Cross-Sectional Research Evaluating School Psychologists’ Training on Dating Violence and Perceived Competence

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Abstract

Each year, one in five adolescents’ report being a victim of physical or sexual dating violence and 40% of girls ages 14 to 17 know someone their age that has been beaten by a boyfriend (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence [NRCDV], 2004). School psychologists have an integral role in serving the physical and mental health needs of students. However, it is not known if school psychologists are being trained to competently address dating violence. The primary aim of this cross-sectional exploratory analysis is to identify what forms of dating violence training school psychologists received from school psychology programs and assess school psychologists’ knowledge base of dating violence. Such information may be useful for identifying the level of competency school psychologists have regarding dating violence and in which dynamic they may need further instruction.
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Marquart and colleagues (2007) examined the prevalence of dating violence and victimization among adolescents and examined patterns by gender and region. Results showed that approximately one-sixth of students in grades ten through twelve have experienced dating violence. Violence by region of the U.S. revealed higher levels of violence for both males and females living in the South. Consistent with previous research in this area, females from all four regions reported being victims of dating violence more often than their male counterparts. Exposure to community violence was found to be the best predictor of both perpetration and victimization. Other factors related to dating violence were assessed by Howard and Wang (2003). The authors identified the most significant risk factors of dating violence among 7,284 ninth through twelfth grade U.S. females. According to their analysis a cluster of risk factors associated with dating violence victimization included multiple sex partners, nonuse of condoms, ethnicity, binge drinking, cocaine or inhalant use, and sad or hopeless feelings.

In addition to prevalence, school psychologists should be aware of potential predictors of dating violence victimization and perpetration. Cleveland, Herrera, and Stuewig (2003) found that GPA was a significant predictor for both males and females in regard to male-to-female abuse. Verbal IQ, fighting, attitudes about sex and relationships, and past sexual behavior were only predictive for males. In contrast, Mother relationship, school attachment, drinking behaviors, and depression were only predictive for females (Cleveland, et. al, 2003). Arriage and Foshee (2004) assessed the risks of exposure to violent relationships (interparental violence or friend dating violence) in predicting later victimization or perpetration. Although both dependent
variables were associated with perpetration and victimization, only friend dating violence predicted later perpetration for boys and later victimization for girls. Results showed that adolescents were more likely to be victims of dating violence to the extent that their friends were in violent relationships (Arriage & Foshee, 2004). Specific to African American females, Raiford, Wingood, and Diclemente (2007) found that having less understanding of healthy relationships or those who used drugs were two times more likely to experience dating violence. As well, participants who viewed X-rated movies were 1.9 times as likely to experience dating violence (Raiford, et. al., 2007). Although generalizability is a limitation to this study, African Americans may be at increased risks for dating violence and therefore, targeted research is needed for culturally sensitive prevention and intervention (Howard & Wang, 2003; Silverman, et. al., 2001; Howard, et. al., 2007).

Dating violence victimization is also associated with negative social and emotional factors. Howard, Wang, and Fang (2007) examined the psychosocial factors associated with reports of dating violence from a national sample of adolescent females. The authors assessed four dimensions: violence, suicide, substance use, and sexual risk behavior. Results showed that participants who reported being victimized also reported more emotional distress, violence-related behaviors, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and sexually risky behavior (Howard, et. al., 2007). Silverman and colleagues (2001) examined the health risks associated with female adolescent dating violence victims. The authors found that participants who reported dating violence in the previous year were twice as likely as those that had not to have multiple sexual partners. In addition, participants that were victims of dating violence were found to be at an increased risk for drug use (e.g., heavy smoking, cocaine use, binge drinking), unhealthy weight
Assessing School control (e.g., vomiting, diet pill, laxative use), drinking and driving, and suicidal ideation (Silverman, et. al., 2001).

Although psychosocial factors may affect the present psychological and social status of victims, long-term implications have also been examined. In examining the future risks of dating violence victimization, Smith, White, and Holland (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of physical and sexual assault during adolescent dating relationships and its co-occurrence during college. Data revealed that women physically assaulted as adolescents were at greater risk of re-victimization, as well as being sexually assaulted during their freshman year and each subsequent year. Adolescent victimization was found to be a greater predictor of college re-victimization than childhood victimization (Smith, et. al.).

Smith, White, and Holland (2003) emphasized the urgency in addressing dating violence throughout middle and high school to potentially decrease later re-victimization. There is evidence that dating violence prevention and intervention programs are effective among seventh and eighth graders. Foshee and colleagues (2004) conducted a study assessing the long term effects of the Safe Dates program which is an adolescent dating violence prevention program involving participation in a play, a poster contest and the use of a curriculum based on healthy relationships. Results showed that participants who received Safe Dates treatment maintained less supportive attitudes of dating violence even after a one-year follow-up. In addition, providing an element of social support for victims may be effective in intervention as it has been shown to alleviate victim’s outcomes. Holt and Espelage (2005) identified victimization in dating relationships, psychological functioning, and perceived familial and peer social support in a cross-sectional exploratory analysis. Perceived social support was evaluated as a moderator.
Assessing School between dating violence, victimization, depression and anxiety. Social support was found to be significantly influential as a buffer against anxiety and depression (Holt & Espelage, 2005).

Statement of Problem

It is noted that one in five high school girls have experienced dating violence and that the health risks of adolescent girls that experience dating violence are significantly increased, however, these numbers may under represent the reality because studies did not include adolescents that live in shelters, are homeless, or are high school drop outs (Center for Disease Control, 2006). Although studies demonstrate the prevalence and gravity of dating violence, there is no research available to ascertain whether school psychology graduate training equip school psychologists to be competent in this area. Competency includes training in regard to potential risk profiles of abusers and victims, consequences, and protective factors as well as prevention and intervention strategies to combat dating violence at the middle and high school levels.

The following research questions will be evaluated in this study: Do school psychology programs address dating violence? Do school psychologists feel competent in addressing dating violence in schools? What are school psychologist’s attitudes towards dating violence prevention and intervention programs in schools?

Methods

Sample

Kentucky Association for Psychology in the Schools (KAPS) members were recruited to complete a 10 minute online survey via the KAPS listserv. Participants were comprised of Ed.S. or Ph.D. level KAPS members. There are approximately 243 KAPS members across eight regions. Surveys were sent electronically to all members and 44 were returned. All information
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**Procedures**

Using the sampling procedures described above, a consent form, cover letter and questionnaire were emailed to potential participants. In addition, all respondents will be offered a written report of the study’s findings.

**Instrumentation**

The lead researcher developed the School Psychology and Dating Violence Questionnaire (see Appendix) for this study which was peer-reviewed by my colleagues. The first part of the questionnaire defines school psychology training as “training offered or conducted by your graduate school psychology program which could include: instruction in class, seminars, lectures, presentations, workshops, readings from required texts or articles, or research from own academic or personal interests”. Also, for the purposes of this study dating violence is defined as “physical, sexual, or verbal violence within a dating relationship”. The questionnaire then utilizes four questions to evaluate participants’ school psychology program training on dating violence.

In the second section of the questionnaire, participants were asked two questions to rate their degree of perceived competency related to dating violence, four questions evaluating participant’s knowledge base regarding dating violence, and two questions that address attitudes toward dating violence prevention and intervention in schools. The final section of the survey
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asks for the following background information: gender, age, ethnicity, highest degree earned, total years of experience as a school psychologist, and what is the majority population of students they serve.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted online via SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey provided a tally of the response totals, percents, and response counts for each question. In addition, SurveyMonkey provided rating averages for all rating questions.

Results

Respondents were asked a total of 19 questions. Each question will be stated in this summary with the response rate and response count. If a respondent skipped a question it will be stated, if not, then all 44 respondents answered the question. Forty four participants began and completed the survey.

Questions one through three evaluated what type of training participants received from their school psychology program regarding dating violence. Question number one, “Did your school psychology training teach about dating violence”, resulted in 15.9% (n = 7) of respondents answering yes and 84.1% (n=37) of respondents answering no. Question number two, “What type of school psychology training have you received in regard to dating violence”, allowed participants to choose more than one option. Results showed that 54.5% (n=24) answered None, 6.8% (n=3) of respondents answered Required reading of article(s), 4.5% (n=2) answered Required reading of course text, 2.3% (n=1) answered Attending presentations offered by your program, 6.8% (n=3) answered In-class seminar, 25% (n=11) answered Research from own academic or personal interest, and 20.5% (n=9) answered other. Question number 3, “Please give an indication of how much time was spent on this topic”, allowed participants to
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choose more than one option. Results illustrated that one participant skipped this question, 67.4% (n=29) answered None, 7% (n=3) answered One class period, 23.3% (n=10) answered Dating violence was mentioned as a subtopic, 2.3% (n=1) answered Entire course, 7% (n=3) answered Personal project/Research paper, and 0% (n=0) answered a Series of lectures.

Questions four through six evaluated how adequate school psychologists feel in regard to preparation on dating violence, warning signs of dating violence, and handling a potential incident of dating violence. Question number 4, “Do you believe that you were adequately prepared by your school psychology program to provide prevention and intervention for adolescents in regard to dating violence”, was skipped by two participants, answered yes by 2.4% (n=1) and answered no by 97.6% (n=41). Question number five, “To what extent are you familiar with the warning signs that indicate an individual may be suffering from dating violence”, resulted in 13.6% (n=6) participants answering not familiar at all, 40.9% (n=18) of participants answering Barely familiar, 38.6% (n=17) participants answering Somewhat familiar, and 6.8% (n=3) of participants answering Very familiar. Question number six, “If a student were to come to you and confess that their boyfriend or girlfriend was abusing them, how capable would you feel in helping that student”, was skipped by one participant, answered No familiar at all by 13.6% (n=6) participants, answered Barely familiar by 40.9% (n=18) participants, answered Somewhat familiar by 38.6% (n=17) participants, and answered Very familiar by 6.8% (n=3) of participants.

Questions seven through ten evaluated how knowledgeable participants are in regard to what dating violence encompasses, its’ risks, and knowledge of availability of literature or training on dating violence. Question number seven, “Do you believe that most dating relationships among teenagers and adolescents occur within the school setting”, was skipped by
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one participant, answered Yes I agree by 48.8% (n=21) participants, answered No I do not agree by 23.3% (n=10) participants, and answered not sure by 27.9% (n=12) of participants. More than one option was allowed for question number eight. The question was asked, “Do you consider dating violence to include”, Forcing sexual acts was the response of 100% (n=44) participants, Slapping was the response of 97.7% (n=43) participants, Damaging personal items was the response of 88.6% (n=39) participants, Public humiliation was the response of 95.5% (n=42) participants, and Verbal abuse was the response of 100% (n=44) participants. More than one option was allowed for question number nine which was skipped by two participants. Question number nine asked “Do you believe that victims of dating violence are more likely to” Use drugs was the response of 59.5% (n=25) participants, Engage in unhealthy weight control was the response of 88.1% (n=37) participants, Engage in sexual health risk behaviors was the response of 90.5% (n=38) participants, Have been pregnant was the response of 33.3% (n=14) participants, Make better grades was the response of 9.5% (n=4) participants, Seriously consider and/or attempt suicide was the response of 85.7% (n=36) participants. Question number ten, “Are you aware of any curricula or training regarding dating violence”, was answered Yes by 5.1% (n=2) participants, however, these participants did not enter the name of the curriculum or training into the survey text box option. No was the response of 94.9% (n=37) participants and five participants skipped the question.

Questions eleven through twelve evaluated what needs participants felt were or were not warranted in regard to dating violence education. Question number eleven, “Do you feel that there is a need for a school protocol to help deal with dating violence”, was answered Yes by 75% (n=33) participants, No by 6.8% (n=3) participants, and Not sure by 18.2% (n=8) participants. Question number twelve, “How beneficial do you believe a series of workshops
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would be in helping students to understand:”, provided three options for each workshop topic, 
*Not at all Beneficial, Somewhat Beneficial, and Very Beneficial.* If the option is not discussed, then zero participants chose that option. The first workshop topic, *The signs that a relationship may be abusive* was answered *Somewhat Beneficial* by 13.6% (N=6) participants and *Very Beneficial* by 84.4% (n=38) participants. The second workshop topic *What to do if they find themselves in a violent relationship* was answered *Somewhat Beneficial* by 18.2% (n=8) participants and *Very Beneficial* by 81.8% (n=36) participants. The third workshop topic *What constitutes a healthy relationship* was answered *Not at all Beneficial* by 2.3% (n=1) participant, *Somewhat Beneficial* by 18.2% (n=8) participants, and *Very Beneficial* by 79.5% (n=35) participants. The fourth workshop topic, *What constitutes an unhealthy relationship* was answered *Somewhat Beneficial* by 15.9% (n=7) participants and *Very Beneficial* by 84.1% (n=37) participants.

Questions 13-19 were designed to determine the demographics of participants involved in the study. Question number thirteen “Please indicate your gender” was skipped by two participants. Three participants responded that they were male and 39 participants responded that they were female. Question number 14 “What is your age” was skipped by one participants. Results showed that the average age of the 41 participants who responded was 36.35. Question number fifteen “How do you describe yourself” showed that 42 respondents were Caucasian, one respondent was African American, and one respondent was Asian American. Five participants skipped Question number sixteen “Please indicate your highest degree”. Results showed that 19 of the 39 participants who responded had an Ed.S., 16 of participants had an Psy.S., one participant had a Psy.D., and three participants had a Ph.D. Question number seventeen “Please indicate your total years of experience as a school psychologist” was skipped by one participant.
Results showed that the average years of experience of the 43 participants who responded was 9.93 years. Question number eighteen “Please indicate your primary practice setting” showed that 27.3% (n=12) participants primarily worked in an Elementary school setting, 4.5% (n=2) participants worked in a Middle school setting, 13.6% (n=6) worked in a High school setting, 2.3% (n=1) participants worked in a University setting, 6.8% (n=3 worked in another setting not specified, and 45.5% (n=20) of participants worked in a combined setting. Question number nineteen, “Which group is the majority population in your schools”, allowed participants to choose more than one option. This question was skipped by seventeen participants, 3.7% (n=1) responded ESL or bilingual students, 55.6% (n=15) responded Low SES students, 14.8% (n=4) responded Minority students, 85.2% (n=23) responded Primarily Caucasian students, 18.5% (n=5) responded Mid to High SES students, and 7.4% (n=2) responded that their school was Racially heterogeneous.

Discussion

Results show that although the vast majority of participants recognize a need for awareness and education regarding dating violence in schools just as research agrees, the majority did not receive training in their various school psychology programs in order to feel competent or adequately prepared in addressing issues related to dating violence. Participants that did receive dating violence training from their school psychology programs primarily did so through research from their own academic or personal interest. Although, 53.3% of participants do feel “somewhat capable” in helping a student experiencing dating violence, the majority (94.9%) are not aware of any curricula or training regarding dating violence.

When participants were provided a list of risk factors and asked which they believed were related to dating violence, every risk except for “better grades” should have been checked by the
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42 participants who responded. However, the overall grade for the overall response to this question may be a “D” at best indicating that participants are not fully aware of the dangers associated with dating violence. When participants were asked what actions were included in dating violence, all 44 participants indicated “forcing sexual acts” and “verbal abuse”. However, not all were in agreement as to “damaging personal items”, “public humiliation”, and “slapping”. Results speak to the lack of emphasis or non-existence of dating violence education in school psychology programs.

The majority of participants did feel that dating violence was important enough in the lives of students to present workshops discussing the signs of abusive relationships, what to do if one finds him/herself in an abusive relationship, as well as what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy relationship.

Limitations and Implications

Because this is the first study to evaluate graduate school psychology training regarding dating violence, the survey was self-created and does not have known reliability or validity. However, the survey was peer reviewed to ensure construct validity. Another limitation is that the operational definition of dating violence for this study does not include psychological abuse. Although the author does recognize psychological abuse as a component, it is too broad of a term to be measured for the purposes of this study.

Although there is growing literature regarding the gravity of dating violence including signs, risk factors, and prevention and intervention strategies, the evidence of dating violence being integrated into school psychology programs has not been assessed. This study is a contribution in regard to dating violence research as many do not address availability of training nor competency of school supports such as school psychologists. Ethically school psychologists
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are to only engage in practices for which they are qualified (National Association of School Psychologists, 2000). Therefore, before offering services outside their scope of training, school psychologists must complete appropriate and verifiable training before offering such services (American Psychological Association, 2002). This study is significant in that it is the first to examine school psychology training on dating violence.

References


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