Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity

Supportive, Not Punitive, Practices Reduce Homophobic Bullying and Improve School Connectedness

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Homophobic bullying is a pervasive issue in U.S. schools. Broadly, two distinct approaches to address bullying include punitive versus supportive practices. Few studies have considered these approaches in the context of school connectedness in relation to homophobic bullying. Drawing from theories of social support and control, we argue that supportive practices should reduce homophobic bullying and promote school connectedness. Further, although punitive practices may deter homophobic bullying, they also compromise school connectedness, except perhaps among students who have been bullied. Supportive practices could be especially important for promoting school connectedness for students who experience homophobic bullying. Using teacher ($n = 62,448$) and student ($n = 337,945$) data from 745 high schools that participated in the California School Climate Survey and the California Healthy Kids Survey, our study examines the association between teacher reports of punitive versus supportive practices, and student experiences of homophobic bullying and school connectedness. We also interrogate differential effects of punitive and supportive practices on school connectedness for students who have and have not experienced homophobic bullying. Results indicate that supportive, but not punitive, practices are associated with less homophobic bullying and higher school connectedness. Supportive practices also serve as a protective factor for students who have experienced homophobic bullying. Additionally, students in schools with less supportive practices, and who have not experienced homophobic bullying, report low levels of school connectedness comparable with students who have been bullied. Implications for school policy related to supporting students at risk for being bullied and school disconnectedness are discussed.

Keywords: bias-based bullying, school climate, discipline, school policy, teacher report

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Bullying is a primary and shared concern among stakeholders invested in the health, well-being, and educational success of children and youth (Russell, Day, Ioverno, & Toomey, 2016;

Swearer & Espelage, 2011). The concern is warranted: Young people who are bullied report compromised well-being related to social relationships, mental health, and academic achievement (for reviews, see Hong & Espelage, 2012; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Compared to general harassment, bullying based on bias because of race or ethnicity, gender, and perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) is especially associated with more severe negative outcomes related to mental health, substance use, and truancy (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012).

Although all aspects of harassment and bullying are of concern, we turn our attention to homophobic bullying. This form of bias-based harassment is troublingly prevalent in schools as evidenced by nationwide data revealing that 55% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students report verbal harassment because of their gender expression, and 74% because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Students who report having experienced homophobic bullying—especially those who are questioning their sexuality, or who identify as LGB—are at higher risk of truancy, lower academic performance, poorer mental health (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009), and negative health outcomes including

higher rates of alcohol, drug, and cigarette use (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001; Russell et al., 2012). Additionally, transgender and gender nonconforming youth are at heightened risk of bias-based harassment (Burdge, Licona, & Hyemingway, 2014; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). A study of school safety in California found that LGBT youth of color often experience multiple forms of bias-based harassment, but are most likely to encounter homophobic harassment (Russell et al., 2012). More specifically, among LGBT youth, 20% of students of color reported being bullied because of their race or ethnicity, and 40% of Asian, 60% of Latino/a, 55% of Black or African American, and 56% of multiracial students reported being bullied based on their sexual orientation (Russell, Clarke, & Laub, 2009).

Schools have sought to address bullying in a multitude of ways, including punitive, "tough on crime" approaches intended to dissuade future bullying (Skiba & Losen, 2015), and supportive practices intended to improve school climates. These approaches are notably often implemented to address bullying in general, yet preventive factors for homophobic bullying remain less clear (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). In the current study, we examine punitive versus supportive approaches to discipline and student behavior, and how each relate to homophobic bullying and school connectedness.

Bias-Based Bullying and Harassment

Researchers have made important distinctions between general bullying and discriminatory bullying based on bias because of race/ethnicity, gender, and perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity. Homophobic bullying and harassment includes the use of homophobic language and derogatory comments (Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012), verbal harassment (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008), or physical violence (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; DuRant, Krowchuk, & Sinal, 1998).

Previous research highlights the need to attend to issues of intersectionality, as experiences of victimization and harassment differ across the cultural contexts of both students and schools (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). Specifically, students of diverse backgrounds and identities are often the targets of homophobic bullying (e.g., Toomey & Russell, 2016) and bias-based bullying more generally, including those who identify as heterosexual (Pascoe, 2011; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Poteat & Espelage, 2007), transgender or gender-nonconforming (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun, & Laub, 2004), and ethnic and racial minorities (Kosciw et al., 2009). Additionally, students often experience multiple forms of bullying simultaneously, which can exasperate negative outcomes, such as those related to depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Garnett et al., 2014).

Students need not be the victims of bullying to experience negative outcomes, as observing bullying has been found to be associated with adverse outcomes related to mental health (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Homophobic bullying also has a negative impact on school climates overall (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). Because of the deleterious effects of bullying, not only for victims but also for bystanders, and the negative effects on school climate, addressing hostilities within schools warrants immediate attention, and emphasizes the need for identifying policies and practices that effectively address issues related to bullying and harassment.

Punitive and Supportive Practices

Punitive discipline, in the form of automatic suspensions or expulsions, is often a result of zero-tolerance policies aimed to deter bullying, violence, and other forms of misconduct through strict discipline measures (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008), though there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of this approach (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010; Gerlinger & Wo, 2016; Gregory & Cornell, 2009). There is now a solid and long-standing body of literature that demonstrates that zero-tolerance policies and related punitive practices are ineffective in creating safer school climates (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba & Losen, 2015). Further, punitive punishment in schools is associated with lower academic achievement (Fabelo et al., 2011), and higher risk of school dropout (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011) and incarceration (Fabelo et al., 2011). Punitive discipline has failed to reduce general verbal or physical bullying in schools (Gerlinger & Wo, 2016) and does not address or deter SOGI-related bullying (Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015). Also, students report lower school connectedness in schools in which harsh discipline is used for infractions (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

Supportive practices have also been implemented in schools to address discipline and behavioral issues and to facilitate school connectedness (e.g., Dignity in Schools, 2015; Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2014; Skiba, & Losen, 2015; Snapp & Russell, in press; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). School connectedness, defined by having caring and supportive relationships in school (McNeely & Falci, 2004), is associated with higher academic achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Goodenow & Grady, 1993) and lower health risk behaviors, especially when students report having stronger connections to teachers (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Disparities in school connectedness have been found among racial and ethnic minority students (Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015), and among sexual and gender minority students (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010), which may be associated with higher risk of youth being disengaged from schools and caught in the school-to-prison pipeline (Burdge et al., 2014; Snapp et al., 2015).

There is a diverse array of supportive approaches to discipline that address student-level characteristics (e.g., decision making) as well as structural-level changes to improve school climate (e.g., added support services). Some examples include social-emotional learning (SEL; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011) and school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2006). A number of these programs address both student and structural factors, such as those rooted in restorative justice (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2014). Such approaches have been found to reduce discipline referrals (Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010) and bullying (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Gregory et al., 2010). The extant literature therefore suggests that supportive strategies may reduce homophobic bullying and promote school connectedness among students who have experienced homophobic bullying, though studies have not tested these specific associations (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013).

Current literature on punitive versus supportive practices often treat them as mutually exclusive constructs. However, schools employ a range of strategies on a continuum of punitive and supportive policies. Offering a helpful framework for understand-

ing discipline strategies within schools, approaches to discipline have been conceptualized more succinctly into those that are authoritarian (high in structure, low in support) or authoritative (high in structure and support; Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Cornell & Huang, 2016; Gregory et al., 2010). Bosworth and Judkins (2014) suggest that policies and programs that enforce clear boundaries but are also high in supportive practices may best promote a positive school climate. Therefore, schools that implement a dual-pronged approach with clear rules that express "zero tolerance" for bullying and also promote supportive practices may create safer and more supportive climates for students (Gregory et al., 2010). How this framework extends to homophobic bullying and school connectedness among those subject to homophobic bullying is unknown.

Current Study

In this study, we examine punitive and supportive policies and practices in relation to homophobic bullying and school connectedness. We use datasets that allow us to study policies and practices as reported by teachers, matched with students' reports of homophobic bullying and school connectedness. Studies on policies and programs in schools tend to be based on student reports of policies or practices, or on assessing the effectiveness of programs through student-level outcomes. Yet teachers offer unique perspectives on the policies and practices utilized in their schools, as they are at the nexus of implementing policies and interacting with students. For example, because of their position within schools, teachers' roles extend beyond instruction and exist at the heart of everyday interactions among students. Therefore, much insight can be gained by considering reports from multiple vantage points—such as from the perspective of teachers and students—about policy, practices, and student experiences within schools.

We expect that homophobic bullying will be lower in schools with more supportive policies and practices, but will not differ depending on punitive policies and practices. Further, we expect

school connectedness to be higher in the context of supportive policies and practices, but lower in the context of punitive policies and practices. Finally, when their schools are characterized by supportive policies and practices, we expect higher school connectedness for students who have experienced homophobic bullying. We control for differences in school connectedness and bullying victimization based on age (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; McNeely et al., 2002), race and ethnicity (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; McNeely et al., 2002; Nansel et al., 2001), sex (Cook et al., 2010; McNeely et al., 2002), percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price meal (FRPM) programs, and school size (McNeely et al., 2002).

Method

Sample

Data come from 745 California schools for which we had companion surveys of students (the California Healthy Kids Survey [CHKS], $n = 337,945$) and teachers responsible for health, prevention, discipline, counseling or safety (the California School Climate Survey [CSCS], $n = 62,448$) collected between 2009 and 2011. High schools in California were required to administer the CHKS in compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act (2003) in the 2009–2010 school year, but the mandate expired in 2010 (WestEd, 2011); teacher participation was voluntary.

The CHKS included students in Grades 7 to 12, with the majority enrolled in high schools (5.06% were in Grades 7–8; 51.13% in Grades 9–10; 43.81% in Grades 11–12), ranging in age from 10 to 18 years old ($M = 15.05$, $SD = 1.29$; see Table 1). The student sample in this study was ethnically and racially diverse, with 42.99% identifying as Hispanic, 28.61% as White, 12.93% as Asian, 7.51% as multiple races, 4.85% as African American or Black, and 1.07% as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Students were also asked to identify their sex, with 51.55% reporting female

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Student Demographics and School-Level Characteristics

Variables	Percent/Mean (SD)	Range	n
Student-level			
Grade			
7th	5.06%	—	17,097
9th	51.13%	—	172,801
11th	43.81%	—	148,050
Age	15.06 (1.40)	10–18	336,809
Race/Ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.07%	—	3,334
Asian	12.93%	—	40,350
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2.05%	—	6,389
African American	4.85%	—	15,127
White	28.61%	—	89,291
Multiple	7.51%	—	23,446
Hispanic	42.99%	—	134,183
Sex (Male)	48.45%	—	163,357
Homophobic bullying (yes)	8.90%	—	28,062
School-level			
Supportive practices	.00 (.37)	−1.75–1.20	745
Punitive practices	2.50 (.43)	.50–4.00	745
Free and reduced-priced meals	42.25%	—	745

and 48.45% reporting male. Students were not asked to report on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Measures

Homophobic bullying.   Homophobic bullying was a dichotomized measure of student reports of being harassed or bullied on school property during the past 12 months, "because you are gay or lesbian, or someone thought you were." The survey defined bullying as being "repeatedly shoved, hit, threatened, called mean names, teased in a way you didn't like, or had other unpleasant things done to you. It is not bullying when students of about the same strength quarrel or fight." Students were given four response options ranging from *0 times* to *4 or more times*. Responses were dichotomized, with *0 times* = 0, and responses between *1 time* and *4 or more times* = 1. Homophobic bullying was reported by 8.90% of students.

School connectedness.   School connectedness was a validated five-item scale adapted from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health's School Connectedness Scale (α = .82; Furlong, O'Brennan, & You, 2011; Resnick et al., 1997). Students were asked, "How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your school" (0 = *strongly disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*): (a) "I feel close to people at this school"; (b) "I am happy to be at this school"; (c) "I feel like I am part of this school"; (d) "The teachers at this school treat students fairly"; and (e) "I feel safe at my school." We created a mean-score scale variable based on the means of students' responses across all five items, ranging from 0 to 4.

Student-level covariates.   We included the following covariates to account for demographic characteristics of students: (a) race/ethnicity, (b) sex (0 = female, 1 = male), and (c) age (ranging from 10 to 18 years old).

Punitive practices.   Teachers were asked a series of questions after the statement, "The following questions are ONLY for staff at this school who have responsibilities for services or instruction related to health, prevention, discipline, counseling, and/or safety." *Punitive practices* was a two-item measure (r = .57) of teacher reports regarding how strongly they agreed with the statement, "This school . . ." (a) "punishes first-time violations of alcohol or other drug policies by at least an out-of-school suspension"; and (b) "enforces zero tolerance policies" (0 = *strongly agree*; 4 = *strongly disagree*). These items were reverse coded, averaged, and the mean of teachers' responses were calculated for each school. The aggregated scale ranges from .5 (lowest level of punitive practices) to 4 (highest level of punitive practices).

Supportive practices.   *Supportive practices* was a six-item measure (α = .82). Teachers were asked to rate how strongly they agreed with the statement, "This school . . ." (a) "provides adequate counseling and support services for students" (0 = *strongly agree*; 3 = *strongly disagree*). Teachers were also asked to assess their agreement with the following statements: "This school . . ." (b) "considers sanctions for student violations of rules and policies on a case-by-case basis with a wide range of options"; (c) "provides effective confidential support and referral services for students needing help because of substance abuse, violence, or other problems" (e.g., a Student Assistance Program); and (d) "emphasizes helping students with their social, emotional, and behavioral problems" (0 = *strongly agree*; 4 = *strongly disagree*). Finally,

teachers were asked, "To what extent does this school" (e) "foster youth development, resilience, or asset promotion"; and (f) "provide conflict resolution or behavior management instruction" (0 = *a lot*; 4 = *not at all*).

Items were reverse coded so that all evaluations were scaled from most negative to most positive, and were standardized using z scores before creating the mean-based scale ranging from −2.30 (lowest level of supportive practices) to 1.26 (highest level of supportive practices). Aggregated measures were created by taking the mean of teachers' responses for each school.

School-level covariates.   Both school academic performance index (API) and percent of students eligible for FRPM were tested as covariates. Because both items were highly correlated (r = −.81), and not all schools had data on API, we only included FRPM in final models. The substantive findings remain unchanged when API is excluded from models. We also accounted for school size (based on data available from the California Department of Education).

Analytic Approach

Multilevel models were estimated in Stata 14 for each of the outcomes to account for the nestedness of the data (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2013; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). The *meqrlogit* and *mixed* commands were used to estimate multilevel models for the dichotomous outcome of homophobic bullying and continuous outcome of school connectedness, respectively. We first estimated unconditional models to assess the amount of variance explained by differences between schools (the intraclass correlation [ICC]). Next, we introduced student-level indicators into a conditional model, followed by a model including school-level items (i.e., teacher reports of punitive and supportive practices, FRMP, and school size). Finally, we estimated a full model including cross-level interactions between punitive-practices/supportive practices and homophobic bullying. As the interaction between punitive practices and homophobic bullying was not significant, we excluded the interaction term in the final model for parsimony. Simple slope analyses were conducted using the *margins* command in Stata to decompose the significant interaction between supportive practices and homophobic bullying (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006).

Missing data were determined to be missing at random and imputed using the multiple imputation procedure in Stata (*mi imput*; Acock, 2005; Allison, 2002; Rubin, 1996). Listwise deletion resulted in a loss of 27% of the sample. Final models with imputed data had a sample size of 397,945 students across 745 schools. Ten imputed data sets were created, seeded at 29,390 for replicability (Allison, 2002; McKnight, McKnight, Sidani, & Figueredo, 2007). Parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors.

Results

We present results for students' experiences of homophobic bullying and school connectedness in relation to school-level teacher reports of approaches to supportive and punitive policies. First, we examined the associations between homophobic bullying, supportive practices, and punitive practices. Second, we investigated the associations between school connectedness, supportive

practices, and punitive practices. Finally, we tested for differential associations between school connectedness and homophobic bullying based on varying levels of supportive practices and punitive practices.

Homophobic Bullying

The ICC calculated based on the unconditional model indicated that only 1% of the variance in homophobic bullying was attributable to differences between schools (see Table 2). Despite this low variance between schools, and although there were no differences in homophobic bullying based on teachers' reports of punitive practices (odds ratio [OR] = .99, 95% confidence interval [CI] [.95, 1.03], p = .538), we found that students in schools whose teachers reported more supportive practices had lower odds of experiencing homophobic bullying (OR = .90, 95% CI [.86, .95], $p \leq$ .001). Older students also had lower odds of bullying (OR = .92, 95% CI [.91, .93], $p \leq$ .001). Additionally, compared with White students, Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and multiethnic students had higher odds of bullying (see Table 2). Finally, students in schools with higher proportions of students who received FRPM reported more homophobic bullying (OR = 1.21, 95% CI [1.12, 1.30], $p \leq$ .001).

School Connectedness

For school connectedness, the ICC indicated that 5% of the variance was attributable to differences between schools (see Table 2). Higher supportive practices reported by teachers were positively associated with students' reports of school connectedness (b = .15, $p \leq$ .001), but punitive practices were not associated with school connectedness (b = .01, p = .570). These findings remain unchanged when we account for the percentage of students eligible for FRPM programs (b = −.31, $p \leq$ .001). Additionally, having experienced homophobic bullying was associated with lower school connectedness (b = −.35, $p \leq$ .001), as expected. All student- and teacher-level covariates were significant (see Table 2).

In models that tested differential effects of discipline strategies among students who had experienced homophobic bullying, only supportive practices (not punitive practices) significantly moderated the association between homophobic bullying and school connectedness (b = −.07, $p \leq$ .001; see Figure 1). The simple slopes for schools with the least versus the most supportive practices were both negative (b = −.15, $p \leq$ .001; b = −.32, p = .001, respectively). The results indicate that although students who experienced no homophobic bullying received the most benefit from supportive practices, students who experienced homophobic bullying had notably higher school connectedness if they attended schools in which teachers reported having more supportive practices (see Figure 1).

Discussion

This study examined teachers' reports of punitive versus supportive approaches implemented to address health, violence, discipline, counseling, or safety in schools in association with students' reports of homophobic bullying and school connectedness. Despite the small variability across schools in reports of homopho-

bic bullying, we found that supportive practices were associated with less homophobic bullying, but punitive practices had no effect. As expected, students in schools with more supportive practices reported higher school connectedness. Importantly, students who experienced homophobic bullying felt less connected to schools, yet if they attended schools with more supportive practices, they reported higher school connectedness (compared with students in schools with less supportive practices who also experienced homophobic bullying).

Consistent with previous research, we also found that, except for Hispanic and Asian students, ethnic and racial minority students (Kosciw et al., 2009; Russell et al., 2012), as well as those eligible for FRPM, were at higher risk of homophobic bullying. Additionally, racial and ethnic minority students reported lower school connectedness (Voight et al., 2015). These findings highlight the need to consider multifaceted identities and backgrounds in conjunction with bias-based bullying (Garnett et al., 2014) and school connectedness to identify disparities in students' experiences, and to inform the development of effective policies and practices.

Our findings contribute to existing research that underscores the limitations of punitive and exclusionary practices. Previous studies demonstrate that punitive practices do not deter bullying (Gerlinger & Wo, 2016), including homophobic bullying (Snapp et al., 2015). Although punitive policies may signal that aggressive behavior is not tolerated, our findings suggest that even among students who have been the victims of homophobic bullying, such practices did not facilitate school connectedness. Punitive practices neither serve as a protective factor against homophobic bullying, nor as a support for the students such policies are intended to benefit (Advancement Project, Alliance for Educational Justice, & GSA Network, 2012). More to the point, punitive policies fail to address underlying issues that lead to bias-based bullying (Advancement Project et al., 2012) and do not facilitate school connectedness, disadvantaging both students who experience—and who perpetuate—homophobic bullying.

Conversely, we found that students were less likely to report having experienced homophobic bullying in schools with more supportive practices. Specifically, a higher score on our measure of supportive practices indicated that having more of each of the distinct forms of support was associated with less homophobic bullying. This finding further calls into question "tough on crime" approaches (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba & Losen, 2015), even when implemented in conjunction with supportive practices. Although we did not examine specific alternatives to zero-tolerance policies (i.e., restorative practices, SWPBIS, SEL), our findings illustrate that supportive practices are more effective, especially when multiple forms of support are implemented. Supportive practices may specifically target disciplinary issues (i.e., when schools consider punishment for violating school rules on a case-by-case basis), but they also extend beyond discipline by including supportive services for students who are the victims of violence, and by addressing social, emotional, and behavioral issues. In essence, a broader, holistic, and more supportive approach to students' well-being is more effective than punitive measures—especially for students who are bullied.

Previous studies demonstrate zero-tolerance policies are detrimental to school connectedness (McNeely et al., 2002). We did not find a negative association between punitive practices and school connectedness, but these practices notably had no association with

Table 2
Multilevel Analyses of Homophobic Bullying and School Connectedness, Including Interactions Between Punitive/Supportive Practices and Homophobic Bullying (n = 337,945)

Variables	Model 1: Homophobic bullying *OR* [95% CI]	Model 2a: School connectedness conditional model with Level 1 indicators *b* (*SE*)	Model 2b: School connectedness conditional model with Level 1 and 2 indicators *b* (*SE*)	Model 2c: School Connectedness full model with significant interactions *b* (*SE*)
Student-level indicators				
Age (centered)	.92 [.91, .93]***	−.03 (.002)***	−.03 (.002)***	−.03 (.003)***
Ethnicity/Race				
Hispanic	.92 [.89, .95]***	−.14 (.005)***	−.13 (.005)***	−.13 (.005)***
African American/Black	1.24 [1.16, 1.32]***	−.31 (.010)***	−.31 (.010)***	−.31 (.010)***
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.63 [1.47, 1.82]***	−.27 (.017)***	−.26 (.017)***	−.26 (.017)***
Asian	.78 [.74, .82]***	−.09 (.007)***	−.09 (.007)***	−.09 (.007)***
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1.07 [.97, 1.17]	−.10 (.013)***	−.10 (.013)***	−.10 (.013)***
Multiple	1.32 [1.26, 1.38]***	−.09 (.006)***	−.09 (.006)***	−.09 (.006)***
Sex (male)	1.31 [1.28, 1.35]***	−.03 (.003)***	−.03 (.003)***	−.03 (.003)***
Homophobic bullying	—	—	−.35 (.007)***	−.35 (.007)***
School-level indicators				
Free or reduced-priced meals	1.21 [1.12, 1.30]***	—	−.31 (.024)***	−.31 (.024)***
School size (centered)	1.00 [1.00, 1.00]	—	−.00 (.000)***	−.00 (.000)***
Supportive practices	.90 [.86, .95]***	—	.15 (.017)***	.15 (.018)***
Punitive practices	.99 [.95, 1.03]	—	.01 (.015)	.01 (.015)
Cross-level interactions				
Supportive Practices × Homophobic Bullying	—	—	—	−.07 (.019)***
Punitive Practices × Homophobic Bullying	—	—	—	—
Constant	.08 [.07, .09]***	2.66 (.09)***	2.82 (.013)***	2.83 (.039)***
Residual constant	.14 [.12, .16]	.19 (.006)	.14 (.006)	.14 (.006)
Residual variance	—	.82 (.002)	.82 (.002)	.82 (.002)
ICC (unconditional model)	.01	.05	—	—

Note. Age is grand mean centered (*M* = 15.06). Race/ethnicity is a categorical variable, with "White" as the reference variable. Sex is a dichotomous variable (1 = male). Homophobic bullying is a dichotomous item assessing students' experience of bullying based on the perception that they are gay or lesbian (1 = yes). Free and reduced-priced meals assesses percentage of students receiving meal subsidies within schools. School size is grand mean centered (*M* = 1,692.96). OR = Odds Ratios; CI = Confidence Interval; SE = Standard Error; ICC = Intraclass Correlation.
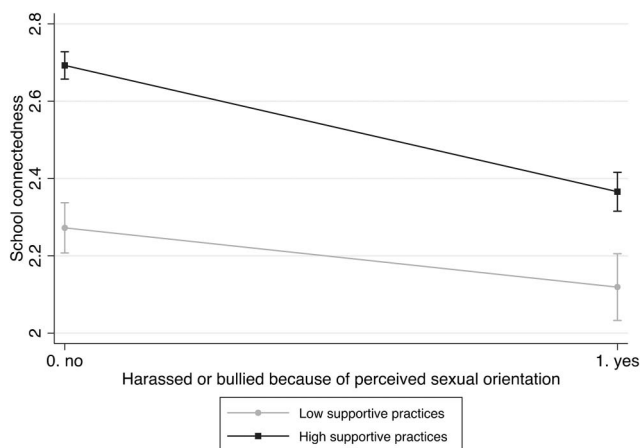* *p* ≤ .05.   ** *p* ≤ .01.   *** *p* ≤ .001.

Figure 1. Predictive margins for school connectedness based on the interaction between homophobic bullying and supportive practices.

school connectedness even among students who were victimized for homophobic reasons. However, we were unable to account for students who are the target of such policies—perpetuators of bullying—and who are therefore most at risk of suspension and expulsion under such policies. Nevertheless, our results have important implications for schools that adopt authoritarian and authoritative discipline strategies. First, as has been found previously, high structure and low support undermine the cultivation of safe and supportive school climates (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Gregory et al., 2010). Second, although it is necessary to instate clear boundaries to provide structure within schools, punitive practices may not be an effective means for doing so.

Strikingly, the moderating effect of supportive policies on the relationship between school connectedness and homophobic bullying reveal two key findings: (a) supportive policies serve as protective factors against school disconnectedness for students who experience homophobic bullying, and (b) students in schools with the least supportive policies, and who have not experienced homophobic bullying, have lower levels of school connectedness—most notably, at levels comparable with students who have been bullied in schools with more supportive practices. Put simply, the effects of having few supportive policies on school connectedness are similar to the experience of being bullied "because you are gay or lesbian or someone thought you were," putting the benefits of supportive practices in sharp relief.

Limitations and Future Directions

The findings of this study are useful for evaluating all students' experiences of homophobic bullying in schools. However, we were unable to assess the experiences specific to sexual and gender minority students, as the 2009–2011 CHKS did not include a measure of sexual orientation or gender identity. Accounting for students' sexual orientation and gender identity may reveal differential trends for youth at higher risk for school disconnectedness, especially if they experience homophobic bullying. These processes may be accentuated for LGBT youth (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013), and deserve further attention. Although our data do not allow for a more nuanced analysis

of intersecting identities, including measures of sexual orientation and gender identity would also help illuminate which programs and policies are most effective for supporting diverse student populations, and better account for complexities in findings related to multifaceted identities. Such approaches should be the focus of future studies.

Teacher reports of school policies and practices are subjective and do not necessarily reflect formal policies adopted at the administrative level. Additionally, such reports do not account for specific programs intended to address behavioral and discipline issues, such as restorative practices and SWPBIS; how policies are implemented (e.g., whether teachers receive training for implementing policies; how policies are communicated to students); or their effectiveness (e.g., pre- and post-implementation evaluations). Teacher participation in the CSCS was voluntary; therefore, their reports may not be representative of the broader population of teachers in their schools. Finally, only teachers who have specific roles related to health education, discipline, and/or safety responded to questions relevant to the current study. Such teachers should be most knowledgeable of policies and practices related to health and safety, but their reports may not reflect the portrait of punitive and supportive practices within schools from the perspective of all classroom teachers. Additionally, more insight could be gleaned by combining objective measures of programs and policies with teacher reflections on their quality and effectiveness of implementation.

Conclusions

The findings in this study have important implications for implementing policies and practices that address homophobic bullying, support those who have been bullied, and foster a school climate that facilitates school connectedness. At present, there are no federal protections for students who are harassed or discriminated against in public schools on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Efforts to protect students against SOGI-related bullying have been outlined in the Student Non-Discrimination Act (2015), a bill that was reintroduced in 2015 after it failed to pass in 2010 (Rudolph, 2011). Given the preponderance of evidence as to effective strategies for dissuading SOGI-related bullying and supporting students who are bullied, future policies and practices should be guided by the goal of promoting supportive rather than punitive strategies.

Our findings are especially important as U.S. states consider how to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015): supportive practices are effective for preventing bullying and fostering stronger connections to teachers and schools, whereas punitive practices neither prevent homophobic bullying nor promote school connectedness among bullied students. Further, with an absence of supportive practices, school connectedness is lower in schools, regardless of bullying. Yet the benefits of supportive policies and practices are twofold: (a) students in schools with supportive practices are less likely to report having experienced homophobic bullying, and (b) supportive practices mitigate the negative effects of being a victim of bullying on school connectedness, a key indicator of school climate. These findings support a growing call for reevaluating punitive policies in the context of bullying, school safety, and connectedness, and promoting supportive policies and practices so that every student can succeed.

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