adults are not always effective at resolving problems and punishing the appropriate students. In the following paragraphs I discuss student descriptions of each of these factors.

Stigmatized Tattle Tales

A primary justification for not reporting negative behaviors to adults was the stigma associated with "tattle tales" or "tattlers." Leann at Greenfield defined "tattlers" as those who see "little things that are like no problem, not going to be a problem, but [they] go and tell anyway." There was a strong desire at both schools to avoid being seen as a "tattle tale" and to avoid those who received this label. For example, Jason at Greenfield stated, "I hate tattle tales." This label centered on two groups of students: younger children and those who were perceived to tell on

others for behaviors that were, as Jim at Greenfield stated, "not really that big of a deal." Chad at Hillside argued that "nobody ever tells unless you are really little" while Malcolm stated that Hillside had "hordes of little kids" that "come and tattle." This sentiment was echoed by Hillside's principal, who told students that the recess supervisor did not have time for tattlers. The association of telling with younger children is consistent with research suggesting that older students are less likely to report incidents to adults than younger students (Trach et al. 2010).

As Malcolm asserts, adults in both schools contributed to the stigma associated with telling too much. Consistent with Malcolm's statement, Mrs. Winter, Hillside's principal, noted that "kids seem to tattle on the trivial stuff and then sometimes when it's the bigger stuff we don't know it. We had a little boy here who was black and someone was calling him 'nigger.' I want to know this." Recess supervisors at both schools echoed this differentiation between important and unimportant information. For example, early in my field work I was in line with the Greenfield students at the end of recess when I heard one of the supervisors say that students should not tell on others unless they do something "really bad," continuing to state that students sometimes tell on others too much. In making these statements, adults in both schools reinforced the idea that "tattle tale" was a label that students should avoid and contributed to students' reluctance to tell on others. Although adults (and students, as noted below) differentiated between "trivial stuff" and things that were "really bad," the meanings of these distinctions may not have been shared with students. It is possible, then, that the student who had been called "nigger" had not reported it because of Mrs. Winter's previous statements to students about recess supervisors not having time for tattlers.

"Minor" Attacks

Differentiation between "major" and "minor" attacks was key to the stigma associated with tattle tales and a second factor in students' decisions not to tell. For most students, verbal attacks were classified as minor. Maggie at Greenfield, for example, stated, "if they're teasing me, I'd probably just laugh about it 'cause it's not anything that major that you need to go and tell a teacher about." Some students also noted that they wouldn't tell on somebody for a verbal attack, even if the attack was emotionally hurtful. Tom at Greenfield stated, "usually just saying something doesn't hurt you too much, it just makes you feel bad." As noted above, messages from adults also affected these decisions. Christy explained a belief that she might "get in trouble for being nosy" if she told on somebody for the wrong thing, giving an example in which she was in the computer lab and somebody was using the wrong program. When she told Mrs. Hunter, who was teaching the computer class, about the situation, Christy reported that Mrs. Hunter replied, "Why are you being nosy? You're not supposed to be watching their monitor, you're supposed to be watching yours!" For Christy, Mrs. Hunter's assertion that students sometimes need to mind their own business in the computer lab carried over to the Greenfield Elementary playground, where Mrs. Hunter is a supervisor, reinforcing the belief of students that some behaviors matter less than others.

Students' perceived intentions were also seen as an important way to differentiate between "major" and "minor" attacks. Jane at Hillside, for example, stated, "I can take, like, little jokes and things." Jerry at Hillside noted, "I never really got mad at anybody when I *knew* they were joking around. Now, if I didn't know they were joking around I probably would." Jim stated that he gives his friends the benefit of the doubt, arguing "if they're your friends and kinda know it might be jokin' around but if they're not, they're just total strangers, then you kinda know that they're probably bein' mean." Students in both schools attempted to use the ability to

define behaviors as joking to protect attackers from potential punishment and targets from potentially hurt feelings. Adults also used perceived intentions to determine their responses. For example, in one instance at Hillside I wrote in my field notes that Jared jumped on Brad and pulled him down to the ground before running away. Brad chased him, pulling on Jared's shirt. Mrs. Wheeler, who observed the interaction between these two friends, said, "You better be playing!" Because in a different context the same behaviors would have been interpreted as a serious physical attack, situations such as this reinforced student beliefs that negative behavior between friends was acceptable.

Avoiding Signs of Weakness

A third major justification for students not to tell adults about negative behavior was the desire to avoid showing signs of weakness to peers.[3] This was accomplished both by ignoring verbal attacks and retaliating against physical attacks. As Kaci at Hillside noted, if somebody was mean to her:

> K: I wouldn't let it bother me. Because I would, I could feel hurt inside if I wan- if it hurt me that bad, but I wouldn't show it. I wouldn't be like, ((makes crying noises)) "*That. Was. So. Mean*." I'd be like, "Suuure."
>
> I: So if you were hurt by something somebody said, why would you not want to let them know?
>
> K: Because that shows weakness and that's just what, then people are going to do it more and more. Like a bully, if you show that you're really scared of it, like then they'll keep doing it and doing it and doing it and it just won't stop. But if you let it not bother you, I guess they'll think, like, "Hey, they're not going to listen to anything I say, so I should just stop."

Jason at Greenfield also discussed the importance of avoiding weakness:

[3] As noted earlier, hiding negative emotional reactions is an important coping strategy that students use to deal with negative behaviors that also makes it more difficult for adults to detect them (Gamliel et al. 2003; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). Because a discussion of the full range of coping strategies used by these students is beyond the scope of this paper, my focus here is on the ways that these behaviors impact students' willingness to report behaviors to adults.

> If they like hit me in the shoulder and just kept hittin' me and bullyin' me around, I'd probably like hit 'em back and make 'em stop hittin' me. Like, I'd probably hit 'em a bunch, not a bunch, but like, I'd hit them in the shoulders. Prove to 'em that-that I can. Like, "stop bullyin' me around." But if it was something, just someone called me like, "retard," like, "your mom's stupid," I wouldn't do anything. I would just ignore 'em.

For Jason, like Kaci, it was important not to show weakness. While ignoring a verbal attack demonstrated that a student was emotionally strong, however, students such as Jason believed that ignoring a physical attack demonstrated that a student is willing to be pushed around. Ted at Hillside argued that retaliation was important "so you just don't let people know that you're scared of them." Echoing negative associations with younger children, Jill at Greenfield stated that students defend themselves because "in 5th grade they probably think they want to be cool and want to start fighting back so that people don't think they're wusses or something."

Although adults in the schools did not reinforce these beliefs, some students reported that their parents did. For example, Brittney at Hillside reported that her dad "said 'if somebody punches you, you should go back and punch them back. That's what we did when we were little.' I was like, 'okay.'" When asked if that stopped people from being mean to her, she replied, "No. Well, it depends. Like Phil. I pushed him the other day, um, into the creek, and so he didn't come around me ((slight laugh)) the rest of the day. So, yes." Whether ignoring verbal attacks or retaliating against physical attacks, students (and, reportedly, some of their parents) believed that it was important not to show signs of weakness. It is also important to note that although telling was not seen as a solution in these situations, students discussing responses like these typically shared the classification of verbal attacks as minor.

The Disciplinary Process

For bystanders who were not directly involved in an interaction, the disciplinary process itself was a potential reason to avoid telling. Because supervisors at both schools rarely observed

verbal or physical abuse on the playground, adults reported having to act like detectives after the fact, often interviewing multiple witnesses in order to ascertain what had transpired. Sandy at Hillside captured the reluctance of some students to participate in this process, recalling:

> S: [The boys in the class] said they were gonna beat up someone. I'm just like, the teacher's gonna know that. If something's going on, the teacher's gonna realize. I'm just like, I really don't want to get in this, because then I would probably have to go to the office and explain to Mrs. Knight and-
>
> I: So if you told on somebody, like, you would have to go and, like, tell every- everything that you had heard or what you knew, and then//
>
> S: //And sometimes I wouldn't know that much, and they would think that I know everything, and I'm just like, "I don't know much."
>
> I: So they would think you had more information than you really// did?
>
> S: //Yeah. And it would be pressure.

Because Sandy has had to act as a witness in these investigations and reports negative experiences with them, it seems that her true motivation for not telling may be to avoid the experience of serving as a witness rather than an assumption that adults are really aware of what is going on between students. Although this was not a common response, it is important because it reveals the way that the disciplinary process itself can discourage students from telling.

The Golden Rule

While some bystanders did not want to serve as witnesses, a small number of students who were sometimes in trouble themselves described a sort of "golden rule" of telling. For example, Jody at Hillside noted that in deciding whether or not to tell on somebody for breaking the rules she considered whether she had ever broken the same rule. If she had, she tended not to tell because "I've done it, too." Jason at Greenfield expanded on this, stating, "I never tell on kids who break the rules," because, "if I break the rules, I don't want someone tellin' on me. So, like, if they break the rules, why would I want someone tellin' on them?" Christy was not as

reluctant to tell, but tried to "not get them involved with the principal, 'cause I don't like doing that to people." She then revealed that she did not like to put other people in that position because "[the principal] scares me." Each of these students reported avoiding putting other students in situations in which they had found themselves in the past or might find themselves in the future.

In a few cases, this consideration extended to life outside of school. Hank at Greenfield noted the usefulness of this:

> Sometimes I'll keep it to myself like when me and Tim got into a fight I kept it to me and Tim kept it to him cause if [Tim's parent] woulda heard about it, Tim woulda been black and blue the next morning probably, and I would've too… My stepdad, he has a paddle, and whenever I do something really bad, he'll get me with it really bad. Or else, he'll have me do over fifty pushups sometimes.

In addition to trouble at home, it is also likely that both students would be punished for fighting by the principal. In cases such as this, then, the negative consequences associated with telling outweighed any positives for the students involved.

Potentially Ineffective Adults

Even if students did not seek to avoid telling for the reasons detailed above, they recognized that telling a teacher was not always an effective way of solving problems, which is consistent with findings by others (Lloyd and Stead 2001; Oliver and Candappa 2007). Jerry at Hillside noted that teachers were sometimes "in the middle of somethin'," preventing them from turning their attention to a student's interpersonal issues. Similarly, Bobby at Hillside noted that teachers may not see an issue as important enough to deal with, stating, "Kathy, she really gets on my nerves a lot and, um, like, she'll do somethin' that aggrevates me a lot and it's like against the classroom rules and she'll be, like, makin' a lot of noise and stuff and then I'll tell Mr. Erickson and he's like "well, she's not hurtin' nobody blah, blah, blah.'" Joel at Hillside noted

that even when the principal takes action, this is not necessarily an effective means of problem solving. For example, in response to cases of physical violence, instead of issuing suspensions, which Joel thought would send a strong message that this kind of action will not be tolerated, "she'll call the parents and then the parents don't really care." Because of this, even students who initially reported behaviors to a teacher reported using other tactics if the teacher did not resolve the problem.

Some students reported that their parents supported telling while recognizing that those options may fail. John at Greenfield, for example, stated, "my parents say if they, if someone's being mean to you and they're like punching at you, you tell the teacher first and if they don't do anything about it, if they're doing it again, then you gotta defend yourself." Jason at Greenfield reported a similar message, noting, "my dad said the first thing to do if they hit you a bunch, tell the teacher. And if they keep doin' it, beat 'em up. Well, not beat 'em up, but hit them back." In relation to the discussion of not showing weakness above, both John and Jason noted that telling the teacher might stop a single physical attack while not necessarily preventing future attacks. The potential ineffectiveness of teachers, then, reinforces students' other justifications for not telling.

When to Tell

In light of the justifications for *not* telling discussed above, rather than asking why students would choose not to tell in a particular situation we can ask which situations motivate students to tell *despite* all of the reasons not to do so. Student justifications for telling fall into three categories: perceptions of certain attacks as "really bad," continued negative behaviors, and disliking the student they are telling on. In the following paragraphs I discuss student descriptions of each of these factors.

"Really Bad" Attacks

As discussed above, students distinguished between "major" and "minor" attacks with verbal attacks typically classified as minor and physical attacks typically classified as major. As a result, students reported a general willingness to tell on others for physical attacks. Jane at Hillside exemplified this sentiment, stating, "I would only tell the teacher if they did something really, really bad." When asked what she would classify this way, she stated, "If they kicked you or punched you." Some students also discussed how a physical attack could outweigh the desire to avoid being seen as a tattle tale. Kaci at Hillside, for example, stated "it just feels weird telling on people. If, 'cause, I mean, there are, like, tattle tales. Like, '*Oh my gosh*, you just hit me, I'm going to tell the teacher.' But, of course, if they like actually physically hurted me, I would tell, but I am not really the telling kind of person."

The attacker's motive and victim's innocence were also cited as factors in deciding to tell. For example, Luke at Greenfield noted that he would classify "punching a person on purpose for no reason" as "really mean" and deserving of telling. Similarly, Maggie at Greenfield noted that, "if someone is pushing over and knocking me down for no absolute reason, I would probably not just ignore 'em, I would go and tell the teacher because they don't need to push on you for no reason." These descriptions imply both that these behaviors were purposeful and that the recipient of these behaviors did nothing to justify them. A few students also mentioned particularly bad forms of verbal attacks. Joel at Hillside, for example, discussed classmates saying "nasty stuff" about his sister and Ted at Hillside argued that he would be bothered by students saying "something about my mama." In these cases, invoking a victim's innocent family members also allowed them to see telling as a legitimate response.

Continued Negative Behavior

In addition to the definition of a particular behavior as "really bad," students reported that the continuation of negative behavior would lead them to eventually tell a teacher, even if this would not have been their initial response. Over two thirds of students I interviewed said that they would tell an adult if negative behavior persisted. For these students, teachers were seen as a last resort if they were unable to handle things on their own. Joanna at Hillside, for example, reported that "if it kept happening, I would tell someone." Similarly, Jim at Greenfield stated, "if it got to a point where they're not stopping, then I would probably go tell a teacher." When asked what he would do if somebody was mean to him, Tom at Greenfield replied:

> First I'd try to get away and if, if they kept on bothering me, um, I would run away again, and then if they keep on bothering me, just stuff like that, then I'll go tell the teacher and then after that, let's see, well, the first thought that ran through my mind was punch 'em in the nose, but then they, that's only if they punch me first.

In this statement Tom recognized the desire to handle things on his own, that some situations might necessitate telling a teacher, and the fact that telling an adult is not always effective.

Telling on Those You Dislike

A small number of students also reported being more likely to tell on those that they disliked. Although rare, these responses are important because they demonstrate the important role that interpersonal relationships play in a disciplinary setting that relies on student reports. Marshall at Hillside exemplified these responses in his interview:

> We don't like Will very much 'cause we try to get him in trouble. If he did something, we try to get him in trouble for doing it. So we try to get him in trouble as much as we possibly can so he's not around us very much… if we like hit Will, or if Will did something, we'd probably tell each other and then go tell the teachers like all together so we all saw it. 'Cause like if Ryan saw Will hit someone, he'd tell us and then we'd all go and say we're all witnesses.

Not only does Marshall indicate a willingness to tell on Will, he also indicates a willingness to participate in the disciplinary process as a witness against Will, even if he did not actually

observe Will's behavior. Marshall's statement also demonstrates the important role that social support played in students' decisions about whether or not to tell on others, which I discuss in the next section.

The Importance of Friendship

Friendship was a common thread throughout students' discussions of whether or not they would tell in various situations. Because adults did not observe most of the negative behavior that occurred at these schools and relied on students to tell on others and serve as witnesses, students held a great deal of power in the disciplinary process. As a result, decisions of whether or not to tell on a particular student were influenced not only by the characteristics of an interaction but also by whether they liked or disliked that student. Additionally, one's friends played an important role when one had been told on because of their ability to counter the reports of other witnesses. Friendships, then, protected some students from being told on *and* protected them from punishment when they were. Friends also provided social support and sometimes reported behaviors to an adult on another's behalf. I discuss each of these findings in the paragraphs below.

Protection from Being Told On

A number of students reported that they were less likely to tell the teacher when their friends say or do something to them than when others did so. Phil at Hillside noted that there was a "big difference" in how he reacted because "if they're my friends, they have to get me really, really angry, like furious [before I would tell the teacher], but if they're not my friends, it just takes a little, just very little to get me to tell on them." Brittney at Hillside noted the potential social ramifications of telling on friends, saying that she would not tell on her friends "Because they might get mad at me, and they wouldn't be- want to be friends anymore." In these

examples, the desire to maintain friendships outweighs momentary anger. This does not mean, however, that students will accept unlimited bad behavior from their friends. Kaci at Hillside, for example, held her friends to a higher standard, noting "if it was my friend and they were meaning it, picking on me, then I would be more upset than somebody I didn't know that well."

Protection from Punishment

Because investigations by recess supervisors, teachers, and principals were an important part of the disciplinary procedure, students who were accused of misbehavior were less likely to be punished if they had witnesses to support them. For example, Marcy at Greenfield reported being falsely accused in the past but relying on friends to contradict her accuser. She explained:

> "I've always had a friend that's with me at the same that that happened … and if someone that just apparently just doesn't like me, just says, 'she did this,' and then I've got these guys that are like, 'help, what did I do?' And then they're all like, 'Well, she didn't do that. She was with us playing basketball or she was talking to us.'"

Marci also cautioned, however, that friends can face pressure to provide alibis for those who *are* guilty. A large number of students stated that they would lie to protect a friend from punishment. This allowed student reputations to play a role in the disciplinary procedure because adults could not necessarily trust student reports. Along these lines, Jerry at Hillside argued "if the person has been pretty much good all year or good part of the year, the teacher will probably know" that he or she is innocent. Abigail at Hillside argued that the importance of one's reputation also extended to witnesses, with teachers placing their trust in statements by students who did not "do bad things."

Importantly, students were aware of others' reputations and used this to their advantage. Jerry at Hillside noted that one's reputation was important in getting another student in trouble because "some of the good students who don't like some of the bad students would go and say something that a bad student didn't do and they- and since the good student hadn't gotten in

trouble, the bad student would get in trouble." Students with bad reputations, then, were accused more frequently than those with good reputations. Sandy at Hillside argued, Mike "sorta has, not a bad reputation, but people know that he can get in trouble really easy. And so, if something comes up, then they're just like, 'Mike did it.'" Brian at Hillside, who regularly teased, chased, and pushed others, reported being wrongly accused, stating, "I know I've got told on for throwing a ball and I didn't throw it, and it hit somebody."

Student comments about the importance of one's reputation in the success of a false accusation are strongly supported by the comments of teachers, principals, and recess supervisors. Nearly all of the adults that I interviewed reported that student reputations play a role in their disciplinary decisions. As Mrs. Neely, a recess and lunch supervisor at Hillside Elementary, explained, "first time offenders, depending on what it is, you are kind of more lenient about things than the people who are repeatedly in trouble. I mean, I'm not one to take recess all the time from somebody, but the repeat offenders, I sometimes, I don't think twice about making them go stand [for time out]." Mr. White, the Greenfield principal, reported considering a student's reputation along with "witness accounts." This practice placed students like Mike, who had bad reputations and relatively few friends, at a significant disadvantage when accused of negative behavior.

Support and Reporting for Others

Beyond the disciplinary procedure, friendships also provided students with social support and sometimes led to others telling on one's behalf. Joey at Hillside noted that his friends might "try to comfort me or something." Similarly, Marcy at Greenfield noted that if somebody was mean to her she would seek a friend "and ask them if they can help me if it happens again," which would make her "feel a lot more comfortable." Friendships could be especially useful for

students with relatively high social standing. For example, Chad at Hillside argued that in response to "really mean" negative behavior he would probably "start making jokes about them" with his friends. He and his friends might then "kind of like cast them out… or if they wanted to like hang out, we'd be like, 'no,' or just ignore them." Chad's social status allowed him to use his friendships to retaliate at attackers. Regardless of social standing, seeking refuge with friends was an important tactic mentioned by students at both schools.

In addition to students who sought help from others, I also observed students intervening on behalf of their friends in attempts to stop negative behaviors. In the following example from my field notes, we see three students at Hillside attempt to intervene on Monica's behalf:

> When it was time for social studies Kathy's book was missing. Because of this Mr. Erickson told her to sit by somebody and read their book with them and Kathy chose to sit in the aisle between Monica and Felicity's desks. For almost the entire time that the class was reading out of the social studies book Kathy was bothering Monica. First, she had her water bottle in her mouth and was pressing the bottom end against Monica's arm, then she made a face at Monica, then she went back to pushing Monica with the water bottle, this time while holding it in her hands. I couldn't see Monica's face but she did not say anything while this was going on, she just put up with it and tried to ignore it. At one point Kathy went out in the hall to get a drink and Monica and Felicity tried to move their desks and push the chair that Kathy was sitting in back so that when she returned she wouldn't be so close but when Kathy came back she just pulled the chair up next to Monica's desk again. Throughout this time Ben seemed like he was irritated by Kathy's actions and Jared kept telling Kathy to stop when she was pushing Monica or to "shut up" when she was talking. Finally, Ben and Brad approached Mr. Erickson and told him what Kathy was doing to Monica. Mr. Erickson told Kathy that she needed to leave Monica alone and she relented.

Although she did not directly confront Kathy in the excerpt above, Monica made it clear that Kathy bothered her when she attempted to move her desk away from Kathy's chair. Throughout this interaction, Jared tried and failed to verbally curb Kathy's behavior against Monica. After his efforts failed to resolve the situation, Ben and Brad approached Mr. Erickson, who was able to stop Kathy's behavior.

As evident in this example, peers were also important for reporting negative behaviors to teachers and other supervisors. Kerri, in the middle of the social standings at Hillside, noted that if somebody was mean to her, "I'd either ignore it if it wasn't too bad and if it was really bad I'd either tell the teacher or some-, one of my friends, and they could tell someone." Bobby, who was near the bottom of the social standings at Hillside, reported that his friends might support him in a number of ways. He noted, "they'd just probably say tell on 'em, 'n, and stuff like that and they would probably tell for you or for me." Bobby argued that he sometimes did not want to tell teachers about negative behaviors because he did not "really want to get the kids in real big trouble," but noted that his friends will sometimes push him to tell on those who have been mean to him and, in other cases, actually tell the teacher on his behalf.

Discussion and Conclusion

Taking these findings together, it appears that those who study the reporting behaviors of participants and bystanders in negative interactions may be approaching this topic from the wrong perspective. Rather than asking why students would choose *not* to report negative behavior (e.g. Oliver and Candappa 2007), perhaps researchers should ask why they *would*. Like previous researchers (e.g. Smith and Shu 2000; Oliver and Candappa 2007), I find that students often believe reporting behaviors to adults is ineffective.[4] In addition to being potentially ineffective, however, I also find that students who are directly involved in these interactions recognize that telling a teacher may be perceived as a sign of weakness, letting the attacker know that he or she "got to" the victim (Garpelin 2004). Further, a student who develops a reputation

[4] Adults in these schools did the best that they could but the number of students per adult made it difficult for them to effectively deal with student reports of behavior. See Harger (2019) for a more detailed description of these challenges.

for telling adults may be labeled a “tattle tale,” effectively increasing the abuse he or she is trying to reduce.

This study also provides insight into the decision-making processes of bystanders, who are central to efforts to increase reporting and intervention (Sullivan et al. 2004; Meyer 2016). For bystanders, the potential for being labeled a “tattle tale” and the hassle associated with serving as a witness while adults attempt to reconstruct what has occurred appear to outweigh the rewards associated with helping a fellow student, especially when that student is not a friend. Building on previous studies that focused solely on the perspectives of students (e.g. Gamliel et al. 2003; Hamarus and Kiakkonen 2008; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011) or adults (e.g. Merten 1997), these findings demonstrate the importance of exploring the relationship *between* students and adults in creating a school context in which telling is not seen as a worthwhile response to negative interactions between students.

In this context, students wield a large amount of power over their participation in the disciplinary process, with this power being concentrated among those with the strongest support networks and best relationships with adults. For a student with high social status, such as Chad at Hillside, it may make more sense to use friends in an attempt to “cast out” a verbal attacker than to tell an adult. Students with less social status or smaller support networks, though, may be less able to effectively handle problems on their own. Bobby at Hillside, for example, reports that his friends often encourage him to tell on those who have attacked him. For social isolates, these factors may be magnified. Students with no social support networks may see telling an adult as the only way to react to a negative interaction, which demonstrates weakness and may lead to being labeled a “tattle tale.”

These findings also provide important insight into the different ways that students respond to physical and verbal attacks. While definitions of bullying recognize that verbal attacks can be just as harmful as physical attacks (Olweus 1993), there were a number of factors in these schools that prevented verbal attacks from being addressed. First, in line with previous research, student interactions such as these often took place in locations such as the playground or the school bus where it was difficult for adults to directly observe students (Craig et al. 2000; Hamarus and Kiakkonen 2008). Second, verbal interactions are harder to observe than physical interactions (it was easy, for example, to witness one student hitting another from across the playground while it was impossible to hear what was being said from the same distance). Finally, the association of telling on others with young children and "tattling" prevented students from reporting rule violations that they viewed as "minor," which included verbal attacks. The result is that both students and adults downplayed verbal attacks in these schools, despite evidence that the accumulation of verbal attacks can have long-term consequences for victims (Newman 2004; Sue 2010).

Further research is needed in order to understand how these interpretations of negative behavior and decisions about whether or not to tell them may differ in urban and suburban schools and whether race or social class may play a role in more diverse settings, but these findings suggest a number of implications for those who work in schools. First, teachers, principals, and staff members need to address the fact that students may fear the process of reporting negative behavior and serving as a witness. Adults in these cases need to be careful to obtain information without putting undue pressure on student witnesses. Second, adults in schools need to recognize that the majority of negative behaviors are probably not reported. Thus, when students do report things these reports need to be taken seriously and adults need to

demonstrate to students that they are willing to work to help resolve the problem. Beyond this, adults should work to identify patterns of behavior, such as students who are consistently being abused by a particular student or group of students. In this way teachers, principals, and staff members can work to stop ongoing attacks that may be individually perceived as minor.

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