RECOGNIZING THREATENING AND ABERRANT BEHAVIOR: AN APPLIED STUDY
TO DEVELOP ONLINE TRAINING FOR THE SUPPORT STAFF AT JOHN DOE HIGH
SCHOOL

by

James Daniel Christian
Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Liberty University
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APPROVED BY:

Susan Quindag, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Barry Dotson, Ed.D., Committee Member
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of adequately providing guidance to support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia and to design practices to train all students, faculty, and staff to address the problem. A multimethod design was used consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first approach was semi-structured interviews with members of the school-based threat assessment team. The second approach was conducting a focus group with support staff. The third approach led to the development of a brief online training module followed by a post-training survey to measure perceptions of effectiveness. Based on findings identified during interviews, the focus group, and quantitative survey data several recommendations for implementing an initiative to improve recognizing threatening or aberrant behavior were developed that is consistent with the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services’ Threat Assessment Model Policies. This initiative included developing a hybrid training approach that includes virtual micro lessons and in-person training for support staff and increasing the communication of threat assessment awareness to the entire school community to increase the capacity to recognize and report threatening or aberrant behavior.

Keywords: aberrant behavior, school shootings, social bonds, social control theory, targeted violence, threat assessment, support staff, professional development
Dedication

A single paragraph of dedication hardly seems worthy of the sacrifices my wife Stephanie, and our children Noah, Emma, and Silas had to endure during this long ride. I like to think they never took the proverbial backseat to this process; however, it is not lost on them, or me, that there were many times this manuscript was my front seat passenger. Fortunately, my capacity to procrastinate and still meet deadlines allowed me to find time to have a life outside of this educational pursuit. Stephanie, through it all you were forced to experience every late night, every word typed onto a pixilated screen, and every journal printed and read as my challenges became yours. In the end though, I am glad it is you that will share with me the relief, joy, and sense of accomplishment of reaching this incredibly lofty goal. I am thankful for your support, your confidence in me, and most of all for still loving me through it all.
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There are countless people that provided me support, encouragement, and prayers in the development of this manuscript. I am certainly cognizant that while the words on paper were mine, the capacity to put them there is shared with many. This was an undertaking that required dependence on others, which is not always my best strength. However, I would not have accomplished this on my own.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Quindag for her guidance, patience, wisdom, and ability to help me focus my frequently disjointed thoughts. When I began this project, I had no idea how to distill my ideas into asking the right questions. Dr. Quindag was able to see through the clutter of my mind and provide thoughtful insight that provided clarity. I would also like to thank Dr. Dotson for agreeing to serve as my second committee member and for his thoughtful feedback and review of my drafts. I am grateful for both of you and thankful God brought you into my life to share in this endeavor.

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Finally, I want to thank my wife Stephanie and my children Noah, Emma, and Silas for believing in me and the sacrifices made to support me.
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List of Abbreviations

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)
Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU)
Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)
Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Center for Homeland Defense & Security (CHDS)
Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS)
Family Educational Rights Protection Act (FERPA)
Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)
Individual Education Program (IEP)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
John Doe High School (JDHS)
Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)
National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
School Resource Officers (SROs)
School Security Officers (SSOs)
United States Department of Education (USDOE)
United States Secret Service (USSS)
University of Virginia (UVA)
Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)
Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School (JDHS) located in southeast Virginia by developing and implementing online training modules. The problem was that John Doe High School is not adequately providing guidance and training to support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others. A multimethod design will be used consisting of qualitative and quantitative approaches to address this problem.

Chapter one provides the foundation of factors that led to the integration of threat assessment in the school community at both the national and Commonwealth of Virginia level. This not only includes the historical events, but the policies and legislation that led to change specific to Virginia. Of particular interest to this problem of practice is the framework of social control theory and social bond theory and how they explain certain behaviors that relate to threat assessment and recognition of aberrant behavior. Additionally, adult learning theories will be examined as they relate to the development of online training. The accompanying literature and research will be used to develop solutions for addressing the problem of this study and increase threat assessment guidance and awareness through an online training module.

Targeted violence in schools is a major concern and topic of discussion among law enforcement, school personnel, politicians, parents, students and the media in order to keep students and faculty safe (Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2018). There has been increased concern for the safety of students and staff related to the prevention of targeted
violence. Many local agencies have responded by hiring school security officers, utilizing school resource officers, locking doors, installing entry access systems, and/or increasing training related to threat assessment (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018).

Preventive measures to address school safety may reduce or mitigate potential targeted violence and increase options available to school administrators and law enforcement to confront minor problems before it escalates (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2017). Preventative measures may also serve as a deterrent to individuals who may be on the pathway to violence (Pollard, Nolan, & Deisinger, 2012).

All Virginia public K-12 schools and institutions of higher education are legislatively mandated to have behavioral threat assessment teams for the purpose of recognizing threatening or aberrant behavior of individuals that may pose a threat to self or others (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services [DCJS], 2020). The use of behavioral threat assessment teams for the purpose of managing threats to self and others provides a proactive approach to managing risk. Threat assessment teams are required to provide guidance to school staff and students on how to recognize threats and aberrant behavior. However, individuals outside of the school-based threat assessment team may be unaware of the threat assessment process, how to recognize aberrant behavior, and any reporting mechanisms that may be in place.

**Background**

In April 1999, Columbine High School in Colorado captured the nation’s attention when two students began shooting students and staff. This resulted in 13 fatalities, several injuries, and untold trauma as a result of this horrifying experience. Although Columbine was not the first school shooting, it was seen as a critical moment when schools, law enforcement, and policy makers began making systemic institutional changes. Shortly following the Columbine shooting
the United States Secret Service (USSS) and the United States Department of Education (USDOE) collaborated to further understand the profile of a school shooter and find ways to prevent these violent attacks (Vossekuil et al., 2004). As a result, the Safe School Initiative was developed based on a threat assessment model employed by the USSS. This framework served to answer the questions of whether an attack was being planned and if it could be prevented. This inquiry resulted in a “federal model of school threat assessment” to identify and manage threats of violence (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018, p. 110).

Threat assessment is a preventative measure to identify aberrant, or concerning, behavior by an individual (DCJS, 2020). A threat assessment team is a multidisciplinary group of individuals tasked with evaluating whether an individual is on the pathway to violence. This pathway for an individual consists of ideation, planning, preparation, and attack (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2017, p. 24). The goal of threat assessment is to identify the individual(s) of concern, determine if they are on the pathway to violence, and remove them from that pathway prior to an act of violence. As a part of case management, the team typically provides support service to address any mental health needs and certainly in some situations there may be school based consequences and/or criminal prosecution. These teams, however, are only effective if the staff and students in a school are aware of the threat assessment process, can recognize aberrant behavior, and know how to report a threat to the appropriate person.

The Commonwealth of Virginia legislatively requires all institutions of higher education and public K-12 schools to have behavioral threat assessment teams (Threat Assessment Teams and Oversight Committees, 2016). Despite this legislative mandate, however, there is no requirement that threat assessment teams be trained, only that their practices are consistent with
the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) Model Polices and Guidelines (DCJS, 2020).

**Historical Events Impacting Virginia Legislation**

While school shootings seem to be a frequent topic in mainstream and social media, this is not a new event. The first documented school shooting in America was July 26, 1764 in Pennsylvania ("History of School Shootings," n.d.). However, other school shootings after this incident have been largely unknown until the Columbine school shooting in 1999. While Columbine was not the first, it was the event that led to significant changes in school safety practices and the implementation of behavioral threat assessment teams in a school setting (O’Toole, 1999). Additionally, the “Secret Service in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education reviewed 37 incidents of targeted school violence” (Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis, 2018, p. 2564). This led to the establishment of behavioral threat assessment teams in schools and institutions of higher education before legislation was written and passed into law. Another challenge to school safety data was the varied definition of how a mass shooting is described by the literature. This was complicated because many mass shootings were a familicide (murder of multiple close family members in close succession) or a byproduct of a robbery or other criminal activity. However, they were being counted statistically in some instances as a mass shooting or active shooter incident (Jonson, 2017).

The shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2013 resulted in significant policy changes at the federal level and within the Commonwealth of Virginia. Stakeholders from law enforcement, education, mental health agencies, and policy makers were looking for a solution in response to what many parents viewed as a systemic problem of school violence. This ultimately led to an executive order by President Obama that allocated funding through grants to improve
school safety measures (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). There was also a focus on gun control and mental health by implementing preventative strategies in schools (Call for Action, 2018).

**Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.** On April 16, 2007, an armed student murdered 32 students and staff at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia before taking his life. Following this act of targeted violence, an investigation revealed that the shooter demonstrated observable aberrant behavior that was witnessed by the school community (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008). The shooter had made statements while in high school that referenced repeating the shooting at Columbine High School and demonstrated withdrawn behavior and isolation. However, there was no mechanism in place to share these concerns with Virginia Tech (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008). At that time there were no requirements for institutions of higher education or K-12 to establish threat assessment teams.

This Virginia Tech Massacre directly led to proposed legislation in an effort to mandate that all institutions of higher education have threat assessment teams. In 2008, the Virginia General Assembly proposed and passed House Bill 1449 which led to changing Virginia Code in to mandate that every institution of higher education establish threat assessment teams (Violence Prevention Committee; Threat Assessment Teams, 2008).

**Sandy Hook.** In December 2012, a non-student adult entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut and murdered 20 students and six staff members. Former Governor McAuliffe established the Virginia Children’s Cabinet to identify strategies and best practices that could mitigate or prevent an act of targeted violence. Since Virginia had established behavioral threat assessment teams for institutions of higher education it was a natural transition to incorporate them in K-12 public schools. As a result, the Commonwealth of Virginia became the first state in the nation to legislatively require every K-12 public school to
have behavioral threat assessment teams. Initially, the legislation required threat assessment teams to manage threats to self or others by students. However, in 2016 the legislation was amended to change the language that was specific to assessing “students” to “individuals.” It was recognized that threats are not unique to students and may include parents, former students, staff, and individuals with no affiliation to the school.

**Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.** On February 14, 2018, a former student entered Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Parkland, Florida and killed 17 students and staff. There were several factors that in hindsight indicated this individual was on the pathway to violence, from local and federal law enforcement, and members from the community. Based on a search of the shooter’s cell phone and internet searches he identified as someone with an expressed perceived grievance and had been acquiring weapons and tactical gear (Camp, Massucci, & Suess, 2018). He had made several comments on various social media platforms that indicated a capacity for violence. However, all of these indicators were isolated as they existed in various domains (Camp et al., 2018). Unfortunately, there was no central clearinghouse to further investigate these concerns and to assess if there was cause for intervention.

At the time of the shooting in Parkland, Virginia was the only the state with mandated K-12 threat assessment teams. Since that time Maryland and Florida have passed legislation based on Virginia’s legislation and several other states have consulted with the Virginia DCJS to explore developing similar policies and legislation (DCJS, 2020). The Virginia DCJS was awarded a Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) grant to increase the number of K-12 threat assessment training, update the curriculum, and develop specific applied modules to better assess and manage cases.
Policies and legislation

Historically, the tragedies at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Stoneman Douglas High School not only resulted in significant loss of life but translated into significant policy and legislative changes (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013). In some cases, changes were aimed at prevention with a greater degree of government accountability through changes to gun control policies, prevention strategies, and increased responses to mental health needs. After the Columbine mass attack politicians in Colorado created significant changes to policies, legislation, and threat assessment practices (DiRenzo, 2016). They created a robust state school safety center and have made efforts to continue to examine school safety within the context of research and practical changes to practice (Colorado School Safety Resource Center, n.d.). Despite what school divisions have implemented, Colorado legislators passed the Claire Davis School Safety Act in 2015 (DiRenzo, 2016). This bill allows families of victims to file civil suits against the government in the event an act of violence is carried out (DiRenzo, 2016).

One challenge of legislation imposed on school divisions is they are often unfunded mandates. Lawmakers must consider “legislation aimed at increasing school safety” and “focus on resource officer programs and individual school safety plans” (Elliott, 2015, p. 525). While these are worthy programs, it can be expensive to implement and could redirect funding that is allocated to other programs that are needed.

Social Context

The interest in school safety from the individual school building to the federal government has had a significant amount of attention. The response by the federal and local government, school boards, and the Commonwealth of Virginia would suggest that school
shootings have increased dramatically (Temkin et al., 2020). The data does not support a significant increase in school shootings. However, there has been a significant response (Center for Homeland Defense & Security [CHDS], 2019). In 1986 there were 76 fatalities and injuries as a result of a school shooting, while 2018 was slightly higher with 82; including the death of the shooter (CHDS, 2019). There were far more fatalities and injuries in schools during the 1990s compared to the 2000s (CHDS, 2019). There is no question school shootings have garnered significant attention on all media platforms and created a demand for improved school safety (Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003). The advent of social media during the two decades, compared to only print, radio, and television, has likely provided greater reach to the masses (Ogle et al., 2003). Furthermore, social media creates a platform where anyone with an account can become a “reporter” and share news stories to a much larger audience and with greater frequency. Whether the information is accurate or provided within the appropriate context is not necessary to disseminate the story. This may lead to inaccuracies that drive fear and responses not based on best practice. The media paradox described by John Ruscio (2000) finds that “events must be somewhat unusual in order to be considered newsworthy, but the very fact of their appearance in the news leads us to overestimate their frequency of occurrence” (Ruscio, 2000, p. 24).

The fascination with firearms in the United States is often a frequent discussion by mental health professionals, politicians, and citizens (Cukier & Eagen, 2018). Despite legislative requirements to bar individuals with criminal history and/or mental health issues from purchasing or owning firearms it does not seem to prevent mass shootings from occurring (Bramble, 2014). Some see the increased frequency of mass shootings to be a byproduct of a
failed mental health system and lead to some individuals attempting to gain access to firearms to protect themselves from those who mean harm (Bramble, 2014).

**Training**

While Virginia requires all K-12 public schools to have threat assessment teams there is no legislative requirement that teams receive formal training. The 2017 Virginia School Safety Audit Survey Results indicated that 7,439 teachers serve on threat assessment teams, however, only 36% received training (p. 11). Research conducted where pre-testing was compared to post-testing after receiving threat assessment training indicated “substantial changes in their knowledge and attitudes regarding school violence” (Allen, Cornell, Lorek, & Sheras, 2008, p. 329). Of course, this does not include training of support staff and it would not be typical for them to serve on a threat assessment team. Currently, there is no indication support staff receive any training on recognizing aberrant behavior or local reporting processes (Cornell et al., 2018).

**Theoretical Context**

The application of Hirschi’s Social Bond theory in conjunction with identifying the school climate and the use of the threat assessment team could have the potential to prevent and/or mitigate acts of violence (Cornell et al., 2018). Findings from the School Safety Initiative found that most school shooters have a grievance, or perceived grievance, towards others and it may be a motivating factor towards some act of violence (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Attachment to school is one of the cornerstones of a positive authoritative school climate (Cornell & Huang, 2016). Researchers suggest there is not only a benefit to increase the opportunities for connectiveness in school, but to also provide student support (Cornell et al., 2018; Cornell & Huang, 2016). In the context of threat assessment there would
be opportunities to identify students that may not feel connected to the school, or within their community and provide support and interventions.

To some extent, schools are tasked with modeling appropriate behavior that will lead to becoming productive citizens. This is frequently done through a combination of teaching rules and redirecting as needed. These rules are often written in the Student Code of Conduct and many are supported by school board policies. Many of these rules not only conform with the expectations of a school, but also follow local and state law. There are certainly some students that not only reject the school rules but can become a threat to the school community. One of the functions of a threat assessment team is to identify when a student is on the pathway to violence and intervene to mitigate possible risk (DCJS, 2020).

Furthermore, social control theory suggests that individuals are “inherently inclined to be deviant” and that “it is the mechanisms that inhibit individuals from yielding to their deviant inclinations” (Peguero, Popp, Latimore, Shekarkhar, & Koo, 2011, p. 260). The application of social control theory in school shootings, and not just deviant behavior or school violence, became prevalent following the Columbine Shooting (Pittaro, 2007). Prior to the tragedy at Columbine, there was very little empirical research devoted specifically to school shootings and the perpetrators (Pittaro, 2007). To some extent juvenile deviant behavior was primarily seen as a byproduct of lower socioeconomic status. An accurate profile of a school shooter, or active shooter in general, does not exist. Many school shooters did not align with the typical characteristics associated with juvenile delinquent behavior (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018). It goes on to propose that individuals with “weak or broken social bonds to conventional institutions are more likely to engage in criminal behavior” (Peguero et al., 2011, p. 260).
Social control theories address why people follow the rules. When individuals do not follow society’s rules, or school rules, then the theory suggests that there is a weak bond between the individual and some aspect of society (Pittaro, 2007). While there are many defined social control theories, the most relevant to juvenile delinquency and the scope of this study is social bond theory. Hirschi proposes that a juvenile is “less likely to engage in acts of delinquency if there is a strong attachment to family, school, and the community” (Pittaro, 2007, p. 6). There are four components required to maintain a social bond, which are attachment, belief, commitment, and involvement (Hirschi, 2002). According to Pittaro (2007), two shooters in the Columbine incident lacked attachment to school, which he considers the most important of the four components of social bond theory that must be in place. Attachment, or the lack thereof, can impact an “individual’s sensitivity and empathy for the feelings of others” (Pittaro, 2007, p. 6).

Problem Statement

The problem was John Doe High School is not adequately providing guidance and training to support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others. According to the findings of the Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey (2018) and the school safety survey most teachers are not aware that a threat assessment process is in place at their school. This has been particularly problematic considering threat assessment teams are required to “provide guidance to students, faculty, and staff regarding recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, school, or self (DCJS, 2020, p. 7). There has been no training for the recognition of aberrant behavior and behavioral threat assessment specific to the role of support staff in Virginia. However, support staff often have increased opportunity to witness behavior compared
to administrators and teachers. Bus drivers are the first and last school-based contact each day. Custodial staff are familiar with the entire building and often observe behaviors in the hallway, restrooms, and cafeteria. Front office staff regularly interact with parents, guardians, and other visitors to the school. School security officers respond to violations of the student code of conduct and monitor the school building entrance. All of these individuals have the potential to observe, report, and intervene, which may mitigate or prevent an act of targeted violence.

For threat assessment to be effective it requires a positive school climate where trust and connectedness are promoted and “training in early risk factors and warning signs” are “offered to students and school staff members, as they are often the first to become aware of a concern” (Reeves & Brock, 2017, p. 150). Many individuals that are on the pathway to violence demonstrate warning behavior well before an act of violence occurs, which will likely be observed by other students and/or school staff (Meloy, Mohandie, Knoll, & Hoffmann, 2015). Providing all staff and students guidance in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior allows for earlier intervention by the threat assessment team. Finding a solution to this problem is a primary goal of this applied research study.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia by developing and implementing online training modules. A multimethod design will be used consisting of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first approach was interviews with the division level school safety coordinator and the school-based threat assessment team, which includes individuals with expertise in administration, instruction, law enforcement, and
counseling. The second approach was focus groups with support staff, which includes custodians, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, front office staff, and school security officers. The third approach was participants completing an online training module on behavioral threat assessment. This was followed by a survey that will measure their perception regarding the effectiveness of the training at improving their threat assessment knowledge.

**Significance of the Study**

Research conducted of 37 acts of targeted violence in K-12 schools as a result of the School Safety Initiative found that other students knew the plans of the attacker prior to most attacks, however, did not report it to an adult. All students, faculty, and staff have the capacity to recognize aberrant or threatening behavior and report it to the threat assessment team prior to an act of violence to self or others. There is a need for all individuals within the school community to receive guidance on aberrant or threatening behavior and how to report it through the appropriate channels. Threat assessment is outlined in Virginia Code 22.1-79.4 and establishes that threat assessment teams “shall provide guidance to students, faculty, and staff regarding recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, school, or self” (DCJS, 2020, p. 7). Based on this requirement, it is imperative that these stakeholders receive training to build capacity for recognizing and reporting threatening behaviors.

Teachers and staff at John Doe High School were asked through the 2018 Secondary School Climate Survey “does your school use a formal threat assessment process to respond to student threats of violence” and 30% indicated “yes,” 7% “no,” and 63% indicated that they “do not know” (p.20). Code of Virginia requires all schools to have a formal threat assessment process and John Doe High School does have a process, however, most teachers were unaware
and there is no indication support staff are aware of the process or how to spot and report aberrant or threatening behavior. These numbers are relatively consistent across the Commonwealth with regards to the lack of knowledge about the use of threat assessment teams and not unique to John Doe High School as evidenced by statewide school safety audit reporting (Cornell et al., 2018). The Federal Commission on School Safety outlines the importance for schools to “establish and provide training” and “programs and policies must be put into place that promote a climate that ensures those reporting feel safe in their concern” (Federal Commission, 2018, p. 54). While the scope of this problem is narrowly focused on one school, it clearly is a problem across the state and any efforts to solve the problem could be applied to all schools in Virginia’s 132 school divisions.

**Research Questions**

**Central Question:** How can the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others be solved at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?

**Sub-question 1:** How would members of the school-based threat assessment team in an interview solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia.

**Sub-question 2:** How would support staff in a focus group solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia.

**Sub-question 3:** How would an online training module and post-training survey data
solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia.

Definitions

1. *Aberrant behavior* – is that which is atypical for the person or situation and causes concern for the safety or well-being of those involved (DCJS, 2016, p.9).

2. *Behavioral threat assessment* – a fact-based process emphasizing an appraisal of observed (or reasonably observable) behaviors to identify potentially dangerous or violent situations, to assess them, and to manage/address them (DCJS, 2016, p. 9rative).


4. *Targeted violence* – the end result of a process of thinking that begins with an idea, progresses to development of a plan, moves on to preparation to carry out the plan, and culminates in an attack (DCJS, 2016, p. 15).

5. *Threat* – a concerning communication or behavior that indicates an individual poses a danger to the safety of school staff or students through acts of violence or other behavior that would cause harm to self or others (DCJS, 2016, p. 9).

Summary

Providing guidance to support staff through the development of a training module to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior to self or others is the primary goal of this study. Initially, this may seem to be a relatively simple solution that can be met through staff in-service and some basic instruction. However, there must also be a process for reporting, responding to the reports, and most importantly, creating a school climate that lends itself to a culture of trust
in reporting. Through interviews of the threat assessment team members, the goal was to identify ways to address school climate, create a process for providing guidance to support staff on recognizing threatening and aberrant behavior, leverage online training modules, and establishing processes for reporting. A facilitated focus group convened to learn what school support staff perceive about threat assessment and what would constitute a threat or demonstrate aberrant behavior. Additionally, support staff were solicited to learn the best approach for providing an online module that meets their needs. Interviews and a focus group were used to inform the development of a brief online training module specific to all support staff. The online training module was provided to each participant and immediately followed by a survey. The survey was used to measure whether the participants believed that the online training module increased their knowledge in threat assessment.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

To understand behavioral threat assessment and its potential relationship to the recognition of threatening and/or aberrant behavior it is important to establish a conceptual framework that may contribute to such behaviors (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The conceptual framework is discussed to comprehend the evaluation of social control theory and the development of social bonds. The choice to utilize a conceptual framework provided context to understanding of the importance to providing guidance to a particular problem of practice (Imenda, 2014). The foundation of threat assessment in law enforcement was explored and its integration into school threat assessment teams was grounded in the work of the Safe School Initiative. The literature surrounding the “lessons learned” as a result of significant school shootings, and other acts of targeted violence, was identified in an effort to establish a baseline of specific behaviors observed during those previous events. Virginia’s relevant legislative mandates and requirements for school divisions were evaluated to create a framework of what is legally required of threat assessment teams. Finally, data collected through the Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey provided insight to the percentage of staff that are aware of formal threat assessment teams in their schools.

Conceptual Framework

Social Control Theory

While many social control theories exist, the focus will be on social bond theory and how it may integrate into the threat assessment process. The connection between violence that occurs in school and weak social bonds is well established in the literature (Pittaro, 2007). Historically, most criminological theories attempt to determine why people deviate from societal norms;
However, social control theories attempt to explain why people choose to conform (Akers & Sellers, 2013). While school curriculum typically focuses on academia there has been an increased need to address interpersonal relationships, motivation, and social support among students and school personnel to adjust to an academic environment in order to improve school adjustment (Lakhani, Jain, & Chandel, 2017). Improved school adjustment is not the only factor to consider as it relates to social bonding. Students’ strong social bonds tend to improve academic progress, reduce dropout rates, and lead to increased levels of school attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief (Peguero, Ovink, & Li, 2016). Additionally, strong social bonds play an important role in the healthy development of children contribute to “academic performance and social competence” (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004, p. 252).

Schools, to some degree, allow for socialization to the social norm, in spite of subculture norms or family values (Walker, Shea, & Bauer, 2004). This often begins in kindergarten with simple rules, structure, and socially acceptable behavior. For instance, students are taught to walk on the right side of the hallway, raise their hand before speaking, take turns with others, share with peers, and follow the rules. In fact, to a large extent the earlier grades establish a foundation for appropriate and expected behavior which is ideally built upon throughout the school career. In some situations, the social expectations run counter to behavior that is learned at home, which is often the source of many discipline issues. Certainly, some students fail to conform and are often “at odds” with the behavioral expectations of the school, or even individual classroom teachers (Walker et al., 2004). For most students, however, they follow the rules and demonstrate appropriate behavior that is congruent with adolescent maturity (Fisher, Gardella, & Tanner-Smith, 2019).
Social bond theory. Social bond theory, in which Travis Hirschi is considered the primary theorist, is the most recognized social control theory (Bouffard & Rice, 2010). Hirschi developed this theory as a response to the observed turbulence of the 1960s in the United States. He was attempting to answer why individuals were engaged in behaviors outside of the acceptable social norms (Hirschi, 2002). He theorized that weak social bonds contributed to deviant behavior (Bouffard & Rice, 2010). There are four components identified as crucial to creating a social bond. They are attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Pittaro, 2007).

The theory relating to social bonds has been repeatedly studied using various attributes and behaviors. It is important to note that previous studies on weak social bonds focus on risky or deviant behavior occurring, not on delayed onset (Han, Kim, & Ma, 2015). One such study conducted by Han, Kim, and Ma (2015) attempted to explore whether strong social bonds decreased the onset of alcohol use among youth. The Korea Youth Panel Survey, which is administered nationally to youth was used to conduct discrete-time logistic regression. The researchers found a negative relationship between youths’ attachment to their teachers and delayed alcohol and cigarette use. Additionally, commitment and involvement were found to reduce how early they begin smoking cigarettes and consuming alcohol. Their findings certainly demonstrate the need for preventative strategies such as establishing and building relationships, creating positive school climate, and involvement in school community.

Attachment. This is often considered the most crucial component of a strong social bond (Pittaro, 2007). Attachment is defined as “an individual’s sensitivity and empathy for the feelings of others” (Pittaro, 2007, p. 6). Attachment is a critical component to not only being connected to the school community, but also having a relationship that increases the opportunity
for others to recognize aberrant behavior. Individuals that develop a grievance that leads to ideation about committing an act of targeted violence frequently lack attachment to the school community (Watts, Province, & Toohy, 2019). Ideation is the first step identified in the pathway to violence and this is motivated by a grievance, or perceived grievance (DCJS, 2020). Of 37 school shootings evaluated by the United States Secret Service they found that 71% of the shooters felt “persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured by others prior to the incident” (Vossekuil et al., 2004, p. 21). Mass murderers, whether in schools, or some other venue, share “similar dynamics of mistreatment, alienation, hopelessness, and desire for public revenge in a final suicidal act” (Cornell, 2014, p. 29). These feelings by a potential attacker do have the capacity to move beyond a grievance and develop into the ideation of a vengeance mindset (Capellan, 2015).

One study on attachment explored the characteristics of 18 individuals that engaged in targeted school violence between 1996 and 2012 (Lenhardt, Graham, & Farrell, 2018). The characteristic of alienation was identified in 67% of the shooters. Based on this study, the researchers concluded that perpetrators of targeted mass attacks are often described as a “lone wolf” and have very few meaningful relationships with others (Capellan, 2015). It is often observable when a student has minimal attachment to the school community. It may manifest as limited social interaction with peers, poor relationships with teachers, and isolation during activities. Despite the assumption that all students involved in acts of targeted violence lack attachment, research of school shootings between 1974 and 2000 indicates that 41% of school shooters appeared to “socialize with mainstream students or were considered mainstream students” and only 34% were considered to be “loners” (Vossekuil et al., 2004, p. 20).
Commitment. The commitment involved in social bonds is related to the pursuit towards school, a career, or some other goal that is to be attained through effort on their part. When an individual is committed to work or school it provides opportunity to develop attachment to others and share norms within the group (Pittaro, 2007). In many cases, school shooters do not have any long-term career aspirations since they typically expect to either be killed, arrested, or choose to commit suicide (Pittaro, 2007). Furthermore, most shooters are not only homicidal, but suicidal and consider their final act to be suicide as a result of law enforcement intervention (Vossekuil et al., 2004).

Involvement. The premise of involvement is that if an individual is involved in school through academics, social relationships, and activities, they will have minimal time to engage in criminal behavior (Pittaro, 2007). Vossekuil et al. (2004) found that 56% of school shooters have not been involved in extracurricular activities within or outside of school. However, they do spend a considerable amount of time planning and preparing when they have made the decision to carry out an act of targeted violence (Vossekuil et al., 2004). Many school shooters have spent a considerable amount of time researching previous school shootings and the shooters, rather than becoming involved in school activities such as sports, clubs, and academics (FBI, 2017). The school shooting in Columbine, Colorado is often the most studied event for school shooters and the Columbine shooters are often viewed as mentors to prospective shooters (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019).

It is reasonable that when there is strong involvement in the school community there will also be greater attachment and commitment. The shooters that carried out the mass attack on Columbine High School were not involved in the school community, lacked attachment to their
peers and teachers, and there was no evidence of commitment to aspirations such as a life beyond high school (Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003).

**Belief.** The application of believing in the rules and accepting of societal norms is considered to be a preventative factor for people engaging in criminal behavior, or nonconforming behaviors (Pittaro, 2007). All school divisions establish policies that outline acceptable student behavior that are based on societal norms; however, they are not always consistent and congruent with every subculture. For instance, all school divisions in Virginia have policies regarding student dress code, however, some students and/or families may not subscribe to the same belief of what is acceptable (Virginia Department of Education, 2015). The subculture may be a community with a shared belief system, a neighborhood, family, or a small group of individuals. Consequently, students and their family may recognize that a rule exists, however, they may not accept the rule since they do not subscribe to that particular social norm. Typically, people follow the rules regardless of whether they subscribe (Zink, 2008).

In many cases, school shooters have a grievance, or a perceived grievance, directed towards an individual or group of individuals, which may lead to a sense of rationalizing their behavior and thereby reducing empathy towards others (Meloy et al., 2015). The research does not clearly identify any one trait that contributes to an individual developing homicidal ideations that leads to targeted violence. However, there are several factors that have been identified in many school shooter profiles that may contribute to a sense of alienation and a lack of attachment. These factors include body-related concerns (obesity, acne, stature), psychosis, exposure to trauma, and social problems (Langman, 2017). Many individuals experience some of these traits, however, most do not commit violent acts and usually develop appropriate social
bonding. There is no profile of a school shooter, however, there are several characteristics that tend to be prevalent and can be observed by school personnel (Vossekuil et al., 2004).

**Application of social bonds to the recognition of aberrant behavior.** Weak social bonds do not necessarily lead to an individual engaging in targeted violence, or any other criminal behavior. However, there is evidence to suggest that there are observable signs that an individual may be on the pathway to violence (FBI, 2017). Those signs may manifest through weak social bonds that could be observed by members of the school community. This may include individuals that are demonstrating signs of despair, suicidal thoughts, depression, significant losses, obsession with previous attacks, isolating, and making previous threats (Doherty, 2016; FBI, 2017; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). It is important that someone in the school community recognizes an individual that may be demonstrating any of these signs in order to refer to the threat assessment team for further investigation. Even if these behaviors do not indicate that an individual is on the pathway to violence it certainly establishes a need for possible services and creates a record in the event there is a pattern of concerning or aberrant behavior (DCJS, 2020).

**Self-Control.** Despite the influence of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief the individual is clearly expected to maintain self-control. Hirschi (2002) maintains that those with weaker bonds have less expectations and as a result will demonstrate less self-control (Bouffard & Rice, 2010). Complicating the matter is that self-control is often limited due to the late maturation of the frontal cortex, which does not fully develop until around 25 years of age (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2016). As a result, impulse control, risky behavior, and aggression are negatively impacted (AACAP, 2016).
School-based victimization. Students that have been victims of criminal acts such as robbery, larceny, or assault and battery have traditionally been defined as school-based victims (Popp & Peguero, 2012). Recently, the definition of school-based victimization has been expanded to include harassment, fear, and bullying (Muschert & Peguero, 2010). Most students that are victimized or bullied by their peers do not engage in criminal behavior; however, research suggests that “school-based victimization is associated with criminal offending” in students that engage in threatening behaviors ((National Threat Assessment Center, 2019; Popp & Peguero, 2012, p. 3372). It is theorized that the victimization leads to a weaker bond in individuals, which can increase the likelihood of deviant behavior (Hirschi, 2002; Popp & Peguero, 2012). Historically, many school shooters felt hopeless and vulnerable as a result of being victimized through “bullying and exclusion” (Henry, 2009, p. 1252). In most cases of targeted acts of violence in schools the shooter had been a victim of bullying and felt persecuted by their peers (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). Students that are bullied are less likely to feel connected to the school community and may have weaker social bonds than students who are not bullied; consequently, this could attribute to increased deviant behavior in some people (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019).

Related Literature

Threat assessment practices are guided by years of research and practice in the field. An overview of the establishment of threat assessment in educational settings is provided. Several comprehensive studies on acts of targeted violence have been conducted to better identify pre-attack behaviors and warning signs. This research serves as the basis for the threat assessment model used in Virginia schools and is detailed in this chapter. Additionally, an overview of Virginia specific legislation detailing the requirements for threat assessment teams, the process
for assessing and managing threat cases, and the consideration of school climate are detailed. Finally, a review of literature specific to professional development with the consideration of in-person versus virtual delivery is provided.

**Foundation of Threat Assessment**

Threat assessment practices do not have their origin in schools, but rather law enforcement (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). It is important to establish how law enforcement applies threat assessment to assess if an individual is on a pathway to violence and if a credible threat exists. The shooting at Columbine High School was the impetus for collaboration between law enforcement and education personnel to establish behavioral threat assessment teams (Vossekuil et al., 2004). The methods used by law enforcement to assess a situation by collecting available information and assessing the credibility of the threat is the cornerstone of behavioral threat assessment.

**United States Secret Service and the Safe School Initiative.** The United States Secret Service (USSS), while best known for protecting political dignitaries, also responds to communicated threats of violence. These threats can be communicated through any means, to include verbal, written, electronic, or implied. Threat assessment has long been used by the USSS to determine if an individual, or group of individuals, pose a risk of violence and if appropriate, intervene prior to an incident occurring (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Following the highly publicized shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 the USSS and the USDOE collaborated on a project known as the Safe School Initiative. The purpose of the collaboration was to develop guidance that schools could use to apply threat assessment management from a law enforcement setting to a school setting. The Safe School Initiative reported that “researchers identified 37 incidents of targeted school violence involving 41 attackers that occurred in the
United States from 1974, the year in which the earliest incident identified took place, through June 2000” (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 8). The data collected by the research team provided evidence that there are reasonable steps that a school can take to possibly prevent and act of targeted violence through the implementation of assessing a threat. Vossekuil et al. (2002) found there were 10 key findings that have become the basis for school-based threat assessment models. The findings are:

1. Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely were sudden, impulsive acts.
2. Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker’s idea and/or plan to attack.
3. Most attackers did not threaten their attackers directly prior to advancing the attack.
4. There is no accurate or useful “profile” of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
5. Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
6. Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many considered or attempted suicide.
7. Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.
8. Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
9. In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
10. Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention (p. 31).

**Pathway to violence.** Researchers found that there is a pathway to violence that shooters take prior to an incident, which consists of grievance, ideation, planning, preparation, and
implementation (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). The first stage of the pathway begins with a grievance. This occurs when an individual has a grievance as a result of some perceived wrong directed towards them and they identify as having been bullied or victimized. Most people have likely experienced a grievance at some point; it rarely escalates and is often addressed through some nonviolent measure (DCJS, 2020). There may certainly be cause for the grievance based on some degree of victimization perpetrated towards the individual, however, this may progress to the second stage on the pathway, known as ideation. During ideation, they may fantasize about seeking revenge against an individual, or society, as a result of this grievance.

The third stage is identified as planning where the individual begins to develop how they would carry the act out (DCJS, 2020). This may include a very formal planning process that is written down as an outline, the recording of observations that could lead to success, or researching previous shooting incidents. For example, a female adult student in Frederick County, Maryland was arrested in 2017 after it was discovered she had been planning a mass shooting and bombing at her school (Masters, 2018). There was extensive planning involved, which she recorded in a very detailed journal. She had observed the schedule of the School Resource Officer (SRO) and planned to kill them first to increase her success. She manipulated several male students into unknowingly acquiring individual components to create explosives in order to not raise suspicion by buying the materials at the same time. She built fully operational explosive devices and concealed them in her basement, which were discovered at that time of her arrest. Her plan even included purchasing a shotgun with a small gauge since she recognized a large gauge shotgun would make it difficult to execute the act. Writing down her detailed plans in a journal ultimately led to her arrest and conviction before she could carry out her attack because her father discovered her journal and reported it to law enforcement. (Masters, 2018).
The fourth stage is preparation, which involves the individual acquiring what is needed to carry out the act (DCJS, 2020). This may include the acquisition of materials to successfully complete the act such as acquisition of weapons, explosives, body armor, or diversionary devices. It may also include the individual participating in a “dry run” of the event to practice and increase success. For example, the individual responsible for the mass attack at Virginia Tech practiced shooting targets at an outdoor range with his weapon, to include laying the targets on the ground to imitate that his victims were in a prone position. This was a behavior he actually followed through with during the mass shooting. Additionally, he acquired chains and locks to prevent students from leaving the building to increase his number of fatalities (TriData Division, System Planning Corporation, 2009). The preparation stage may also involve the subject preparing to die once the act is executed, which may include giving away possessions, preparing a suicide note, or recording a video.

The final stage is implementation—the individual fulfilling the targeted violence (DCJS, 2020; FBI 2017). This is the culmination of the grievance/ideation, planning, and preparation of the fulfillment of the act of targeted violence. At this point, the threat assessment process is not an effective strategy, and the response shifts to preventing the attack through a lockdown response and the deployment of law enforcement to stop the attack.

When conducting threat assessments, it is useful for the threat assessment team to identify where a subject is on the pathway to violence continuum. The goal is to avert a potential threat, remove them from the pathway, and provide support to reduce further harm (Vossekuil et al., 2004). Initially, the threat assessment team is tasked with triaging the incident that is reported to determine if the threat is imminent (DCJS, 2020).
**Pre-attack behaviors.** In 2018 the Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) with the FBI conducted a study to identify behaviors that were exhibited by individuals prior to an active shooting incident. This study examined active shooter situations in the United States between 2000 and 2013 and attempted to identify characteristics of active shooters to apply the findings to establish preventative steps. This study was not exclusive to school shooting incidents; however, the findings did indicate that there were no significant differences in the pre-attack behaviors of school and non-school shooters (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018).

These pre-attack behaviors are often observable by family, friends, members of the community, school employees, and classmates. Members of the school community may recognize behaviors that cause concern; however, they may be unaware of the process for reporting. In some cases, the concerning pre-attack behaviors in an individual with intent to cause harm may be a sudden change in mood, attempt to acquire weapons or some other resource needed to carry out an attack, or a sudden interest in previous mass violence events (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). The National Threat Assessment Center (2019) conducted a study of 41 acts of targeted school violence at school between 2008 and 2017 and found that in every case the “attackers exhibited concerning behaviors” and “most communicated their intent to attack” (p.52).

Some of these pre-attack, or warning behaviors, may not indicate that an individual is apt to engage in violent behavior; however, it is reasonable for the threat assessment team to evaluate whether the individual is on the pathway to violence. At the very least, many of the pre-attack behaviors may indicate a need for intervention and/or support, even if the individual is not on the pathway to violence. School shooters often communicate a threat to a third party in a
manner that may leave the recipient unsure of the seriousness of the communicated threat (Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldimann, & James, 2011).

A major finding by Silver et al (2018) relating to threat assessment is that on average, active shooters displayed four to five “concerning behaviors over time that were observable to others around the shooter” (p. 7). This is particularly important for schools to consider when measuring school climate, training on the recognition of aberrant behavior, and developing a process for reporting concerning behaviors. Schools have multiple members within their community that have the capacity to observe behaviors that may cause concern. These members include instructional staff, support staff, administrators, parents, and students. Each of these individuals represents a connection to an individual that may be on the pathway to violence, or in need of support.

**Leakage.** Threat assessment would have very little positive impact if the prospective attacker did not reveal something that was observable. Theses pre-attack behaviors are known as leakage and “occurs when a student intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes, or intentions that may signal an impending violent act. These clues could take the form of subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums” (O’Toole, 1999, p. 16). In almost all mass shootings there has been significant leakage that is observable and often reported as a concern after the incident occurs (Lankford, Adkins, & Madfis, 2019). There are certainly many cases where leakage was reported to the appropriate authorities and as a result the attack was averted. However, there are some mass shootings where there was no discernable leakage observed. For example, the Las Vegas mass shooter did not reveal any discernable warning signs or grievance, however, he clearly demonstrated potential mental health concerns. Events like the Las Vegas shooting may seem like these events are not
preventable, however, that is the exception. Considering the significant levels of leakage present many of these attacks can be prevented early into the pathway of violence, even in school settings (DCJS, 2020). The potential to prevent targeted attacks through recognition of aberrant or threatening behavior by members of the school community necessitates the need for training.

**Behavioral Threat Assessment in Virginia**

The mass shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007 led to significant legislative changes by the Virginia General Assembly (DCJS, 2020). Virginia legislation required institutions of higher education to create threat assessment teams for the purpose of managing aberrant behavior (DCJS, 2020). Following the incident at Sandy Hook Elementary School the Commonwealth of Virginia became the first state to legislatively require every K-12 public school to have threat assessment teams (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, n.d.). Initially, the legislation required threat assessment teams to only consider threats by students, however, in 2016 the legislation was amended to change the language from students to individuals (DCJS, 2020).

It was recognized by the Virginia General Assembly that threats to cause harm to the school community are not unique to students and may include parents, former students, staff, and individuals with no affiliation to the school (DCJS, 2020). Virginia was the only the state with mandated K-12 threat assessment teams in every public school until after the incident at Parkland, Florida in 2018 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019). Since that time the State of Maryland and Florida have passed legislation based on Virginia’s law and several other states have consulted with the Virginia DCJS to explore developing similar legislation (DCJS, 2020).
**Virginia threat assessment model and implementation.** When Virginia legislatively required threat assessment teams, they did not require schools to utilize a particular threat assessment model, however, the language did require schools to use a model consistent with the DCJS Model Policies (DCJS, 2020). Dr. Dewey Cornell at the University of Virginia (UVA) developed a model, known as the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG), prior to the legislative mandate that has been in use by some school divisions in Virginia and other states. Based on previous surveys conducted by the DCJS most school divisions utilize the DCJS model; however, there are some school divisions that utilize the VSTAG model (DCJS, 2017). There are slight differences in the VSTAG model and the DCJS model, however, they both follow a similar process based on the threat assessment model used by the Secret Service. The VSTAG model does not consider threats to self as a function of the threat assessment, where the DCJS model does.

Regardless of the model used the threat assessment process begins with someone from the school community observing a concerning or aberrant behavior that is initially reported through some process and the threat assessment team triages the threat to determine the validity, urgency, the implementation of protective measures, and the assembly of the threat assessment team. The team then assesses the threat and determines the threat enhancers and mitigators. Finally, the threat is managed through the development of strategies, monitoring, and reassessment as necessary (Reeves & Brock, 2017). The use of threat assessment provides a flexible approach to resolving a problem without the application of a zero-tolerance approach, resulting in better outcomes for the student (Cornell et al., 2018). Threat assessment does have the capacity to be a “problem-solving approach to violence prevention that focuses on resolving
the conflict or difficulty that stimulated the threat and working out a solution that allows the student to continue in school” (Cornell, Allen, & Fan, 2012, p. 102).

**Role of threat assessment teams.** Threat assessment teams in all Virginia K-12 public schools are required to assess and intervene for any behaviors that may pose a threat to the safety of the school or to self (DCJS, 2020). A threat assessment team is a multidisciplinary team that is composed of individuals with expertise in instruction, counseling, administration, and law enforcement (DCJS, 2020). Many threat assessment teams elect to also add team members with expertise in special education, school psychology, and social work. In addition, social workers may be aware of programs in the community that could help provide additional options for an opportunity response (Bent-Goodley, 2018).

Based on Virginia Code threat assessment teams are required to “provide guidance to students, faculty, and staff regarding recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, school, or self” (DCJS, 2020, p. 7). It is critical that all members of the school community are not only aware of the threat assessment process, but they should be aware of how to recognize aberrant or threatening behavior. Not only does this increase the capacity for recognition and reporting, but possibly provides needed services before an individual carries out a threat. School staff and students may notice a change in behavior or observe threatening or aberrant behavior; however, they do not report it to the threat assessment team for further investigation (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2012). It is important to consider the role of staff that support non-educational purposes in the school environment, such as bus drivers, school security officers, and custodial staff. Support staff typically do not receive training beyond what is necessary to perform their job, however, their involvement with the school community provides opportunity to be a critical part of the threat assessment process.
Threats are categorized based on the seriousness of the threat and organized into four categories: low risk, moderate risk, high risk, and imminent. All public K-12 schools in Virginia are legislatively required to report quantitative data on threat assessments to the DCJS annually. This data is used to inform practice, conduct training, and establish policy. During the 2016-2017 school year there were 9,238 threat assessments conducted in Virginia schools and 928 (10%) of threats were classified as high/imminent (DCJS, 2018, p. 14). Of those 928 threat cases only 40 (less than 1%) were carried out (DCJS, 2018, p. 14).

In Virginia, roughly half of all documented threats in K-12 schools are for threats to self (DCJS, 2018). Suicide is the second leading cause of death of individuals in the United States between the ages of 10-24 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015). While school shootings receive a significant amount of media coverage and legislative action, there are still far more students that harm themselves, than commit homicide. Assessing for risk of suicide can only happen if there is a process in place for identifying a student of concern and responding appropriately (Crepeau-Hobson, 2013). The threat assessment team is tasked with not only assessing threats to self or others, but also providing resources and services to mitigate a threat and remove an individual from the pathway of violence (Vossekuil et al., 2004).

Although threat assessment teams are required to provide an incredibly specialized risk assessment most of these team members do not have training specific to criminal behavior (DCJS, 2016). Of course, this is one reason law enforcement is a required member of the team. The team must consider and evaluate multiple reports, evidence, statements, and in some cases arbitrary information to arrive at an appropriate threat disposition. This can lead to difficulty identifying a threat and assigning the appropriate classification (Goodrum, Evans, Thompson, & Woodward, 2019). Virginia Code also allows law enforcement to share adult and juvenile
criminal history with the threat assessment team for the purposes of accurately determining an appropriate threat level (DCJS, 2020). Law enforcement may also have relevant information based on calls for service to the home of the subject of interest.

**Community threat assessment.** Despite the requirement that all Virginia K-12 public schools and institutions of higher learning have threat assessment teams, there is no legislation that extends the reach of threat assessment teams or their functionality beyond the school and/or campus setting. Considering that some school shooters, and others that have perpetuated targeted violence at a school, were not current students it stands to reason that considering community threat assessment is vital to mitigating potential threats (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). Regardless of whether the shooter is a current student or not, there is benefit to the establishment of communication between schools and outside law enforcement regarding aberrant or threatening behavior.

The individual responsible for the school shooting in Parkland, Florida was known to local and federal law enforcement for hateful speech and calls for service to his residence. Additionally, when he was a student at Marjorie Stoneman High School there were significant concerning behaviors that resulted in disciplinary action (Camp et al., 2018). However, there was nothing in place to connect the concerning behaviors between the school, local law enforcement, federal law enforcement, and the community. Essentially, community threat assessment widens the net of assessment and provides more information across a greater scope of influence, which could increase the capacity to mitigate a threat regardless of the origin or potential target.

There are certainly privacy concerns and overreach by many advocates about the implication of threat assessment and its extension beyond schools. Constitutional protections afforded by the Fourth and First Amendments are still relevant, however, in many cases the
individual’s behavior and communications are conducted within public domain which include social media platforms and online public forums (Camp et al., 2018). Any speech communicated within a public domain is not afforded the protections under the Fourth Amendment and are subject to investigation by law enforcement (Congressional Research Service, 2019). With the increased use of social media platforms and electronic devices laws and statutes are continually amended to reflect threatening and harassing language through electronic means. While law enforcement attempts to monitor public message boards and social media platforms for threatening behavior, there still remains the need for citizens to report concerning behaviors. Many mass shooters, of schools and other venues, made initial statements on social media or other communication platforms and were only discovered after the event occurred (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019).

**Threat assessment training.** While Virginia requires all K-12 public schools to have threat assessment teams there is no legislative requirement that teams receive formal training. The DCJS does provide free training on a regular basis throughout the state, however, it is often difficult for all members of a threat assessment team to attend. The 2017 Virginia School Safety Audit Survey Results indicate that 7,439 teachers serve on threat assessment teams, however, only 36% received training. Research conducted where pretests were compared to posttests after receiving threat assessment training indicates “substantial changes in their knowledge and attitudes regarding school violence (Allen, Cornell, Lorek, & Sheras, 2008, p. 329). Threat assessment training conducted by the DCJS for school divisions includes information on the legislative requirements of threat assessment and the responsibilities of the team, historical basis for threat assessment, recognition of threatening and aberrant behavior, framework of the School Safety Initiative, and case management, and participation in assessing a mock case. The training
is intended for the threat assessment team members and the expectation is that the threat assessment team will then provide guidance to staff, faculty, and students on the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior towards self or others.

The current training provided by DCJS lasts seven hours and is designed to prepare members of the school threat assessment team in conducting and managing threat assessment. There is a considerable emphasis on providing participants with the legal requirements of information sharing with respect to the Family Educational Rights Protection Act (FERPA) and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). All participants are provided with a mock scenario with the goal to conduct a threat assessment with a mock team during the training. Ideally, the team will be the actual threat assessment team from the same school, however, it is not always practical to have all members of the threat assessment team at the training. Every effort is made to structure the mock teams to include expertise in administration, instruction, counseling, and law enforcement. These mock teams are required to ask questions of the facilitator to apply an investigatory mindset to the process. Based on the questions they ask and who they choose to interview they will learn more information that will assist in determining the appropriate threat level. This is an opportunity to calibrate a threat assessment team to ensure an appropriate threat level is determined based on the facts of the case. The final threat level will dictate the appropriate response and lead to how the case is managed to prevent and/or mitigate the threat.

The DCJS is responsible for conducting a Secondary School Climate Survey of every public high school and middle school. High schools conduct the survey during even numbered years and JDHS last participated in the Climate Survey in 2018. Schools have the option to
administer the student climate survey to all students, or randomly select 25 per grade level. Staff are encouraged to participate, however, there is no legislative requirement to participate.

In this survey, the staff was asked, “does your school use a formal threat assessment process to respond to student threats of violence” (JDHS, 2019). The results at JDHS indicated that only 30% of teachers were aware that threat assessment existed at their school, 7% indicated there was not a threat assessment process, and 63% indicated that they did not know (JDHS, 2019). The state average for high schools during the same year was 53% of teachers were aware of a formal threat assessment process (JDHS, 2019). Considering the widespread knowledge of threat assessment by teachers it is probable that support staff threat assessment knowledge is lower than teachers.

**Conducting a threat assessment.** Upon receiving a report of threatening or aberrant behavior the team must first determine if the threat is imminent. If so, then it would require immediate law enforcement intervention, and depending on the nature of the threat it may require implementation of a lockdown process. Otherwise, the team attempts to answer questions as outlined in the Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guideline (2020) in order to guide the team towards an outcome. The key questions are:

1. What are the subject’s motives, grievances, goals and intent in their behavior?
2. Have there been any communications suggesting ideas, intent, planning or preparation for violence?
3. Has the subject shown inappropriate interest in/identification with:
   a. Incidents of perpetrators of targeted/mass violence
   b. Grievances of perpetrators
c. Weapons/tactics of perpetrators

d. Notoriety or fame of perpetrators?

4. Does the subject have (or are they developing) the capacity and will to carry out an act of targeted violence?

5. Is the subject experiencing or expressing hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair?

6. Does the subject have a positive, trusting, sustained relationship with at least one responsible person?

7. Does the subject see violence as an acceptable, desirable – or the only – way to solve a problem?

8. Are the subject’s conversation and “story” consistent with his or her actions?

9. Are other people concerned about the subject’s potential for violence?

10. What circumstances might affect the likelihood of escalation of violence (p. 36-37)?

These questions are based on the findings from the School Safety Initiative and are used as a guiding framework for teams to determine if an individual is on the pathway to violence, as opposed to demonstrating attention seeking or typical adolescent behavior (Storey, Gibas, Reeves, & Hart, 2011). Most threat assessment cases are triaged and found to be low risk by the threat assessment team, however, there are cases that require a great degree of management (DCJS, 2018). While identification of a threat is important, it is only once facet of the process. Managing the threat is critical to not only removing the individual from the pathway of violence, but also following up with services. These services can include professional mental health evaluations, responding through special education services as applicable, pursuit of criminal charges, change in placement, and meeting the needs of potential victims ((DCJS, 2020)

While criminal charges or school-based consequences are a possibility, that is not the
primary goal of threat assessment (DCJS, 2018). Safety to the entire school community and preventing an act of violence or threat to self-harm is paramount to the threat assessment process. Threat assessment often has a victim that needs to be considered in addition to the subject of concern. Additionally, the subject of concern may also have victim issues to be considered that require services to address. In fact, it may have, in part, led to the concerning or aberrant behavior that had led to the need for a threat assessment.

Most threats are made by current students; however, the threat assessment can include any individual (DCJS, 2018). School divisions often represent the largest employer in a locality and workplace violence still occurs at a much higher rate than violence at school. Threat assessment should also be used to evaluate threats made by employees, spouses of employees, parents of students, former students, and individuals from outside of the school community. The shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary was committed by an individual who had never been affiliated with the school. The school shooting in Parkland, Florida was committed by a former student. Clearly, there are additional challenges to threat assessment if the subject of concern is not a student, however, this punctuates the need for communication between law enforcement and the school division.

**Legislative Requirements.** Virginia has been proactive in passing legislation to address school safety concerns. As stated previously, in 2008 Virginia first enacted threat assessment legislation as outlined in Virginia Code §22.1-79.4. This was in response to the mass shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007. Initially, this only applied to institutions of higher education. Following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Virginia established the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet, which was tasked with evaluating K-12 school safety practices. There were numerous recommendations, but of interest for the scope of this research the Cabinet recommended the
requirement of threat assessment teams in K-12 public schools (DCJS, 2020).

Following the shooting at Parkland, Florida in 2018 Governor Ralph Northam directed the General Assembly to create a House Select Committee on School Safety. As a result, the Committee findings led to the passing of House Bill 1734 to direct the DCJS to develop a case management tool for the purposes of managing threat cases and the collection of quantitative data. The goal of the case management tool is to provide greater continuity through the duration of a student’s career between schools and ultimately through college (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, n.d.). The case management tool will be a program that works in conjunction with a school division’s student information management system. The user will input the facts and findings for each threat assessment and develop a plan for intervention and long-term management.

**School climate and threat assessment.** School climate is often considered a measure that benefits the well-being of students. However, recently this is being expanded to the overall safety of the school for teachers and students (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2012). Researchers suggest that a positive school climate has numerous benefits for students (Gregory et al., 2010). These benefits include lower suspension rates (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011), lower rates of aggression and violence (Gregory et al., 2012), and lower substance abuse rates (Cornell & Huang, 2016).

Every public middle and high school in Virginia are required to survey students and staff every two years using the Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey. The data is used to produce an individual report for every school that not only provides metrics on the perception on a host of questions, but also establish the type of school climate as perceived by students. All
schools are encouraged to use these reports to inform their school improvement plan and take necessary measures to improve school climate (Cornell et al., 2018).

School climate borrows its framework from the work around Baumrind’s (1968) theory of authoritative parents. The premise of school climate theory focuses on two axes that are described as either low or high. The first axis is the structure at school. Structure refers to the established rules at the school and how they are consistently and fairly applied to all students. The second axis is the level of support and caring attitude provided to students by staff (Heilbrun, Cornell, & Konold, 2018). School climate can be described based on whether a school is high or low on each axes, which leads to four identified types of school climate. When students perceive their school as low support and low structure the school climate is considered neglectful. Low structure and high support is considered a permissive climate. High structure and low support is an authoritarian climate. High support and high structure is identified as an authoritative school climate and considered to be a positive school climate (Huang, Eklund, & Cornell, 2017).

The relationship between school climate and threat assessment is dependent upon the culture of the school community and whether a threat is likely to be reported. Students may be hesitant to report a concern to a trusted adult if the school climate is not identified as supportive (Lankford et al., 2019). Consequently, a positive school climate certainly improves communication and positive relationships among students and faculty (Cornell et al., 2018). Threat assessment becomes effective when the school has a climate where staff and students feel safe to report a concerning behavior or communication of a threat. If a school climate is considered to be authoritarian, then due to the high structure and low support it is reasonable to assume that some students may believe that reporting a threat to school authorities would cause
harm or consequence. However, an authoritative school climate with high structure and high support may lead a student to understand that reporting the behavior will be handled by the threat assessment team in a manner that is consistent with the climate and culture of the school (Cornell & Huang, 2016).

**Role of media.** The media cannot be blamed for the horrific actions of an individual with respect to initiating targeted violence; however, they should be responsible for their reporting and any unintended consequences that may occur. There is concern that shootings are often sensationalized through significant coverage of the event (E.R., 2015). Often, the shooter receives excessive coverage that could lead some individuals to sympathize with the shooter’s victimization through bullying or exposure to trauma (Elliot, 2015). Through significant coverage of the event and shooter by the media it often creates notoriety that inspires future events. The name of the shooter, their troubled past, and their story is almost always told in detail, yet the victims are rarely mentioned beyond the memorial (Elliot, 2015).

Of particular interest is the notion of media contagion, which has led to “copycat” behaviors. The shooting at Columbine in particular has led to at least 13 copycat attempts specifically based on inspiration of that event (Pescara-Kovach & Raleigh, 2017). This can lead to shooters being viewed as martyrs by some and only perpetuate the shooter over the victims.

The media contagion is further complicated by the increased scope of social media to report on all incidents across the country and further increase awareness of the horrors associated with such an event. This includes using social media during, or immediately following an active shooter event. Mazer et al (2015) conducted a review of social media use as a result of two separate school shooting incidents and found that there is a significant increase in the use of social media to report on mass shootings, however, it is frequently full of inaccuracies. The
researchers evaluated the volume of posts, frequency of posts, social media content, misinformation, and calls for action and found that both shootings had numerous posts on Facebook and Twitter and reposting for several days following the event (Mazer et al., 2015). Save.org describes “helpful reporting,” as opposed to “harmful reporting,” which is described “as assisting others in learning to identify behaviors of concern and, upon doing so, increasing their knowledge of how to respond to those who pose a possible threat” (Pescara-Kovach & Raleigh, 2017, p. 42).

**Implementation of Professional Development through Online Learning**

Support staff need to be trained on recognizing threatening or aberrant behavior, however, there are often restrictions to provide in-person professional development such as available hours outside of their contracted responsibilities. However, training presented through an online format could serve to address some of the challenges associated with in-person training. The level of professional development needed on threat assessment is very limited compared to the training required for threat assessment team members. As such, it is reasonable to develop a training module for support staff to deliver threat assessment training that is 15 to 30 minutes, which tends to be the preferred length of time to maintain engagement (Morgenroth, 2017).

**Challenges of online training.** The traditional learning environment of all participants in the same room, learning at the same time in front of an instructor is one modality for professional development. With improvements in platforms for learning management systems and almost universal access to computers and the Internet there are increased opportunities to receive professional development online at a time and place that is convenient for the learner.
For school divisions, there are relatively few days scheduled for traditional in-person professional development during the school year.

While all professions require continued learning to improve and respond to the needs of the organization, the field of education sees constant changes to policy and practice. Teachers, administrators, and counselors hold professional licensure that requires evidence of continuing education for licensure renewal. With the exception of school security officers, support staff do not require a state license or certification specific to their job that is required by the Virginia Department of Education. School security officers are required to complete 16 hours of approved coursework related to their role every two years, however, there is no requirement specific to threat assessment (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, n.d.).

For instructional staff, professional development is often centered on topics such as instruction and content specific strategies. There is very little opportunity to provide training on topics such as threat assessment. One of the greatest challenges to providing training to support staff is their employment classification. Support staff are typically identified as “classified employees” by definition and limited to their contracted hours per week. By contrast, teachers, counselors, and administrators are “non-classified” and are salaried employees. This classification allows administration to provide teachers and counselors training beyond the regularly scheduled contract hours.

Additionally, support staff may not always report directly to the building administrator, which may impact who provides training. Bus drivers usually report to a division transportation director, school security officers may report to a division school safety director, and custodians may actually be contracted through a private company. All of these positions certainly support
the overall mission of the school, however, their training typically focuses on the specifics of their job and they have very limited hours contracted for additional training.

It is reasonable to assume that online learning will not be the preferred modality for all learners, particularly adults that currently have limited experience using these platforms. It is likely some learners have had negative experiences with previous online training. This may have been due to a training module that did not consider how to best engage adult learners (Pic, 2015). However, there are differences in online education for college credit and online training for professional development. At the very least, the learner participating for college credit enrolled in the course and has a vested interest due to requirements related to achieving a passing grade. Learners that complete online professional development as a required part of their job are often told to complete the training and not given freedom to choose. In some cases, “learning that is imposed on adults will be met with resentment and is minimally effective” (Gog et al., 2010, p. 228). There may not be adequate “buy-in” and the training may be viewed as a “check in the box” to remain employed. The requirement to attend, or complete a training, for work is no different regardless of whether it is in-person or online, but some of the time constraints can be mitigated if an option to complete required trainings can be completed at the learners’ convenience (Scott, Feldman, & Underwood, 2016). Knowles (1984) surmised that adult learners are motivated to learn, but it is based on whether they find it necessary. Establishing buy-in is important so that learners will see the value to their job and the empowerment to impact change.

**Benefits of online training.** The use of online training provides an opportunity for the learner to complete content specific modules anywhere there is an internet connection and the availability of a device capable of participating in the training. With improvements to online learning there has been an increase in its use by employers, institutions of higher education, and
K-12 education. In some cases, it is used to supplement education through an asynchronous e-learning model, or could occur through a platform that is synchronous (Rovai, 2002).

**Costs.** In-person behavioral threat assessment training in Virginia costs between $2500 and $5000 per day and is capped at 50 participants (Brad Stang, personal communication, April 15, 2020). While this training is designed for individuals serving on threat assessment teams and not necessary for support staff, an instructor with subject matter expertise would still be quite expensive for an abbreviated in-person session. The conversion of the material into a short training module would be substantially cheaper than a full day with an instructor, however, the real benefit is the ability to reach all staff with the training module with no increase in cost.

**Time and flexibility.** Availability of time to participate in anything beyond the scheduled workday is often limited and competes with personal obligations. Traditional in-person training would not be cost effective to conduct in increments of 15 minutes considering the daily cost of threat assessment training (Brad Stang, personal communication, April 15, 2020). However, online training has the capacity to be delivered in short submodules. These submodules could deliver a particular concept or topic in a few minutes, allowing the learner to build upon an overarching concept. This provides the learner the opportunity to complete training through short lessons asynchronously during a time that best fits their schedule.

**Customized training.** An online threat assessment training module has the capacity to be developed and delivered based on the role of the learner. Generally, most support staff will have similar training needs with respect to behavioral threat assessment. However, with the introduction of submodules it may be appropriate to customize a training package based on the learner. Front office staff are likely to have a greater deal of interaction with parents and visitors to the school, while bus drivers will primarily interact with students. Custodial staff may
observe threats through written communication as a result of graffiti. School security officers are likely to have more involvement with the SRO and school administration as a result of their role. Beyond the scope of this current study there certainly are implications for expansion to students, parents, law enforcement outside of the role of SRO, and the community.

**Online training assessments.** A reasonable concern with online training is course fidelity and the effectiveness of improving participant knowledge. The participant could certainly advance through a training module without viewing or listening to the material, however, to improve attention to the lesson there should be formative assessments to check for understanding throughout the module (Gog, Sluijsmans, Brinke, & Prins, 2010). Not only will these formative assessments compel the participant to actively engage the material, but also serve to reinforce important concepts. Additionally, if the training module is accessed through a learning management system then there are several features to improve actual completion of the course, to include disabling the ability for the participant to advance through a slide prematurely.

**Online training effectiveness.** If online training is ineffective then any cost or time savings cannot be justified. There is a growing body of research to suggest that online training is at least as effective as in-person training based on pretest and posttest data, and in some cases, there tends to be higher posttest scores with online training (Scott et al., 2016). The increase in knowledge attained through online learning may be a result of students taking “ownership of the material rather than being passive receptacles of a teacher in a commonly used face-to-face didactic teaching environment” (Scott et al., 2016, p. 267). However, not all participants will experience similar gains for a variety of reasons. Neither will have the same level of familiarity and comfort level to learn through autonomous learning (Rabe-Hemp, Woollen, & Humiston, 2009).
Summary

The implementation of the threat assessment process and the corresponding teams to manage reports of aberrant and/or threatening behavior is critical to mitigating potential violence. There is a significant body of evidence to suggest that threat assessment can effectively remove an individual from the pathway of violence and prevent or mitigate an act of violence (FBI, 2017; Jonson, 2017; Lankford et al., 2019; Meloy et al., 2011; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018; Silver et al., 2018; DCJS, 2020). It is not, however, the only step in the process. In fact, without timely recognition and reporting of aberrant behavior to a threat assessment team the formal process is not provided the opportunity to assess and intervene. There are countless stories of concerning behavior that others have observed, however, failed to report until after the tragedy occurred (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). The purpose of this applied study is to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia by developing and implementing online training modules. A multimethod design will be used consisting of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Threats of harm to self or others can be mitigated or prevented by reporting observable concerns to the appropriate authorities (Meloy et al., 2011; National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). Support staff represent a fairly well embedded segment of the school community, yet they do not have formal training in behavioral threat assessment and most do not have an awareness that threat assessment teams exist in their schools (Cornell & Huang, 2016). The development of online training modules may have the capacity to improve the knowledge of
threat assessment. This includes the ability to recognize aberrant or threatening behavior and report concerning behaviors through the appropriate process at the school.

The goal was to provide support staff with the knowledge to recognize behavior or communication that represents a threat and know the appropriate process in place at JDHS. The current literature, established best practice, threat assessment guidelines, and Virginia Code drove the development of a succinct online training module that improved the participant perception of threat assessment knowledge as evidenced by the post-training survey. This project has the capacity to live beyond the dissertation and participants at JDHS. Ideally, this will serve as the foundation and pilot for a series of online training modules on threat assessment for all stakeholders within the Commonwealth of Virginia.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia by developing and implementing online training modules. A multimethod design was used consisting of qualitative and quantitative approaches. To collect qualitative data, the researcher conducted interviews with the members of the threat assessment team at JDHS and conducted a focus group with support staff at JDHS. Additionally, an online training module was developed that provided an overview of the behavioral threat assessment process, the recognition of threatening and aberrant behavior, and the reporting procedures specific to JDHS. After participants viewed the online training module, a five-point Likert scale survey was immediately administered to determine their perception regarding the effectiveness of the online training module at improving their knowledge.

There were two participant groups in this study. The first was the school-based threat assessment team participants, which was comprised of those with expertise in administration, law enforcement, counseling, and instruction. Additionally, a school safety coordinator for the division was included in the interview group. The second group of participants were support staff, which included a combination of those serving in the following roles: paraprofessionals, school security officers, a substitute teacher, and a speech therapist. The setting was John Doe High School in southeast Virginia and the ultimate goal was to provide systemic changes to how support staff are trained to recognize and report aberrant and/or threatening behavior.
Design

A multimethod research design was used for this applied study. The choice to choose a multimethod research design was based on the capacity to develop a “comprehensive research plan” and “implement and monitor the plan” (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. 3). The objective of this research design was to identify and correct a problem of practice as it relates to the lack of threat assessment training for support staff. The use of a descriptive research design was the most appropriate considering it captures the “phenomenon as it naturally occurs” (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. 15).

Data were obtained through interviewing the threat assessment team which including two school administrators, a teacher, the school resource officer as well as the division safety and security coordinator. Additionally, a focus group was conducted with support staff representation and facilitated by the researcher to identify ideas and solutions for the problem of the inadequate training of support staff when recognizing threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School. To gather quantitative data, the researcher developed a brief online training module for support staff on behavioral threat assessment with a post-training survey. The survey measured the perceived effectiveness of the online training module at increasing knowledge on the purpose and role of threat assessment, recognizing threatening or aberrant behavior, and the process for reporting a threat at JDHS.

Research Questions

Central Question: How can the problem of providing adequate training to support staff to increase their capacity to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others be solved at John Doe High School located in southeast
Virginia?

**Sub-question 1:** How would members of the school-based threat assessment team in an interview solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?

**Sub-question 2:** How would support staff in a focus group solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?

**Sub-question 3:** How would an online training module and post-training survey data solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?

**Setting**

The pseudonym of John Doe High School (JDHS) was selected to maintain confidentiality of the school. The setting for this study was chosen based on several factors. First, the location is within close proximity to the researcher, and this provided convenience in conducting the focus group. This school had been identified by both the researcher and staff in the building as not providing training on the recognition or threatening or aberrant behavior to support staff. All middle and high schools in Virginia are required to participate in the Secondary School Climate Survey (Cornell et al., 2018). Additionally, the researcher is very familiar with the locality where the school is located and has an interest in improving the outcomes of the school and ultimately the division.
JDHS is situated in one of seven school divisions that make up a region of southeastern Virginia, which is one of eight superintendent regions in Virginia. For the 2018-2019 school year JDHS reported 2,146 enrolled students. The school had 42.3% White, 41.4% Black, 6.4% two or more races, 5.7% Hispanic, 3.6% Asian, 0.4% Native Hawaiian, and 0.2% American Indian. Students with disabilities represented 18.3% of the student population and 30% are described as economically disadvantaged (JDHS, 2018). The school is a traditional ninth through 12th grade school and was accredited during the 2018-2019 school year. The principal is supported by four assistant principals that are assigned per grade level. Additionally, there is an athletic director and six guidance counselors. The school does have one school resource officer (SRO) assigned by the local police department. There are approximately 60 support staff assigned to JDHS in the following positions: front office staff (4), paraprofessionals (12), school security officers (6), bus drivers (30), and custodial staff (8). The division has a newly created position to oversee school safety, which includes threat assessment training and management.

**Participants**

The sample pool was confined to JDHS and participants were selected using convenience sampling. The decision to utilize convenience sampling as a nonprobability sample design is based on the notion that the participants are “readily available” and “some of the needed study data have already been collected” through the Secondary School Climate Survey (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. 81). Utilizing this type of purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to make selections in participants and site locations based on the ability to “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 158). The researcher required assistance in selecting the participants for the focus groups and interviews. The school administrator was selected based on convenience sampling, however,
snowball sampling was used to identify support staff that would be appropriate to participate in the focus group (Rovai, Baker, & Ponton, 2013). This allowed the researcher to leverage the knowledge of the school administrator, who was familiar with the staff at the school (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

**Interview Participants**

The first school administrator (AP 1) had been employed in public education for 14 years and has been assigned to JDHS for three years. AP 1 has served on the threat assessment team for three years and had been provided formal threat assessment training by DCJS. The SRO (SRO 1) has worked in law enforcement for 9 years, been an SRO for three years, and has served on the threat assessment team the entire time during their assignment at JDHS. SRO 1 has received formal threat assessment training by DCJS while attending the SRO Basic Course. The school counselor assigned to the threat assessment team was asked to participate in the interview, however, they were unavailable. A second school administrator that serves on the team was interviewed (AP 2). AP 2 has been employed in public education for 20 years and assigned to JDHS for 10 years. The teacher (Teacher 1) was assigned to the threat assessment team during the 2021-2022 school year and had not received threat assessment at the time of the interview. Teacher 1 has been employed in public education for 21 years and assigned to JDHS for three years. The central office coordinator (Coordinator 1) has worked in law enforcement for four years, served as a fire fighter for 20 years, a teacher for three years, an administrator for four years, and at the time of the interview oversaw all school safety and security operations for the division during the past two years.

**The Researcher’s Role**

There were reasons why this researcher was interested in assessing the problem of
providing awareness and training around threat assessment. The researcher’s primary occupation is the K-12 School Safety and Threat Assessment Manager with the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety at DCJS, where he is responsible for supervising several legislative mandates, training SROs, school security officers (SSOs), and school personnel on school safety related requirements and best practices, providing technical assistance on several school safety related topics, and overseeing all aspects of the legislative requirements for K-12 threat assessment. A significant amount of technical assistance this researcher provides is devoted to developing and training about behavioral threat assessment and responding to targeted violence. Threat assessment extends beyond the K-12 school environment and includes institutions of higher education, private schools, churches, and businesses. Most often, this relates to targeted acts of violence and the psychological factors associated with their behavior. It is both a professional and personal motivation to mitigate acts of violence that cause harm to self or others since these tragedies have a significant impact on communities, to include the school community.

It was important to recognize the potential for allowing preconceived ideas to guide the research as it relates to behavioral threat assessment. To mitigate assumptions, emergent coding was used to organize data collected during the interviews and focus groups. Furthermore, bracketing was used by creating a mind map through the NVivo software. There are multiple methods that can be utilized to conduct bracketing as it relates to qualitative research, however, it may be most useful to consider more than one method (Tufford & Newman, 2010). There are benefits to bracketing as it “enables a deeper level of researcher engagement and integration throughout all aspects of the qualitative research endeavor” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 93). It was useful to integrate memoing as a part of interviewing and the facilitation of the focus
group. This was done to establish ideas and connect them to the data being collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Procedures

The school division where the study was conducted required submission of the research parameters, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval documentation, and an overview of the study and how it may benefit the division and/or school through the completion and submission of a form. Formal permission to conduct research was granted by the school division and a letter was provided to the researcher indicating approval (see Appendix H and I). A succinct overview of the purpose of the study was provided to the JDHS principal, in addition to assurances of confidentiality.

Permission from the IRB was obtained on April 14, 2021 (see Appendix A for IRB approval). Once permission had been obtained per IRB guidelines to conduct research the researcher contacted the school administrator during the spring of 2021, however, due to the impact of COVID-19 and an anticipated change in leadership at JDHS it was delayed. The opportunity to meet with the new principal did not occur until September 2021. The scope of the project was discussed, and a plan was established to collaborate with AP 1 to elicit participants through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. However, the very next day there was a school shooting in a nearby school division, which led to several social media threats to attack JDHS. This required significant resources by JDHS, law enforcement, and the threat assessment team. Understandably, the research was delayed for several weeks.

Once JDHS was able to allow the research to continue, the names and positions of the threat assessment team members were obtained from AP 1. Additionally, the names and contact info were requested of all support staff at JDHS and organized based on role. The participants
were initially contacted through their division email with a short introduction, an overview of the participation requirements, and the recruitment letter. AP 1 provided notice to support staff and threat assessment team members that they would receive an email from the researcher. Interviews were conducted with members of the threat assessment team and Coordinator 1. There were five interview participants.

The focus group had representation from employees that were identified as support staff. The focus group was composed of paraprofessionals, school security officers, a speech therapist, and a substitute teacher. An attempt to obtain custodians, bus drivers, and office staff was unable to be arranged, however, one school security officer had worked as a bus driver for 21 years and was able to provide feedback related to that role.

**Quantitative data collection**

Survey Monkey was the software used to develop a survey that was administered immediately following the participants completion of the online training module. The post-training survey was organized into three sections to solicit subsets of data. The first section gathered descriptive statistics, the second section measured the perception of increased knowledge in threat assessment, and the third section measured the perception of the effectiveness of the online training module. The first section required participants to select their role, provide a numerical answer to years in the division and at JDHS, and provide “yes” or “no” responses to prior training and awareness. The second and third section required the participants to select either “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neither agree or disagree,” “agree,” or “strongly agree.” The target for support staff participating in the online training module and post-training survey was 25; however, 21 participants completing the training and survey.
Data Collection and Analysis

To collect data that captured the current state of threat assessment awareness by the school community and their capacity to recognize aberrant behavior the researcher used multiple methods. Multiple interviews and a focus group were utilized to collect qualitative data and establish what the participants know and believe. Furthermore, the questions attempted to identify what may increase an understanding and awareness of threat assessment and the recognition of aberrant behavior by support staff.

Interviews

The first sub-question for this study explored how threat assessment team members in an interview would solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia. Four interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform in a private room free from distractions. One interview was conducted in the office of the participant at their request. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to establish rapport and gain an understanding of the school climate, cultural considerations, and unique challenges by structuring the interview questions around topics instead of specific questions (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The questions were used to establish baseline information about the participants’ role as a member of the threat assessment team, previous training, and the number of threat assessments they conduct annually. Additionally, information about their years of experience in education, in the division, and at JDHS was obtained.

The interviews were recorded using Otter AI software installed on the researcher’s laptop and phone. Notes were recorded during the interview to capture any relevant information beyond the scope of the recording, such as observed non-verbal communication. The entire
recording was transcribed and reviewed by the researcher to check for accuracy and add
appropriate notes. Interview transcripts were imported into the qualitative data analysis software
NVivo to organize the findings and any ideas, or themes, that can be classified into codes
(Creswell & Poth, 2018). A database was constructed that organized the codes into four themes
to allow for “assessing inter-rater reliability among multiple coders” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.
190). The goal was to discover emerging patterns and create a visual display of the data. The
interviews were conducted with a total of five faculty members which included a school
administrator, counselor, school resource officer, teacher, and the division safety and security
coordinator.

**Interview questions.** There was a total of five participants interviewed independently. This
included four members of the JDHS threat assessment team. To gain an understanding of the
division perspective on threat assessment and professional development an interview of the
division safety and security coordinator was conducted. Questions one through thirteen
primarily applied to the administrators and teacher. Questions 14 through 19 applied to the SRO
and questions 20 through 24 applied to the safety and security coordinator. All 24 questions
were presented to the participants; however, they were advised that some questions may not be
applicable to their role. The interview questions are:

1. What is your current position and title?
2. How many years have you worked in this school division?
   a. How many years have you worked at this school?
3. How many years have you worked in the field of education?
4. A threat assessment team is required by Virginia Code to be composed of expertise in administration, counseling, instruction, and law enforcement. Who typically fulfills that requirement on your threat assessment team at this school?

5. On average, how often does your threat assessment team meet per school year for the purpose of assessing a threat to self or others?

6. Describe all of the formal and informal threat assessment training you have received?

7. Describe any additional training that complements your role as a threat assessment team member.

8. When gathering information for assessing a threat, please describe who you consulted about what they may have observed or heard? Please use the best role or title to describe them.

9. How many hours on average per year do the following support staff receive professional development?
   a. School security officers
   b. Bus drivers
   c. Front office staff
   d. Paraprofessionals
   e. Custodians

10. How is professional development delivered to support staff?

11. What type of training do teachers outside of the threat assessment team receive on the role of a threat assessment team, recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior, or how to report a threat?
a. How about support staff? This includes bus drivers, front office staff, school security officers, custodial staff, and paraprofessionals.

b. Can you briefly describe the training? (length of training, frequency, structured, etc…)

12. How does the school track online training that is completed by school personnel?

13. How do staff report a concern about an individual that is demonstrating possible threatening or aberrant behavior?

   a. Who do they report that information to?

14. How many years have you been assigned to the role of SRO in this school division?

   a. How many years have you been assigned to this school?

15. How many years have you worked in law enforcement?

16. Prior to your assignment as an SRO, what was your previous role?

17. Please describe the training you received in preparation for your role as an SRO.

   a. Who provided the training and in what year?

18. Please describe any formal behavioral threat assessment training you have received.

   a. Who provided the training and in what year?

19. Please describe how you receive reports from the school community regarding threatening or aberrant behavior that is ultimately addressed through the threat assessment team?

   a. Please describe the roles, titles, or positions of the individuals that have reported a threat to you that is either directed towards someone in the school community or themselves.

20. Describe current practices for providing professional development for support staff within the division.
21. How many professional development hours, on average, do support staff receive per school year?

22. What training topics do support staff receive? Describe using the following:
   a. By role: school security officer, front office staff, paraprofessional, custodian, bus driver
   b. Upon hiring
   c. Periodically

23. What training modality is used to provide training (i.e., online platform, in-person, other)?

24. How many hours are allocated in support staff contracts specific for professional development?

Questions one through three and 14 through 17 not only established a baseline for years of experience and threat assessment training for the members of the threat assessment team, but also provided an opportunity to build rapport between the participants and the researcher (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Questions four through eight, 13, 18, and 19 provided a basis for each participant’s knowledge on threat assessment as established by Code of Virginia and the Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines created by the Virginia DCJS. The Model Policies establish the framework that threat assessment teams follow to assess and manage threats (DCJS, 2020). Questions nine through 12 and 20 through 24 assessed how the school division addresses the professional development needs of teachers and support staff, to include tracking online training. Specifically, question 23 was asked to explore whether the division currently uses online training to deliver professional development. Findings from Rovai (2002) indicate that employers have increased the use of online learning as an exclusive platform, or to supplement existing in-person training.
Focus Group

The second sub-question for this study explored how support staff in a focus group would solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia. The use of a focus group was to identify how the school can increase an understanding and awareness of the threat assessment process and the recognition of threatening and/or aberrant behavior. There was an opportunity by the participants to engage in an open response to this problem of practice. The discussion was facilitated by the researcher through an interview guide (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The focus group met at JDHS in a location free of distractions and was arranged by AP 1 during a scheduled early release day. The focus group discussions were recorded using Otter AI software installed on the researcher’s laptop and phone. Notes were recorded during the interview to capture any relevant information beyond the scope of the recording, such as observed non-verbal communication. The entire recording was transcribed and reviewed by the researcher to check for accuracy, attribute the speaker to their role, and add appropriate notes. Focus group transcripts were imported into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to organize the findings and any ideas, or themes, that can be classified into codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The focus group was composed of 10 support staff participants; however, it will not include school administrators. The selection for participants was based on snowball sampling at the recommendation of AP 1. The participants included school security officers, paraprofessionals, a speech therapist, and a substitute teacher. The researcher moderated the discussion and provided both direct and indirect questions to elicit what support staff believed they needed with respect to training and how they see their role as contributing to the culture of
recognizing and reporting threatening and aberrant behavior. An interview guide was implemented to provide structure to the discussion and keep the participants focused on the purpose of the research questions. The researcher facilitated the discussion around threat assessment, recognition of aberrant or threatening behavior, and ways to increase the school’s capacity within the context of formal threat assessment procedures. Focus groups can also complement the quantitative data collected through surveys and provide a richer understanding than what is gained through a survey alone (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

The focus group was guided by the following questions:

1. Describe what may be considered a threat to your school community.
2. What do you believe to be the biggest challenge to identifying if someone is a threat?
3. Considering some of the examples you gave, how might you proceed in reporting what you saw or heard?
4. In your opinion, in what ways could your school improve your knowledge of identifying threatening behavior?
5. When considering training, what is the best format for you to learn? Do you prefer online modules, in-person workshops, tabletop exercises, or something else?
6. In what ways does staff in your school understand the goals of threat assessment and how to report any concerns?
7. Describe the threat assessments conducted during this school year or any other during your time at this school. This includes frequency, type of threats, possible outcomes.
8. Describe the type of threat assessment training you have received in the recognition of behavior that may cause concern or seem to be threatening to someone else or to themselves. When did you receive the training and who provided it?
9. How do you think training and/or guidance in how to recognize and report threats would be useful to preventing violence towards others or self?

10. If you were aware of a threat to self or others who would you tell, or how would you report it?

Question one through four and six through 10 attempted to learn what members of the focus group understand about threat assessment as defined by the Virginia DCJS Model Polices (DCJS, 2020). Furthermore, these questions allowed an opportunity to learn about their current knowledge about how to report a threat, who to report the threat to, previous assessments, what constitutes threatening or aberrant behavior, and any previous threat assessment training. Question five was asked to gain insight on the learning preferences of support staff. Scott et al., (2016) found that the effectiveness of online training is comparable to in-person training based on pretest and posttest data.

**Quantitative Data Collection**

The third sub-question for this study explored how an online training module and post-training survey data solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia. An online threat assessment training module was developed that provided participants with an overview of behavioral threat assessment and how to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior at JDHS. The online training module was immediately followed by a survey to measure the participants’ perception of the training effectiveness. The survey was constructed by the researcher using Survey Monkey. The survey contained 14 statements that measured the perception of the online training module’s effectiveness in increasing behavioral threat assessment knowledge.
The support staff participants that consented to participate in training completed a self-guided online training module that was approximately 15 minutes in length. This module provided an overview of the relevant content associated with behavioral threat assessment. The online training module was developed by creating a storyboard based on the DCJS Model Policies. The storyboard was then converted into a training module using Articulate software. Since support staff do not typically serve as threat assessment team members they do not require knowledge about conducting assessments. This module provided an overview of the content congruent with the skills and knowledge necessary for their role in the school community. The researcher created a format that provides instruction that is succinct and engaging with respect to adult learning theories.

**Ethical Considerations**

All electronic data was password protected on the laptop used for this research study. All paperwork associated with the research study was stored in a locked filing cabinet that only the researcher has access. The division, school name, and participants’ actual names were not used and any paperwork included that had identifiable information was redacted. There were some documents the researcher used, such as the Secondary School Climate Survey, which has the school and division name listed, however, all identifiable information was redacted. The school was identified using the pseudonym of John Doe High School and all participant names were identified through the use of a coding system that uses the title and applies a number.

**Summary**

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia by
developing and implementing online training modules. The goal was to determine what support staff currently know about threat assessment and how best to improve their capacity to recognize threatening and/or aberrant behavior and report it using the appropriate process at JDHS. The development of an online training module that is self-guided was be assessed for effectiveness as evidenced by survey results.

The interview questions and focus group dialogue attempted to identify the scope of the problem of inadequately trained support staff at John Doe High School on the current awareness of behavioral threat assessment. In conjunction with previous research, best practices, and mandated legislation the researcher identified a process for improving the goals of reducing and/or mitigating targeted acts of violence, or threats to self. This applied dissertation had the lofty goal of being more than an academic requirement, but was also the impetus for further research and potentially increasing the effectiveness of behavioral threat assessment practices in Virginia schools.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia by developing and implementing online training modules. The problem was John Doe High School (JDHS) is not adequately providing guidance and training to support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others. A multimethod design was used consisting of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Chapter Four will provide a synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative data collected, identify themes, and provide “corroborating evidence through triangulation of multiple data sources” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260). This was accomplished by presenting the findings from the threat assessment team interviews, support staff focus group, and survey group as it relates to the three sub-questions and identified codes and themes.

The following questions guided this research:

Central Question: How can the problem of providing adequate training to support staff to increase their capacity to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others be solved at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia be improved?

Sub-question 1: How would members of the school-based threat assessment team in an interview solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at
John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?

**Sub-question 2:** How would support staff in a focus group solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?

**Sub-question 3:** How would an online training module and post-training survey data solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?

**Participants**

**Threat Assessment Team Interview Participants**

The interview participants were selected based on their membership as threat assessment team members at JDHS. The one exception was the inclusion of a division level employee at central office. The decision to include this individual was to gain insight into division level professional development, threat assessment training, and division wide practices. The interview was formatted as semi-structured using structured baseline questions; however, follow-up questions were posed based on individual participant responses (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Four of the five interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform to accommodate the participants due to time constraints. The remaining interview was conducted face-to-face in a private office. The threat assessment team members were composed of three employees at JDHS and a school resource officer (SRO) assigned to the school that serves on the school threat assessment team. The SRO is assigned to JDHS through a cooperative memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the school division and the local law enforcement agency, however, they are employed
and supervised by the local law enforcement agency. To maintain confidentiality participants were only identified by their assigned role (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>AP 1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>AP 2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher 1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Resource Officer</td>
<td>SRO 1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Office Coordinator</td>
<td>Coordinator 1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The SRO has nine years in law enforcement and three years as an SRO at JDHS.

**Focus Group Participants**

The focus group was assembled based on their identified role as support staff at JDHS using input from the school administrator. This method allowed the researcher to select participants that were both representative of JDHS while still providing unique insight based on their position (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The focus group was conducted at JDHS in-person following an early release school day with the assistance of the school administrator. The participants represented a variety of support staff roles and experience in the field of education. A total of 10 individuals participated and were composed of one male and nine females. The participants had previously been provided electronic copies of the IRB approved recruitment letter and consent form. The consent form was provided at the onset of the focus group meeting and participants did sign and return the consent form prior to recording (see Appendix B). To maintain participant confidentiality participants were identified by their role and a numeral. (see Table 2)
Table 2

Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Security Officer</td>
<td>SSO 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Security Officer</td>
<td>SSO 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Security Officer</td>
<td>SSO 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Security Officer</td>
<td>SSO 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
<td>Para 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
<td>Para 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
<td>Para 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
<td>Para 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Therapist</td>
<td>Speech 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute Teacher</td>
<td>Sub 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Group Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized to only recruit employees at JDHS that meet the research criteria of support staff. The school administrator provided assistance by emailing the recruitment letter and consent form to all eligible support staff employees. The email also had an embedded link to the Online Training Module on Threat Assessment. Upon completion of the module the user was directed to the survey to collect limited information on their role, prior threat assessment knowledge, and a series of questions to measure their perceptions. There are 37 support staff at JDHS that are defined as either SSO, paraprofessional, office staff, or custodial staff. Bus drivers are not directly assigned to JDHS, therefore, their access was limited. During the survey window a total of 21 support staff completed the online training module and completed the survey.

Results

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four members of the threat assessment team at JDHS and a division coordinator to identify themes related to current threat assessment training, processes, and challenges. Several themes emerged based on the qualitative analysis
conducted as a result of coding interviews using NVivo. Second, a focus group was conducted with support staff from JDHS to identify themes based on their understanding of threat assessment and training preferences. Finally, an online training video on threat assessment was developed along with a follow-up quantitative survey to measure support staff perception of the training’s capacity to improve their threat assessment knowledge.

**Sub-question 1**

Sub-question one for this study was, “How would members of the school-based threat assessment team in an interview solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?” Four of the interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform and the one was conducted in-person. Each interview was conducted free of distractions and in private. Interviews were recorded using Otter AI software, which provided real-time transcribing of the interview. At the conclusion of each interview the transcript was reviewed against the audio recording, speakers were identified and notated, and corrections were made. Additionally, notes were added based on observations such as tone, laughter, and non-verbal behavior during the interview. The final transcripts were exported to NVivo for further analysis.

Priori coding was used to identify a minimal number of codes based on anecdotal knowledge; however, emergent coding was the primary method used to organize the data. This blended method minimizes the potential biases of the researcher in assigning a particular text or passage to a predetermined code, instead of a code that better reflects the participant’s view (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individual interviews were coded and then refined into 18 distinct codes, which were then catalogued into four themes. The themes of training challenges, Impact
of COVID-19, Defining Threat Assessment, and Communication are displayed in Table 3 along with their corresponding codes and frequency identified in the interview data.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training Challenges</td>
<td>Training Delivery</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complementary Training</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time/Availability</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support Staff PD</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher TA Training</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support Staff TA Training</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SRO Training</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of COVID-19</td>
<td>COVID-19 Barriers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Threat Assessment</td>
<td>Threat Recognition</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threat Triage</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incorrect Definition of Threat</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Harm</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threat Cases</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reporting Threats</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Receiving Threats</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Training challenges.** The theme of training challenges was identified based on seven individual codes with a total frequency of 35 distinct references found across the interviews. It was anticipated that barriers to training would exist for a variety of reasons, however, the interview participants provided anecdotal evidence of substantial gaps in threat assessment training for the team, the teachers, and the support staff. Findings from select codes follow in an effort to identify the primary factors associate with the theme of training challenges.
Time/availability. Providing professional development to educators is often plagued with a variety of barriers due to availability during the school day, existing obligations after school, and limited scheduled professional development days during the school year (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). Training for support staff is often limited due to the nature of their employment contracts as hourly employees, as opposed to being salaried. In Virginia, teachers are required to have time a planning period without students. However, support staff do not have allocated time outside of their role.

Support staff PD. During the interview AP 1 and AP 2 indicated support staff training was limited and in some cases was directed outside of JDHS. AP 2 stated, “I think once they get hired they don’t have much PD and it’s very few and far between.” Coordinator 1 shared that much of the training provided to support staff is “specific to their role and is directed at the division level.” The support staff positions that were the focus of this research are employed in very specialized roles within education and as a result their training is often limited due to the need to meet those needs. Coordinator 1 indicated that SSOs are required by state law to “receive a minimum of 16 hours every two years.”

Support staff threat assessment training. AP 1 stated support staff are included in a “welcome back training in the summer,” however, they were not “formally trained” in threat assessment. Teacher 1 was newly assigned to the threat assessment team and at the time of the interview had not completed a threat assessment training. As a result, the responses to many of the threat assessment questions demonstrated her threat assessment knowledge was consistent with the support staff threat assessment knowledge as evidenced by the survey and the focus group. The challenges associated with providing training to support staff as assessed by the interview participants was consistent with the findings from the focus group. Additionally, the
survey asked support staff whether they have “ever received behavioral threat assessment training” and out of 21 respondents five indicated “yes,” 14 indicated “no,” and two indicated “I do not know.”

**Complimentary training.** The interview panelists were asked about the types of complementary training that could support the threat assessment process of identification of aberrant behavior. All threat assessment team members indicated varying degrees of receiving complimentary training, however, they indicated support staff did not. Coordinator 1 identified the benefit of “looking at prior case studies, such as the one from Parkland, because you get to see a lot of the things that were either missed or very evident after the fact.”

**Training delivery.** The interview participants were asked about training delivery at the division and school level, which provided significant data to support alternative approaches to conducting training. It was noted that due to COVID-19 and the increase in online instruction and meetings that there was an increase in providing training through online platforms. AP 2 indicated the division subscribes to a “learning management system” that can be used to track the “number of hours” of training completed. AP 1 stated that training is “delivered via . . . Vector” which is the learning management system. There was no indication the degree to which support staff participate in online training, however, many of the modules on Vector are accessible to all staff.

**Theme 2: Impact of COVID-19.** It became apparent during the initial interviews that the impact of COVID-19 was not only significant to school operations, but in all facets of the school community. There were several statements revealed that presented various challenges as a result of COVID-19. Some of these challenges were a result of guidance from the division and
state on mask guidelines, which primarily manifested from parents. This led to increased threats towards school board members and required the expenditure of resources to investigate.

**COVID-19 barriers.** It was consistently mentioned across four out of the five interviews and clearly demonstrated the need to consider its implication on not only barriers to training, but the need for increased training to address increased mental health needs. The statement of “prior to COVID” was mentioned in three separate interviews to highlight the differences as a result of the response to the pandemic. Identifying an individual that may be displaying aberrant or concerning behavior becomes difficult when learning is occurring in a virtual environment. When asked about conducting threat assessments Coordinator 1 stated, “there was very little done, except for things that arose on Zoom.” The Zoom platform was used to provide instruction during virtual learning and unless students communicated a threat electronically, or something could be observed in the background of the students’ home it was difficult to observe behavior that could cause concern. Despite the challenges to identifying aberrant behavior during the virtual learning time period of the pandemic there were identified positives. For instance, the requirement to utilize virtual platforms to meet and learn forced people to shift their concept of training delivery. Even with far fewer in-person restrictions Coordinator 1 indicated the benefits of online learning and stated, “I think the blended learning model allows people that cannot get away from the building long enough to still participate without the travel time they needed.”

**Mental health.** Coordinator 1 indicated “with COVID our focuses shift to a lot of online issues and mental health issues.” In spring of 2020 an Executive Order by the Governor of Virginia required schools to shutdown due to COVID-19. In fall 2020, schools transitioned to online learning for most of the school year before transitioning to a hybrid schedule. Anecdotally, the interview participants report increased concerning behaviors and potential
mental health issues. Coordinator 1 shared that “we’re starting to see that even the parents are having some bizarre behaviors that is impacting the front office . . . and having to have these conversations like I’m not sure what that person meant when they said this” and “now we’re starting to see it maybe not so much with the students but with the parents, unreasonable demands or unrealistic expectations.”

**Theme 3: Defining Threat Assessment.** It was anticipated prior to data collection there would be inconsistencies in the recognition of aberrant or threatening behavior based on anecdotal knowledge by the researcher. However, this theme emerged as significant based on the frequency of associated codes across all interviews and the focus group. These inconsistencies are due to a lack of training specific to threat assessment how people may define the word threat. The focus group viewed a threat primarily as an active shooter situation whereas opposed to subtle behavioral concerns that may require an assessment.

**Threat recognition and incorrect definition of threat assessment.** When interview participants were asked to describe threat assessment it was frequently mentioned in the context of an active shooter event or a crisis event. For example, Coordinator 1 stated, “we did the active threat response training” and AP 2 stated, “was really heavy on the active shooter.” Teacher 1 indicated she had not received threat assessment training at the time of the interview and described threat assessment using the following words: “lockdown drills,” “bomb threat,” “hard corners,” “active shooter,” at risk students,” “COVID safety standards,” “evacuation” and “crisis management.” This lack of baseline knowledge specific to threat assessment is consistent with statements made by AP 1, who stated:

> When I first got promoted to an AP, I attended my first threat assessment and to be honest, I didn’t even know threat assessment even existed. As a classroom teacher, I
mean, it could have been something that was told to us, but I didn’t even know there was a thing like threat assessment.

This also aligns with data collected through the state mandated Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey. Teachers and staff at all public high schools in Virginia were asked “Does your school use a formal threat assessment process to respond to student threats of violence?” (Cornell et al., 2020, p. 77). State level data would represent all high schools in 132 school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Table 4 provides the response to that question as reported in the state level technical report, the school level report at JDHS, and the division level report where JDHS is located. The survey conducted at JDHS as a part of the state mandated Climate Report was completed by 50 teacher participants and 12 staff participants.

Table 4

Responses to the Question: Does your school use a formal threat assessment process to respond to threats of violence?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JDHS</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Climate Survey Report does not separate responses based on the employee role, however, the survey conducted as the quantitative component of this research asked a similar question of support staff assigned to JDHS. Their responses are provided in Table 5.

Table 5

JDHS Support Staff Survey Results of Question 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 5</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to this training, were you aware of the requirement for threat assessment teams?</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similarly, when support staff were asked during the focus group to describe what would constitute conducting a threat assessment their responses suggested they were not familiar with recognizing aberrant or concerning behavior. Their responses focused on “outside visitors coming in,” “a shooting,” metal detectors,” “lockdown drills,” “safety on the bus,” “sporting events at the school,” and “after hours when security is not checking visitors on the computer.” While these topics have a relationship to school safety and certainly require awareness, they are not related to the recognition of aberrant or threatening behavior and not a component in the threat assessment process. Considering only 14% of support staff indicated an awareness of threat assessment on the JDHS Support Staff Survey it is consistent with the responses collected during the focus group.

**Theme 4: Communication.** For threat assessment teams to address a potential concern and appropriately manage the situation they must have knowledge it exists. Communication was identified as a theme considering the need to report and receive threats. In addition, the code “trust” was identified as important based on the belief the threat would be appropriately addressed.

**Reporting threats.** When the interview participants were asked how threats were reported they all identified that administration would be contacted. Teacher 1 stated, “well, definitely the school resource officer.” While this response is not incorrect, she used a suspicious vehicle in the parking lot as a threat assessment example. This clearly supports theme three as it relates to defining a threat and the discrepancies identified in properly defining a threat. Coordinator 1 described the school division tip line which he described as “an anonymous reporting system and it allows anybody to report a concern to us and they can under
the app, they can select what school they’re attributing it to, or it can very generalized and just say the district.” Coordinator 1 was clearly familiar with the division anonymous reporting system; however, this was not the case based on the responses from the support staff in the focus group. The group did not respond when asked the questions and when it was defined Para 4 stated, “half the building you have no signal.” Several other participants nodded their heads and made statements of agreement that cell phone usage was severely limited within the school building at JDHS. Their responses seemed to suggest they viewed the anonymous reporting system as an alternative to a 911, or crisis response system.

**Receiving threats.** Interview participants were asked to describe what occurs when a threat is received and AP 1 and AP 2 both indicated they would consult with the principal. AP 2 stated, “depending on where the original source came from, for the threat, definitely want to investigate with other students in the building” and that “the SRO is involved in a lot of that questioning piece.” AP 2 went on to say, “involve the parents in that investigation, hey, does that student have access to firearms?” As a law enforcement officer, SRO 1 has the capacity to investigate a threat with a greater scope of resources and authority and his statements highlighted why someone with law enforcement expertise is a required threat assessment team member based on legislation. SRO 1 provided the following statement when asked about how threats are reported to law enforcement from the school:

> I hear from the grade level administrator. It’s kind of like the first point of contact. Now if I received a threat from an outside source, like social media, I have notified the admin team in the middle of the night. I’ll get a hit on something, or somebody is making a report of a threat on social media. That’s where, you know, that’s kind of like my role. I’m the liaison between, um, that bridge between law enforcement and the school system,
so I’ve called the principal at eight o’clock at night, like hey, this is what we have, and I’m getting dresses and I’m headed out, trying to adjust the situation.

**Social media.** The use of social media was discussed as a contributing problem associated with communicating and sharing threats. AP 2 shared concerns with the TikTok challenges that have led to increases in behaviors that require an investigation and often result in consequences. Coordinator 1 shared an incident that occurred at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year in a nearby school division that involved a student that shot and wounded two students in the school. This led to several social media posts claiming a school shooting would occur the following day at JDHS. While these incidents provided to be false, it still required an investigation and working with local law enforcement and the FBI to assess the credibility. Furthermore, the sharing of the false claims on social media led to significant miscommunication by students and parents according to Coordinator 1.

**Trust.** AP 2 shared the importance of trust by the school community “that when they go to that person that they know it’s going to be follow through.” He went on to state, “any of those members of the threat assessment team that I named, if a staff person or support staff person comes and delivers that information, they have trust that it’s going to go where it needs to go to next.” AP1 shared that “a lot of our teachers, support staff are comfortable going directly to our SRO with that information, because then of course they are going to immediately inform the administration.”

**Sub-question 2:**

Sub-question two for this study was, “How would support staff in a focus group solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School
located in southeast Virginia?” The goal of the focus group was to learn their current perception of threat assessment at JDHS, the types of training they receive, preferred training modalities, and where gaps may exist. The focus group was composed of four school security officers, four paraprofessionals, one speech therapist, and one substitute teacher. The group was assembled in the library at JDHS with the assistance of the school administrator during an early release day for students. The library was free of distractions and afforded the opportunity to maintain social distancing and develop dialogue based on a series of 10 guiding questions. The focus group discussion was recorded using Otter AI, while notes were taken to record any information not captured by the audio recording.

The transcript was compared with the audio recording and individual speakers were identified and attributed to the correct text. The updated transcript was imported into NVivo qualitative analysis software. Individual passages of text were identified and sorted into 18 individual codes, which were then organized into the four themes identified during the analysis of the threat assessment team interviews. The four themes, corresponding codes and their frequency can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

*Support Staff Focus Group Themes and Frequency of Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training Challenges</td>
<td>Virtual Training Preference</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training Relevance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Training</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-person training preference</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hybrid with Shadowing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hybrid training preference</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of COVID-19</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Threat Assessment</td>
<td>Types of Threats</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Security</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme 1: Training challenges. The challenges to providing professional development were significant based on the group consensus. There were no statements that contradicted what was learned through the threat assessment team interviews, however, there were codes that varied with the frequency of references. The perception of the focus group that their role, or position, was a significant factor in why they did not receive communication from teachers or administration. They felt this led to silos existing and reduced their ability to identify behaviors that should be reported. This was not identified during the interviews and the concerns around communication were primarily due to reporting or receiving threats. It is important to note that the interview group was composed of a central office coordinator, two assistant principals, and SRO, and a teacher. However, the focus group was composed of support staff, primarily SSOs and paraprofessionals. These two groups clearly perform very different roles within the school community, so it was expected that there would be variations on their perceptions.

Lack of training. The type of training and amount varied substantially between the SSOs and the paraprofessionals. SSOs are required to be certified through the DCJS using the state approved curriculum that is a two-day course and requires 16 hours of relevant in-service every two years (Regulations Relating to School Security Officers, 2015). The job duties and types of training SSOs lends itself to content that requires a physical security lens. Paraprofessionals,
also referred to as teacher assistants, provide support to special education students based on the students’ Individualized Education Program (IEP). Their professional development is typically provided through central office and relates to special education according to Coordinator 1. Training specific to threat assessment was not received by support staff in this focus group based on their dialogue, which is consistent with findings in the interview. Findings from the survey of support staff did indicate that five (24%) of the participants reported having receiving threat assessment training. However, it is important to note that six of the 21 participants are SSOs and threat assessment is briefly discussed during the certification training to be employed in that role, which may account for the reported training.

Virtual and in-person training preference. The focus group was asked about their preferences in how they receive training, whether in-person or through a virtual platform. SSO 3 stated, “I have 100,000 things going on, no matter where I’m at, whether it’s here. So, I’m gonna hear half of it.” When virtual training was discussed SSO 1 stated, “I’m going to go to sleep.” SSO 4 indicated “yeah, I’m in-person.” SSO 2 stated, “it’s sitting in front of a computer all day. It’s boring.” Interestingly, all the SSOs indicated a preference with in-person training, however, the paraprofessionals indicated a preference for virtual or a hybrid model. Para 3 stated, “I don’t mind training. I am a virtual person, but I also would like follow-up.” Para 1 indicated the need to know “how to apply it to what you’re being trained. So, you need to be able to have a little Socratic conversation.” The survey data also showed variances in their preferences. When asked on the survey “I would prefer to receive this training online instead of in-person” there was a preference towards this online training. Fifty-seven percent (12) stated they strongly agree or agree, 14% (3) neither agree or disagree, and 29% (6) disagree or strongly disagree. However, it is important to note that 95% (20) of the respondents on the survey indicated the length of the
training was appropriate and one respondent selected “neither agree or disagree.” It is unknown from the data collected the significance of length of training. Para 4 provided a completely different approach as outlined below:

I think I would pick something else. For me, I like the option of the online because I feel like I can go as fast as I need to. If I need to slow something down. I think I’d prefer like, actually, like on the job shadow training. It’s one thing to see a bunch of videos of extreme case scenarios that almost never happen a lot. Can I shadow someone and ask an actual person what they would do? That would be more effective for me.

**Theme 2: Impact of COVID-19.** During the focus group discussion COVID-19 was not mentioned as often and in the same context as during the interviews. None of the questions specifically asked about the impact of COVID-19 and it was only addressed with respect to their perception of increased mental health concerns. Since this theme was not anticipated during the development of the focus group questions it was not explicitly asked. However, responses to other questions indicated a perceived increase in mental health concerns following the return to in-person instruction.

**Mental Health.** Para 2 was referring to the return to in-person instruction and expressed an increase in certain behaviors. She stated, “a disgruntled student, or disgruntled parent . . . usually go from zero to one hundred in no time and then they make threats. Para 1 followed that statement up with noticing students are “very withdrawn.” These statements are consistent with the general sentiment by the interview participants when discussing the impact of COVID-19 and the challenges to the return of school.

**Theme 3: Defining threat assessment.** A consistent theme across the interview and focus findings was how threat assessment was defined. Support staff certainly demonstrated a
greater lack of understanding in what constituted a threat and the purpose of a threat assessment team. Seven codes were identified based on the responses from the focus group to form this theme. Three codes in particular represented 40 out of 55 of references within this theme, which are described below.

**Types of threats.** The types of threats described by the focus group primarily addressed concerns with outside threats that could potentially enter the school. Multiple examples were shared, to include “outside visitors,” “a shooting,” “kids carrying a bag,” “sporting events,” “lunch and in between classes,” and “carrying odd things around.” SSO 4, who has previously worked for 21 years as a school bus driver for the school division shared her concerns with “what kids can carry on the bus.” Para 3 identified threats of suicide, which is one of the situations a threat assessment team would convene.

**Incorrect definition of threat.** Prior to conducting this research, it was anticipated very few support staff would have had training in the recognition and awareness of threatening or aberrant behavior. The findings from all three data collection methods confirmed this to be the case. Focus group participants primarily associated a threat in the context of physical security and responding to an act of targeted violence. Para 1 described “lockdown drills” as a type of threat assessment. SSO 4 expressed concerns “if somebody came on the bus with a gun.” The examples provided primarily represented actions that would occur without intervention by a threat assessment team, as opposed to examples that a threat assessment team could avert.

**Physical security.** Many examples of threat assessment focused on physical security measures that schools have in place or could have in place as a preventive or response measure. There was a lengthy discussion by several support staff participants about the use of metal detectors. There were concerns that students walk can walk through a metal detector, but their
bags do not pass through the metal detector. However, JDHS does not utilize metal detectors at the school, so it is unknown why staff shared so many concerns about how they are used. There are metal detectors available for many sporting events.

**Theme 4: Communication.** The theme of communication varied somewhat with the identified codes when compared to the interview participant group. The most significant and unexpected finding from the focus group was the sentiment of their value as an employee. The focus group expressed strong feelings regarding to how others viewed their role at JDHS. The focus group felt their opinion was not valued since they were not teachers. They also believed that information was not shared with them because they felt that others saw them in a lesser role. They seemed to perceive that there was a hierarchy that existed between administration, teachers, and support staff.

**Silos.** Identifying scattered information from varied sources is central to effective threat assessment (DCJS, 2020). The unintended consequence of the organizational structure of schools, like any organization, can lead to silos. This can lead to a “excessively insular mindset or mentality through which these boundaries shape behaviors and ways of working that inhibit cross-boundary collaboration and cooperation” (de Waal, Weaver, Day, & van der Heijden, 2019, p. 2). Focus group participants identified examples of information that because of the perception of silos is not communicated. Para 2 stated, “we don’t know about this one that is a known problem, like you’re late to the party.” The concern with silos was not expressed by the threat assessment team participants during interviews, however, the individuals that form the team typically have a more holistic view of the school due to their role.

**Reporting a threat.** When asked who they would report a threat to they all responding either verbally, or by a nod of the head that they let administration know. Para 1 stated, “in my
experience I’ve had to make several reports for various situations. If it’s an imminent physical threat, depending on where I am, it’s usually phone calls to security.” Other statements included “call security,” “call the office,” “call an admin and do level one, two, three, go,” “whatever administrator is nearby,” and “it depends on the situation.” These responses do not necessarily indicate the capacity to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior, however, it does suggest knowledge on how to report what they perceive to be a threat.

*Valued employee.* This code was not anticipated and there were no questions intended to reveal this as a finding, however, there were multiple comments that were coded into 12 references. When these comments were made there were verbal affirmations of agreement and head nods from the entire participant group. The general sentiment was a perception that teachers and administrative staff do not apply the same value to support staff. Select comments to support this sentiment include “I think a lot of times how it gets kicked off as, oh you’re just a teacher assistant,” “and not that we should have you know, all this authority, but you know our job is to assist,” and “we have no voice and then we don’t have some of the skill set to bring to the table and it’s not respected. The things that we see in the classroom can get shoved away quickly.” This same sentiment appeared in response to training and included “when I started, I even asked for special training because we had a student that tended to be kind of violent and I was denied because I was told that it was special for a special department and I can’t get that.” Para 2 responded to a statement about a school safety conference an SSO attended by stating, “I was going to say it was never offered to us.” Para 3 expressed that when training is provided “it reinforces that you’re a professional doing a job.”

The notion of feeling valued as an employee is certainly important for many reasons, however, it seemed to garner the greatest degree of discussion and emotion during the focus
group discussion. In fact, after the interview was completed every single person stayed to continue to ask questions and share their concerns. While not captured in the transcript it was noted that there was a sense that there was a desire for validation by support staff and this focus group may have offered the opportunity. It certainly raised additional questions that will not be answered within the scope of this research, however, would be potentially useful in a future study. The survey conducted did indicate that 86% of support staff “strongly agreed” the online “training is important for my role at the school” and 5% “agreed.”

**Sub-question 3:**

Sub-questions three for this study was, “How would an online training module and post-training survey data solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia?” To solve this problem an online training module was developed based on the Threat Assessment and Management in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines which was established by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services to guide school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia (DCJS, 2020). This document is the basis for the establishment of threat assessment teams, legislative requirements, identifying and assessing threats, and managing cases through intervention. The basis of all DCJS threat assessment training is established by these model policies.

The researcher converted select relevant content from the model policies into a storyboard that was adapted into a self-paced learning module that was approximately 15 minutes in length. The module was accessed through a link that went to a landing page where both the module could be easily accessed and viewed by the participant. The link to the training
module is https://dcjsthreatassessmentmodule.com/. The training module considered content that would be beneficial and engaging for the role of support staff while considering adult learning strategies and pedagogy.

An anonymous survey was constructed using Survey Monkey with IRB approved questions. The survey consisted of 19 questions, with the first five included to collect minimal demographic information about role, experience in the division and at JDHS, and prior knowledge about threat assessment requirements and threat assessment training. Questions one through five are outlined below:

1. Which job title best describes your current role?
   a. school security officer
   b. bus driver
   c. paraprofessional/ instructional assistant
   d. office staff/ administrative staff
   e. custodial staff
   f. other (please specify)

2. How many years have you worked in this school division?
   a. 0-5 years
   b. 6-10 years
   c. 11-15 years
   d. 16-20 years
   e. 21 or more years

3. How many years have you worked at this school?
   a. 0-5 years
b. 6-10 years  
c. 11-15 years  
d. 16-20 years  
e. 21 or more years  

4. Prior to this training, have you ever received behavioral threat assessment training?  
   a. Yes  
   b. No  
   d. I don’t know  

5. Prior to this training, were you aware of the requirement for threat assessment teams?  
   a. Yes  
   b. No  
   c. I don’t know  

The composition of the survey participants represented school security officers (6), bus driver (2), paraprofessional/instructional assistant (5), office staff/administrative assistant (3), custodial staff (2), and other (3). Respondents that selected other had the option to enter their role. The manual entry indicated two substitute teachers and one coach. Most participants had spent their entire time at JDHS while working in the school division. Fifty-two percent (11) of respondents indicated they have worked at JDHS between “0-5 years,” 33% (7) between “6-10 years,” 10% (2) “11-15 years,” and 5% (1) “16-20 years.” When asked about previously receiving behavioral threat assessment training 24% (5) indicated “yes,” 67% (14) “no,” and 9% (2) “I do not know.” When asked about previously being aware of the requirement for threat assessment teams 14% (3) indicated “yes” and 86% (18) “no.” All responses to questions one through four are outlined for all 21 participants by role in Table 7.
Table 7

Survey Participants (Experience, TA Training, and Awareness)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Years in Division</th>
<th>Years at JDHS</th>
<th>Prior TA Training</th>
<th>Awareness of TA Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bus Driver 1</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute 1</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSO 1</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Staff 1</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSO 2</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>I Don’t Know</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para 1</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para 2</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Staff 2</td>
<td>21 or more</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian 1</td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para 3</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSO 3</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSO 4</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitute 2</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para 4</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 1</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSO 5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian 2</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus Driver 2</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>I Don’t Know</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para 5</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Staff 3</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSO 6</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions six through nineteen measured the respondents’ perception of the effectiveness of the online training module in improving their recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others by using a five-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The survey results were imported into Excel to calculate the mean of questions six through nineteen based on the five-point Likert scale. Table 8 provides the mean response for each item.

Table 8

Mean of Survey Responses Following Completion of the Online Training Module
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. This training improved my awareness of the requirement for threat assessment</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teams in Virginia schools.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. This training is important for my role at the school.</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. After completing this training, I realize that I have observed or heard</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something at school in the past that may have been threatening or aberrant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behavior.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. After completing this training, I feel better prepared to recognize</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threatening or aberrant behavior.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. If I had a concern about a student or another individual in the school</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community, I would know how to report it at my school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. After completing this training, I feel more confident of when to report</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threatening or aberrant behavior.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I am comfortable in reporting threatening or aberrant behavior at my</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The length of the training was appropriate.</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I would prefer to receive this training online instead of in-person.</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. This online training module was easy to understand.</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I believe all support staff should receive this training.</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. The use of scenarios in this training helped me to understand threatening</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or aberrant behavior.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I would like to learn more about behavioral threat assessment.</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. This training makes me feel like a valuable part of my school community.</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Five-point Likert scale: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree or disagree), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree).*

**Theme 1: Training challenges.** Focus group and interview findings indicate one of the limitations of providing training is availability of time. Question 13 “the length of the training was appropriate” received a mean score of 4.48, which could suggest the use of short training modules as a solution to limited availability of time. This module was approximately 15 minutes in length. Training delivery was identified as a code in both the interview and focus group data,
with a focus on virtual, in-person, or a hybrid model to providing professional development. The school division has a learning management system to provide professional development, however, the focus group presented mixed opinions on preference. After further discussion, a hybrid model was generally agreed to be the preferred method. Question 14 asked respondents if they “would prefer to receive this training online instead of in-person” and the mean was 3.67, which was the lowest mean score in this dataset. A mean of 3.67 would still indicate they “agree” with the question of “would prefer to receive this training online instead of in-person,” however, the question was specific to the training module they had just completed. It is unknown based on the response to that question with they would prefer all trainings to be online instead of in-person.

**Theme 2: Defining threat assessment.** The capacity to identify threat assessment was seen as inconsistent during interviews and the post-training survey. The online training module provided numerous examples of aberrant behavior and the purpose of conducting a threat assessment. The survey revealed that only five respondents had received threat assessment prior to the online training module, while 14 had not, and 2 indicated “I do not know.” When asked about whether they were aware of the requirement for threat assessment teams 18 indicated “no” and three indicated “yes.”

**Theme 3: Impact of COVID-19.** The survey was developed in the fall of 2020 and was approved by IRB in spring of 2021, therefore, questions related to the impact of COVID-19 were not considered. This primarily due to the failure to anticipate the longevity of the pandemic and the varied response at the federal, state, and local levels. This survey did not have the capacity to inform this theme in a meaningful manner.

**Theme 4: Communication.** There were several questions in the survey that elicit
responses that correspond to codes identified in the interviews and focus group. Questions eight through eleven on the post-training survey addresses the topics of reporting threats, which was also identified frequently and coded during interviews and the focus group as an area that is necessary for effective threat assessment. See Table 9 for a crosswalk of survey questions and codes that their identified from the interviews and focus group analysis.

Table 9

_Crosswalk of Survey Questions with Select Codes_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Interview Codes</th>
<th>Focus Group Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. This training improved my awareness of the requirement for threat assessment teams in Virginia schools.</td>
<td>*Training Delivery</td>
<td>*Training Relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. This training is important for my role at the school.</td>
<td>*Support Staff</td>
<td>*Training Relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TA Training</td>
<td>*Training Relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
<td>*Valued Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. After completing this training, I realize that I have observed or heard something at school in the past that may have been threatening or aberrant behavior.</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. After completing this training, I feel better prepared to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior.</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. If I had a concern about a student or another individual in the school community, I would know how to report it at my school.</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. After completing this training, I feel more confident of when to report threatening or aberrant behavior.</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I am comfortable in reporting threatening or aberrant behavior at my school.</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
<td>*Reporting Threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The length of the training was appropriate.</td>
<td>*Time/availability</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14. I would prefer to receive this training online instead of in-person.  
   *Training Delivery  
   *Virtual Training Preference  
   *In-person training

15. This online training module was easy to understand.  
   *Training Delivery  
   *Training Relevance

16. I believe all support staff should receive this training.  
   *Support Staff TA Training  
   *Valued Employee

17. The use of scenarios in this training helped me to understand threatening or aberrant behavior.  
   *Complementary Training  
   *Types of Threats

18. I would like to learn more about behavioral threat assessment.  
   *Threat Cases  
   *Concerning Behavior

19. This training makes me feel like a valuable part of my school community.  
   *Trust  
   *Valued Employee

Note. Tables 3 and 6 lists themes and corresponding codes.

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**Discussion**

The implementation of behavioral threat assessment in K-12 schools seek to identify and intervene with an individual that may be on the pathway to violence. Threat assessment is only effective when the capacity for the identification of threatening or aberrant behavior exists in the school community. The empirical and theoretical literature outlined in Chapter two provides the framework for increasing that capacity and are supported by findings of this applied study.

Those findings were informed through threat assessment team interviews, a support staff focus group, and the development and implementation of an online threat assessment training module followed by a post-training survey. The resulting data were analyzed and organized into themes that emerged across all three data sources. These themes confirm and build upon the existing
Theoretical Literature

Social control theory served as the guiding framework for the development of this research. A critical feature of threat assessment is the recognition of threatening and aberrant behavior. While threatening behavior is often explicit and often observable, aberrant behavior may present as the absence of a particular behavior (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). Social control theories consider why an individual conforms with established norms, as opposed to why they may deviate from those norms (Akers & Sellers, 2013). School violence is typically perpetrated by individuals that display weak social bonds (Pittaro, 2007). The qualitative and quantitative analysis of this applied study supports the findings in the theoretical and empirical literature.

Social bond theory. The most recognized social control theory is social bond theory by Travis Hirschi and it was an attempt to determine why people behave outside of acceptable norms (Bouffard & Rice, 2010). The notion that weak social bonds contribute to deviant behavior is rooted in the components of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief as crucial to creating a social bond (Pittaro, 2007). These four components are observable and may indicate the need for intervention; however, it is important to recognize the presentation of a weak social bond does not indicate an individual is homicidal or suicidal.

Attachment. This component is significant to connectedness to the school community and is often considered to be the strongest indicator of a strong social bond (Pittaro, 2007). The lack of attachment is observable and according to Silver et al (2018) that on average, active shooters displayed four to five “concerning behaviors over time that were observable to others around the shooter” (p. 7). During the focus group Para 1 identified “a very withdrawn person”
as someone that may be cause for concern. The focus group did recognize that signs of a “withdrawn person” may be typical behavior that is not cause for concern; however, if this behavior was new or worsening it should be reported for assessment. When conducting a threat assessment the team responds to a series of questions to assess the threat. One question the team considers is “does the subject have a positive, trusting, sustained relationship with at least one responsible person” (DCJS, 2020, p. 37). An individual with a weak social bond of attachment would likely not demonstrate that level of relationship.

The online training module provided an overview of what may be considered threatening or aberrant behavior. The post-training survey indicated 57% (12) of the participants selected “strongly agree” and 33% (7) selected “agree” when asked “After completing this training, I realize that I may have observed or heard something at school in the past that may have been threatening or aberrant behavior.” The online training module developed for this applied study addresses what behaviors may indicate an individual is potentially presenting with a weak attachment to the school community. Not only does this training provide potential warning signs, but it also highlights the importance of developing a capacity for awareness and reporting. The entire school community, including support staff, benefits when it observes, identifies, and reports concerning behavior. Between 2008 and 2017 a study was conducted on 41 acts of targeted school violence found that in every case the “attacker exhibited concerning behaviors” and “most communicated their intent to attack” (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019, p. 52). Furthermore, Vossekuil et al. (2002) identified that “most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help” (p. 31).

A significant finding that was consistent among support staff during the focus group and those that were surveyed was an inaccurate understanding of threatening and/or aberrant
behavior in the context of threat assessment. This also included interview participant Teacher 1 was a newly assigned threat assessment team member. Defining Threat Assessment was a significant theme identified across all three data collections with 126 codes identified. It is important to note there was no behavioral threat assessment training provided based on statements made during the focus group. At the time of the interview Teacher 1 was scheduled to attend an eight-hour threat assessment training offered virtually by DCJS; however, there was no previous training prior to her assignment to a threat assessment team. The post-training survey revealed similar results when 67% (14) and 9% (2) of support staff participants indicated “no” and “I do not know,” respectively, when asked if they have “ever received behavioral threat assessment training.”

**Commitment.** The bond of commitment is the pursuit towards school, career, or a goal that is attained by effort on the part of the individual. Commitment often results in a shared goal with others, which has the potential to allow for attachment to others (Pittaro, 2007). One of the key questions threat assessment teams answer to assess the propensity for violence states, “is the subject experiencing hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair” (DCJS, 2020, p. 36). Individuals that are experiencing hopelessness or despair can be indicative of someone that is not only homicidal, but suicidal (Vossekuil et al., 2004). Students with a weak social bond of commitment may not engage in activities that would lead to a post-secondary goal, which could be identified through a review of academic history and reporting by classroom teachers and support staff. Furthermore, students that demonstrate a lack of commitment often experience hopelessness (Buzzai, Sorrenti, Orecchio, Marino, & Filippello, 2020). As identified under attachment, training provided to staff to recognize what may appear as low motivation, lack of engagement, or hopelessness could potentially lead to an intervention with positive results.
Complementary training to threat assessment training was identified by the interview group as beneficial to identifying aberrant behavior and conducting threat assessments. Coordinator 1 shared the importance of “studying prior events” and “looking at prior case studies, such as Parkland.” Mental health related training was cited as beneficial by participants of the interviews and the focus group.

**Involvement.** The social bond of involvement through academics, social relationships, and activities typically requires some level of commitment and attachment. Pittaro (2007) suggests if an individual is involved in these activities he or she would not have time to engage in criminal behavior. Again, increasing the capacity to recognize and report what may be considered a concern or aberrant behavior would likely result in earlier intervention. For example, the individuals responsible for the Columbine High School mass attack of 1999 were not involved in the school community, lacked attachment to their peers and teachers, and there was no evidence of commitment to a goal beyond high school (Ogle, Eckman, & Leslie, 2003).

**Belief.** This social bond requires and individual to accept that the rules are acceptable and applicable. Often, those who demonstrate non-compliance, whether a law, rule, or norm, often rationalize their behavior. The first step on the pathway to violence is the formation of a grievance, or perceived grievance that in some individuals can lead to rationalizing their behavior and reducing empathy towards others (Meloy et al., 2015). In the school setting this could manifest as repeated violations of the student code of conduct, exclusionary discipline, or bullying behavior towards peers. Identifying non-compliance does not require training; however, it is far more difficult to assess what is typical adolescent non-compliance and the rationalization of behavior that has the potential for violence to self or others.
School-based victimization. Many individuals that ultimately completed an act of targeted violence at schools indicated they “felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack” (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 31). It is theorized that victimization leads to a weaker bond in individuals, which can increase the likelihood of deviant behavior (Hirschi, 2002; Popp & Peguero, 2012). Students that are bullied are less likely to feel connected to the school community and may have weaker social bonds than students who are not bullied; consequently, this could attribute to increased deviant behavior in some people (Cecen-Celik & Keith, 2019).

Experiencing school-based victimization can lead to a grievance towards an individual, a group, or society in general. If grievance progresses to ideation the individual may develop fantasies that enact some degree of revenge. Further development can lead to planning how to enact revenge through targeted violence, which includes identifying methods for carrying out the act. The fourth step is preparation, and this is when the individual acquires what is needed to complete the targeted violence. The final step is implementation, which is an attempt to complete the act. These five steps represent the pathway to violence (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). These five steps represent an opportunity for any number of individuals to identify a behavior that causes concern or is representative of aberrant behavior. “Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely were sudden, impulsive acts” (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 31). As a result, these warning signs are observable well before the latter stages of the pathway to violence.

Empirical Literature

A review of the existing literature confirmed current guidance provided by the DCJS to Virginia schools on behavioral threat assessment is rooted in research and best practice (DCJS, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018; Vossekuil et al., 2004). The purpose of this applied study
was to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior; however, the solution to the problem does not solely rest with increasing the capacity of support staff to recognize threatening behavior. A review of the empirical literature and the data collected through this applied study revealed several key considerations to solving the problem within the four themes identified.

**Theme 1: training challenges.** The challenges identified in the literature to providing employee training are consistent with the findings from the qualitative and quantitative research conducted. Findings from focus group statements revealed the importance of training relevance, time restrictions, and virtual training preferences. These codes were triangulated with research identified in the literature review and were assessed against previous studies (Gog et al., 2010; Knowles, 1984; Morgenroth, 2017; Pic, 2015; Scott et al., 2016). Sub-question 3 proposes an online training module to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff, so the literature and study findings related to training challenges will focus on virtual training.

**Virtual training.** During the focus group several participants indicated their perception of virtual training to be “boring” and found it difficult to “focus.” However, many participants suggested virtual training was the preferred modality to receiving instruction. Post-training survey results indicated a similar mixed preference. Twelve respondents preferred to receive this training online instead of in-person and six did not prefer to receive it online instead of in-person. Three respondents indicated “neither agree nor disagree.” When considering the development of virtual training it is important to consider the length of the training, engagement for adult learners, and relevance to their role. The focus group was reporting their perception of virtual training based on prior experiences, while the survey group was assessing the online training module developed by the researcher. The focus group did not reveal what previous
online training they had received and whether it was consistent with research that indicates
virtual learning should consider length of training, engagement, and convenience (Gog et al.,
2010; Knowles, 1984; Pic, 2015; Scott et al., 2016). However, despite developing a training
module that considered the literature the post-training survey group six of the 21 participants
preferred that training as in-person. Further research would need to be considered to assess what
additional factors may have led to a preference for in-person training, even though the best
practices found in the literature were applied. A potential factor that should be explored is the
impact of social interaction with in-person instruction, however, the literature was not evaluated
as a possible factor in training preference.

Length of training. The preferred length of time is between 15 and 30 minutes
(Morgenroth, 2017). The online threat assessment training module developed for this study was
approximately 15 minutes and based on the post-training survey 52% (11) respondents selected
“strongly agree” when asked if the “length of the training was appropriate,” 43% (9) selected
“agree,” and five percent (1) selected “neither agree nor disagree.” The results from the post-
training survey were consistent with findings from Morgenroth (2017).

Engagement. The literature identifies factors such as comfort with the virtual platform,
negative experiences with previous online training, and maintaining engagement with adult
learners as considerations when developing online training modules (Pic, 2015). The post-
training survey indicated that 67% (14) “strongly agree” and 33% (7) “agree” the threat
assessment “online training module was easy to understand.” The online training module was
based on adult learning best practice identified by Pic (2015) and based on the post-training
survey results the participants found the module easy to understand.
**Relevance.** Training must be relevant to the position to achieve buy-in from the learner. “Learning that is imposed on adults will be met with resentment and is minimally effective” (Gog et al., 2010, p. 228). Adult learners are motivated to learn, but it is based on whether they find it necessary (Knowles, 1984). Focus group participants expressed the desire to gain training that would improve their effectiveness. The post-training survey results indicated 67% (14) “strongly agree” and 33% (7) “agree” with the statement “I believe all support staff should receive this training.” The findings from the post-training and statements revealed during the focus group were consistent with Gog et al. (2010) and Knowles (1984).

**Theme 2: impact of COVID-19.** The literature review was developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, mental health concerns were raised numerous times by the interview and focus group participants due to their belief there were substantial increases due to the pandemic. Schools have the capacity to identify a student that may need services based on observation and interaction during the school day. Coordinator 1 indicated during his interview seeing substantial increases in mental health concerns. While not substantiated through research as it relates to COVID-19, it is certainly reasonable to suspect that the limitations of in-person instruction contributed to weak social bonds. Considering there were minimal opportunities for attachment, involvement, and commitment during the most socially restrictive period of the pandemic it could have had a negative impact on student mental health.

**Theme 3: defining threat assessment.** The foundation of behavioral threat assessment in schools is a result of a collaborative effort by the USSS and the USDOE known as the Safe School Initiative following the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 (Vossekuil et al., 2004). In 2013, Virginia passed legislation requiring all public K-12 schools to have threat assessment teams composed of individuals with expertise in administration, counseling,
instruction, and law enforcement (DCJS, 2020). The FBI’ BAU in 2018 examined active shooter events between 2000 and 2013 to identify pre-attack behaviors to establish preventative steps (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018). These pre-attack behaviors inform current training conducted by the DCJS for schools and served as the framework for developed the online training module for support staff.

The current DCJS training and related resources are based on the literature and were updated in 2020 to reflect additional findings (DCJS, 2020). The interview findings were generally consistent with participant definition of threat assessment. Teacher 1 did not accurately understand threat assessment; however, she had been newly assigned to the team and had not attended training before the interview was conducted. The focus group feedback clearly demonstrated an inaccurate understanding of threat assessment. The participants primarily identified physical security threats instead of behavioral threats, however, this is consistent with what is anecdotally known about threat assessment knowledge outside of the school threat assessment team.

**Theme 4: communication.** Communication emerged as a significant theme in the data, particularly based on identified codes during the focus group. The literature stresses the importance of communication that occurs by a subject prior to an active attack. These communications are known as leakage and “could take the form of subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums (O’Toole, 1999, p. 16). This is consistent with the DCJS training that establishes key questions to guide the threat assessment team towards an outcome, including asking the question “have there been any communications suggesting ideas, intent, planning or preparation for violence” (DCJS, 2020, p. 36). Social media was identified by several members of the interview participants as serving as a platform for the communication of
grievances and threatening statements. Coordinator 1 indicated that all of these require further investigation, which demands significant time and resources. However, many previous mass shooters communicated concerning statements on social media platforms that were discovered after the event occurred (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019).

**Summary**

The findings from the threat assessment team interviews, support staff focus group, and the post-training survey data confirmed the assumption that support staff are not adequately trained to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior. Five interviews were conducted of members of the threat assessment team and one central office employee, a focus group of 10 support staff was conducted, and 21 support staff participants completed an online threat assessment training module developed by the researcher that included a survey with 19 items. Coding conducted of the interviews and focus group identified 36 codes that emerged to establish four themes. Most of the codes were consistent with the findings in the empirical literature (DCJS, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018; Vossekuil et al., 2004). However, the code “valued employee” identified during the focus group was unexpected and certainly suggests the need for further research and what previous literature may indicate. The survey results suggest the online training module was useful in increasing awareness of threat assessment, recognition of aberrant behavior, relevant to the role of support staff, easy to understand, and most respondents preferred this training in an online format. Chapter five will propose a solution to the central question based on the findings in this chapter, identify needed resources and funding, and any potential barriers.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of inadequately trained support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia by developing and implementing online training modules. A multimethod design was used consisting of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The problem is John Doe High School is not adequately providing guidance and training to support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others. To find a solution to this problem the researcher interviewed threat assessment team members, conducted a focus group composed of support staff, and developed an online training module and survey instrument. The online training module provided support staff a brief training specific to behavioral threat assessment and how to recognize and report a threat based on current protocols at JDHS. The online training module was followed by a survey that attempted to measure the participants’ perception of whether it improved their understanding of behavioral threat assessment. Chapter 5 provides solutions to the problem of providing adequate training to support staff to increase their capacity to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others at JDHS. Goals and objectives are presented that address the current gaps, followed by potential resources needed, and funding requirements. The chapter concludes with identifying individuals responsible for the initiative, a proposed timeline for implementation, potential barriers, and an evaluation plan to assess effectiveness.
Restatement of the Problem

This applied study attempted to identify solutions to adequately address the problem of providing guidance and training to support staff in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others. Based on the Virginia Secondary Climate Survey results, this is not a problem that is unique to JDHS or the school division (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services [DCJS], 2020). This problem extends beyond support staff and includes teachers based on state Climate Survey data and findings revealed during the interviews with threat assessment team members.

Proposed Solution to the Central Question

The central question of this applied study asks, “How can the problem of providing adequate training to support staff to increase their capacity to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a threat to the community, self, or others be solved at John Doe High School located in southeast Virginia be improved?” The solution to the central question requires the implementation of adequate training on behavioral threat assessment for support staff. To minimize barriers identified in the literature and the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis the recommended goals and supporting objectives are suggested:

**Goal 1: conduct relevant and consistent training for support staff to improve their ability to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior.** Goal 1 addresses the four themes that emerged during analysis of the data. The primary solution focuses on providing training to support staff that is not only accessible, but relevant to improving their capacity to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior.

**Objective 1: develop a blended training model that includes in-person and virtual training.** The availability of time to participate in training was identified as a barrier by support
staff and interview participants. Support staff are contracted wage employees and hours outside
of their contract requires compensation, which could present challenges if not earmarked as an
expenditure. There are several days on the school calendar that students are not in attendance.
These days should be identified in advance to schedule in-person training.

The use of virtual microlessons could be provided throughout the school year to provide
foundational content and the in-person training could built upon the virtual content through
tabletop exercises. The literature indicates 15 to 30 minutes is the preferred length of time to
maintain engagement (Morgenroth, 2017). A module that is considerably longer could be
divided into shorter 15-minute lessons that support staff could access at school. Learner
convenience can mitigate some of the time constraints if it is presented as an option (Scott,

The school division subscribes to a learning management system that has the ability to
house training modules, assign and track completion, and provide training transcripts and
certificates of completion. The use of asynchronous learning is recognized by many employers
as a way to supplement education without requiring training venues, travel or significant time
(Rovai, 2002). Additionally, the use of virtual training is advantageous to mitigate the concerns
associated with COVID-19. During interviews, AP 1, AP 2, and Coordinator 1 all identified the
increase in virtual training due to pandemic related restrictions for teachers, which resulted in
being able to maintain continuity of operations.

Objective 2: identify topics complementary to behavioral threat assessment and
provide training. There are many training topics that complement behavioral threat assessment.
The literature indicates there are typically observable warning signs that indicate an individual
may require some level of intervention (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). While some
of these warning signs may be obvious, others are simply typical adolescent behavior (Storey, Gibas, Reeves, & Hart, 2011). Training in topics such as adolescent brain development, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), mental health, suicide awareness and the impact of trauma can provide invaluable knowledge to identify and intervene in potentially harmful situations.

**Goal 2: improve communication within the school community.** Goal 2 is necessary to create a culture of trust, awareness, and the reporting of concerning behaviors. The suggested solutions to support this goal will require increased communication on threat assessment, sharing the process for reporting a threat, and increasing opportunities for professional collaboration.

**Objective 1: provide guidance to the school community on the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior and how to report a concern.** Creating an authoritative school climate that has high structure and high support may improve the reporting of concerns (Cornell & Huang, 2016). Trust was identified as an important component by AP 1 and AP 2 in the reporting of concerns to members of the threat assessment team. Threat assessment teams are required by Virginia Code to “provide guidance to students, faculty, and staff regarding the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior that may result a threat to the community, school, or self (DCJS, 2020, p. 17).

Secondary School Climate Survey for JDHS, the division, and the Commonwealth reveal roughly half of teachers and staff are aware of a formal threat assessment process at their school. This was consistent with the interview, focus group, and post-training survey findings. The first step would be to ensure all school employees are aware of the threat assessment requirements and options for reporting. The next step would be to inform parents through a newsletter or email communication and explain not only the legal requirements, but also the importance of threat assessment as an intervention to provide support. Finally, this information should be
provided to students.

**Objective 2: increase opportunities for collaboration between support staff, teachers, and administrators.** An unexpected finding was the sentiment communicated by support staff during the focus group that they were perceived as less valuable to the school community. They felt they were often not included in discussions, had limited opportunities for training, and “not respected.” It would be expected that the implantation of goal 1 would increase the sense of value to the school community. Additionally, support staff should be included in the school’s professional learning communities (PLC) or have a channel to provide feedback and solicit information. An option to address this would be an asynchronous virtual PLC composed of teachers, support staff, and administration.

**Resources Needed**

Virginia public schools are fortunate to have significant resources, training, and technical assistance available through the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety at the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. This is all provided at no cost to public school divisions and individual schools and divisions can request training for staff (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, n.d.). This school division did request and receive behavioral threat assessment in 2019 from the DCJS, however, it did not include school staff beyond the required threat assessment team members. Providing professional development to support staff is a challenge due to limited availability outside of their hired role.

Support staff are hourly employees, and anything required for their job outside of their contracted hours would require it to be reflected on their timesheets. Very few professional development hours are built into support staff contracts and what does exist is required to meet
job specific and/or state mandates. Perhaps, adding additional hours to their annual employment contracts during the school year when students are not in session would provide training opportunities. Of course, this would require adjusting annual contracts and reflecting the increased costs in the budget. This school division does use a learning management system to provide online training and all employees can access the training platform. Since this platform is currently used by the division there would not be additional costs. The DCJS provides a threat assessment curriculum, Model Policies document, a Basic K-12 Threat Assessment training, and a train-the-trainer course at no cost to public school divisions in Virginia. Additionally, there are training videos currently available at no cost that could be used to provide training to support staff.

**Funds Needed**

Considering the Virginia DCJS provides training, technical assistance, and resources at no cost to K-12 public schools in Virginia the need for funding would be limited to personnel costs. If the current contract needed to be modified to provide training outside of the current contract there would be increased costs based on the number of additional days added. It is likely the schedule can be adjusted to provide more training without modifying the current contracted hours. In the event there was an increase in contracted hours the additional costs would need to be absorbed in the division’s personnel expenses.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

To increase threat assessment training for support staff and improve communication in the school community, it is recommended the JDHS principal direct the threat assessment team to assume responsibility for this initiative. The rationale behind this is based on the requirement in Virginia Code that threat assessment teams provide that guidance to faculty, students, and
staff. It would be most appropriate for the school administrator that serves on the JDHS threat assessment team to lead this initiative and coordinate with the team, central officer, IT, and the Threat Advisory Committee to ensure implementation of this initiative.

**Timeline**

To develop training for support staff the threat assessment team would establish an advisory committee consisting of support staff that are representative of the various roles in the school, an instructional and/or curriculum specialist, the SRO, and an additional threat assessment team member. They would need to identify the trainings needed, find days and times on the school calendar, and work with Information Technology (IT) to load training modules into the division learning management system. The establishment of the advisory committee would not only inform the process for providing training, but it would also provide a voice to support staff and increase opportunities for collaboration.

The threat assessment team would work with the building principal to draft a parent resource guide on threat assessment. This resource guide would ultimately be posted to the school website and distributed by email to parents. The content in the guide would be informed by the threat assessment advisory committee based on the DCJS Model Policies. Students would be made aware of the importance of reporting a concern and how it can be reported at JDHS. The timeline to establish these recommendations is as follows:

- Prior to the start of the school year:
  - identify employees to serve on the Threat Assessment Advisory Committee, extend an invitation, and convene a meeting.
  - share initiative goals and solicit feedback on training topics.
  - select four microlessons (15 minutes) to be completed each quarter virtually.
o select a minimum of two training dates and times to provide in-person training to support staff.

o identify two tabletop training topics to occur during in-person training.

o draft a brief parent resource guide on threat assessment based on DCJS resources.

o create a virtual PLC composed of participants representative of teaching, support, and administration.

• First quarter:

  o notify support staff of virtual quarterly training and in-person trainings.

  o work with division IT to load virtual microlessons into the learning management system.

  o ensure all support staff have the appropriate credentials to access online training.

  o building principal, after receiving approval from the school division, will disseminate the parent resource guide and post to the school website.

  o quarterly microlesson.

  o Begin asynchronous PLCs; ongoing.

• Second quarter:

  o conduct the first tabletop exercise at the end of the 2nd quarter to support the first two quarterly microlessons.

  o the Threat Assessment Advisory Committee will draft guidance on reporting a threat or concern for students.

  o student guidance will be shared by classroom teachers, posted in the school, and made available on the school website.

  o quarterly microlesson.
• Third quarter:
  o review training evaluations from the first two quarterly microlessons and the first semester in-person training. Adjust as needed.
  o quarterly microlesson.

• Fourth quarter:
  o conduct second semester in-person training.
  o quarterly microlesson.

• Summer:
  o Review evaluations and adjust based on feedback.
  o identify complementary trainings to prepare for the next school year.

**Solution Implications**

The positive implications for solving the problem of inadequately trained support staff are numerous and based on the literature and findings revealed in this research it is clear they have the capacity to prevent harm. If a threat assessment team is able to avert a threat from occurring due to the recognition of aberrant behavior by support staff, then the solution would certainly see to be effective. However, the negative implications associated with threat assessment in general can be difficult to overcome. When community members do not understand threat assessment, they may perceive it as a process by schools to determine if there is enough evidence to suspend. Therefore, communicating to the entire school community, including parents, is crucial to gaining trust, increased reporting, and early intervention.

A potential negative implication of more training would be more threat assessments conducted. It would be expected that if there was an increase in training to improve recognition of aberrant behavior and the reporting of any concerning behaviors that there would also be an
increase in threat assessment cases. On the surface, this increase in threat assessments would seem to suggest students are engaging in more concerning behaviors. However, it would likely suggest the capacity for recognition and reporting has improved, which would mean there is also an increase in intervention and needed services.

The solution to the problem is primarily the provision of training. While support staff in the focus group and survey indicated the desire for more training, there will certainly be people that do not wish to receive training. Ideally, the suggested approach to providing this training will allow for convenience, relevance, and an improved sense of professional value. It is important for administration to communicate the importance and relevance for the training in order to create buy-in. Too often, trainings are conducted without the participants understanding the purpose and merely become an additional task to be completed.

Considering the extensive free resources, training, and technical assistance offered by the Virginia DCJS there should be minimal, to no, training expenses for the school or division. A potential funding challenge, however, may exist if training hours cannot be identified within the current support staff annual contracts. It is reasonable to assume that any additional training efforts for support staff at JDHS on threat assessment would likely lead to it being replicated across the division. While this is a positive implication, it would require a bit more oversight at the division level to ensure consistency. JDHS could serve as a pilot location in year one, before replicating the initiative in the remaining division high schools. Eventually, the division would need to consider moving the initiative into middle school and then elementary school. If a division wide practice was established, it could necessitate the need to establish school board policies.
**Evaluation Plan**

Determining the effectiveness of the proposed solution requires an evaluation of the identified goals and objectives. There are multiple components that require evaluation since there are many elements to the solution. The use of a post-training evaluation would be used to assess if the training is engaging, increases knowledge, is relevant, and solicit suggestions for improvements. The identification of specific training topics that would complement the threat assessment process should be collected through staff surveys developed by JDHS. Every two years a Secondary School Climate Survey is conducted, and a school specific report of the results is provided. This report serves as an excellent source of information to identify student and staff school climate perceptions, mental health concerns, and the prevalence of bullying. By reviewing the Secondary School Climate report, the Threat Assessment Advisory Committee can determine specific training needs. Additionally, the report can be compared to previous survey administration to determine if there were perceived improvements.

**Summary**

This applied study identified four central themes that informed the suggestions for solving the problem of inadequately trained support staff. These themes highlighted the need to provide training to support staff that is relevant to their role and considerate of their time. There are certainly challenges to providing training to support staff. This is not a unique problem at JDHS; however, the literature suggests support staff have limited professional development due to the structure of their contracts. Conducting a threat assessment by a multidisciplinary school-based team can only occur if a concern is brought to the team for consideration. The threat assessment team typically receives the most relevant training, however, if only the team receives the training, then there will be many potential serious threats that will go unnoticed.
Support staff interact with the students beyond the classroom. The custodial staff are familiar with the entire school and may see writing on a wall that is concerning. The office staff interact with parents, community members, the staff, students and are often the first point of contact with individuals entering the school. School security officers interact with students and visitors to support the student code of conduct and patrol the campus. Paraprofessionals work closely with special education students, which have a much higher incidence of concerning behaviors compared to their non-disabled peers. Bus drivers are the first and last school employee of the day to interact with students. They truly are the bookends of the school day and they may observe the differences in the student that gets on the bus in the morning compared to the one that gets on in the afternoon. Support staff can observe behavior outside of the classroom that may be unknown to teachers and administration. Administrators, teachers, and the threat assessment team would benefit from recognizing the important role support staff can play in the recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior.

Schools are inundated with technology to prevent or respond to a threatening situation. These include such devices as metal detectors, gunshot detection systems, 911 alert systems, and ballistic doors. While some of these tools can have value it is important to consider their impact on school climate. Do they create an environment that is conducive to learning, or do they evoke the character of a prison? While those questions are certainly worthy of an additional study and not the scope of this current study, what can be answered is they are often cost prohibitive, limited in their scope of prevention, and are typically not called into use until a tragedy is occurring. While a metal detector can detect a metallic object that may be concealed, it has zero capacity to identify the student that has withdrawn from their peers. The metal detector will never overhear a concerning or threatening statement. It will never read a statement of self-harm.
on the bathroom wall. It will never recognize a student that is exhibiting aberrant behavior that is cause for concern. Most importantly, however, a metal detector will never build a positive relationship with a student. Support staff are crucial to the school community and with training, collaboration, and communication they can enhance the threat assessment process to intervene with an individual that may be on the pathway to violence.
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Threat Assessment Teams and Oversight Committees, § 22.1-79.4 (2016).


APPENDIX A

James Christian


Dear James Christian,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

[Administrative Chair of Institutional Research]

Research Ethics Office
APPENDIX B

Consent for Threat Assessment Team Interview

Consent

Title of the Project: Recognizing Threatening and Aberrant Behavior: An Applied Study to Develop Online Training for the Support Staff at John Doe High School

Principal Investigator: James D. Christian, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a school division strict employee serving on your school’s behavioral threat assessment team or a school resource officer employed by the local law enforcement agency and assigned at the school through an memorandum of understanding. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to develop an online training module aimed at increasing the knowledge and awareness of behavioral threat assessment in support staff employees (i.e., bus drivers, school security officers, instructional assistants, custodians, and office administrative assistants). The goal is to increase the capacity of support staff to recognize threatening and/or concerning behaviors and report it to the school’s behavioral threat assessment team for further investigation.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in either an in-person or virtual interview. Interviews will be offered through a virtual platform if requested. Social distancing and adherence to state and local guidelines will be adhered to if an interview occurs in-person. Interviews should take approximately one hour to complete. The interviews will be audio- and video-recorded if conducted virtually or only audio-recorded if conducted in person. You will be provided a copy of your interview transcript upon request to review for accuracy.
### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society could include improved identification of threatening and/or concerning behaviors in the school community. This improvement could provide the opportunity to mitigate and prevent acts of violence and provide support by increasing reporting to the threat assessment team.

### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

### How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or with XXXXXXXX XXXXXX. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the phone number or email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.
Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is James D. Christian. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, [redacted]

---

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

---

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

_I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study._

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Printed Subject Name ___________________________  Signature & Date ___________________________
APPENDIX C

Consent for Support Staff Focus Group

Consent

Title of the Project: Recognizing Threatening and Aberrant Behavior: An Applied Study to Develop Online Training for the Support Staff at John Doe High School

Principal Investigator: James D. Christian, Liberty University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invitation to be Part of a Research Study</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a school division employee serving at your school in one of the following roles/positions: school security officer, office staff, paraprofessional, bus driver, or custodial staff. Paraprofessionals will be defined as instructional support staff that support special education teachers by working with students with disabilities for this study. Office staff includes administrative assistants, attendance clerks, bookkeepers, and other office staff positions. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the study about and why is it being done?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The purpose of the study is to develop an online training module aimed at increasing the knowledge and awareness of behavioral threat assessment in support staff employees (i.e., bus drivers, school security officers, instructional assistants, custodians, and office administrative assistants). The goal is to increase the capacity of support staff to recognize threatening and/or concerning behaviors and report it to the school’s behavioral threat assessment team for further investigation.</td>
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<tr>
<th>What will happen if you take part in this study?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Participate in a focus group using an online meeting room, such as Zoom, WebEx, or Google Meet. The focus group will take approximately 1 hour to complete and will be audio- and video-recorded.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society could include improved identification of threatening and/or concerning behaviors in the school community. This improvement could provide the opportunity to mitigate and prevent acts of violence and provide support by increasing reporting to the threat assessment team.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. The focus group will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked cabinet. The data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all physical records will be shredded.
- The focus group will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or with XXXXXXXXXX XXXXX XXXXXXXXXX. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.
### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the phone number or email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is James D. Christian. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [phone number] or [email address]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, [name].

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

### Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

_I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study._

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed Subject Name</th>
<th>Signature &amp; Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
APPENDIX D

Consent for Support Staff Post-Training Survey

Title of the Project: Recognizing Threatening and Aberrant Behavior: An Applied Study to Develop Online Training for the Support Staff at John Doe High School

Principal Investigator: James D. Christian, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a school division employee serving at your school in the one of the following roles/positions: school security officer, office staff, paraprofessional, bus driver, or custodial staff. Paraprofessionals will be defined as instructional support staff that support special education teachers by working with students with disabilities for this study. Office staff includes administrative assistants, attendance clerks, bookkeepers, and other office staff positions. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to develop an online training module aimed at increasing the knowledge and awareness of behavioral threat assessment in support staff employees (i.e., bus drivers, school security officers, instructional assistants, custodians, and office administrative assistants). The goal is to increase the capacity of support staff to recognize threatening and/or concerning behaviors and report it to the school’s behavioral threat assessment team for further investigation.
What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a brief (15 minutes) online training module about recognizing and reporting concerning behaviors and/or threats to your administration. The online training module will be accessed online and will not require you to take a test to measure what you have learned.

2. After you complete the online training module, you will complete a short survey (10 minutes) to share your opinion about whether you feel it improved your ability to recognize and report concerning behaviors and/or threats. The survey will be accessible online through a link that will be on the final slide of the training. Clicking on that link will take you to an online survey platform.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefit participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study is an improved threat assessment awareness and recognition ability.

Benefits to society could include improved identification of threatening and/or concerning behaviors in the school community. This improvement could provide the opportunity to mitigate and prevent acts of violence and provide support by increasing reporting to the threat assessment team.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be anonymous.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked cabinet. The data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all physical records will be shredded.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be not be compensated for participating in this study.

Liberty University
IRB-FY20-21-501
Approved on 4-14-2021
Is study participation voluntary?
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or with [redacted]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?
If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?
The researcher conducting this study is James D. Christian. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Your Consent
Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

Liberty University
IRB-FY20-21-501
Approved on 4-14-2021
APPENDIX E

Interview Questions

1. What is your current position and title?

2. How many years have you worked in this school division?
   a. How many years have you worked at this school?

3. How many years have you worked in the field of education?

4. On average, how often does your threat assessment team meet per school year for the purpose of assessing a threat to self or others?

5. A threat assessment team is required by Virginia Code to be composed of expertise in administration, counseling, instruction, and law enforcement. Who typically fulfills that requirement on your threat assessment team at this school?

6. Describe all of the formal and informal threat assessment training you have received?

7. Describe any additional training that complements your role as a threat assessment team member.

8. When gathering information for assessing a threat, please describe who you consulted about what they may have observed or heard? Please use the best role or title to describe them.

9. How many hours on average per year do the following support staff receive professional development?
   a. School security officers
   b. Bus drivers
   c. Front office staff
   d. Paraprofessionals
10. How is professional development delivered to support staff?

11. What type of training do teachers outside of the threat assessment team receive on the role of a threat assessment team, recognition of threatening or aberrant behavior, or how to report a threat?
   a. How about support staff? This includes bus drivers, front office staff, school security officers, custodial staff, and paraprofessionals.
   b. Can you briefly describe the training? (length of training, frequency, structured, etc…)

12. How does the school track online training that is completed by school personnel?

13. How do staff report a concern about an individual that is demonstrating possible threatening or aberrant behavior?
   a. Who do they report that information to?

14. How many years have you been assigned to the role of SRO in this school division?
   a. How many years have you been assigned to this school?

15. How many years have you worked in law enforcement?

16. Prior to your assignment as an SRO, what was your previous role?

17. Please describe the training you received in preparation for your role as an SRO.
   a. Who provided the training and in what year?

18. Please describe any formal behavioral threat assessment training you have received.
   a. Who provided the training and in what year?
19. Please describe how you receive reports from the school community regarding threatening or aberrant behavior that is ultimately addressed through the threat assessment team?

   a. Please describe the roles, titles, or positions of the individuals that have reported a threat to you that is either directed towards someone in the school community or themselves.

20. Describe current practices for providing professional development for support staff within the division.

21. How many professional development hours, on average, do support staff receive per school year?

22. What training topics do support staff receive? Describe using the following:

   a. By role: school security officer, front office staff, paraprofessional, custodian, bus driver

   b. Upon hiring

   c. Periodically

23. What training modality is used to provide training (i.e., online platform, in-person, other)?

24. How many hours are allocated in support staff contracts specific for professional development?
APPENDIX F

Focus Group Questions for Guided Discussion

1. Describe what may be considered a threat to your school community.

2. What do you believe to be the biggest challenge to identifying if someone is a threat?

3. Considering some of the examples you gave, how might you proceed in reporting what you saw or heard?

4. In your opinion, in what ways could your school improve your knowledge of identifying threatening behavior?

5. When considering training, what is the best format for you to learn? Do you prefer online modules, in-person workshops, tabletop exercises, or something else?

6. In what ways does staff in your school understand the goals of threat assessment and how to report any concerns?

7. Describe the threat assessments conducted during this school year or any other during your time at this school? This includes frequency, type of threats, possible outcomes.

8. Describe the type of threat assessment training you have received in the recognition of behavior that may cause concern or seem to be threatening to someone else or to themselves? When did you receive the training and who provided it?

9. Do you feel training and/or guidance in how to recognize and report threats would be useful to preventing violence towards others or self?

10. If you were aware of a threat to self or others who would you tell, or how would you report it?

**Additional questions will occur as the discussion organically evolves around the answers provided by members of the focus group.**
APPENDIX G

Survey Questions

Background Questions

1. Which job title best describes your current role?
   a. school security officer
   b. bus driver
   c. paraprofessional/instruction assistant
   d. office staff
   e. custodial staff
2. How many years have you worked in this school division?
3. How many years have you worked at this school?
4. Prior to this training, have you ever received behavioral threat assessment training?
5. Prior to this training, were you aware of the requirement for threat assessment teams?

Perception Questions

1. This training improved my awareness of the requirement for threat assessment teams in Virginia schools.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree
2. This training is important for my role at the school.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree
3. After completing this training, I realize that I have observed or heard something at school in the past that may have been threatening or aberrant behavior.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree
4. After completing this training, I feel better prepared to recognize threatening or aberrant behavior.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
5. If I had a concern about a student or another individual in the school community, I would know how to report it at my school.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree

6. After completing this training, I feel more confident of when to report threatening or aberrant behavior.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree

7. I am comfortable in reporting threatening or aberrant behavior at my school.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree

8. The length of the training was appropriate.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree

9. I would prefer to receive this training online instead of in-person.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree

10. This online training module was easy to understand.
    a. Strongly disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Neutral
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly agree

11. I believe all support staff should receive this training.
    a. Strongly disagree
    b. Disagree
    c. Neutral
    d. Agree
    e. Strongly agree
12. The use of scenarios in this training helped me to understand threatening or aberrant behavior.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree
13. I would like to learn more about behavioral threat assessment.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree
14. This training makes me feel like a valuable part of my school community.
   a. Strongly disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neutral
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly agree
On November 11, 2020, the researcher submitted a request to conduct research to the preferred school division. This was accomplished through completing a school division form and included information regarding problem, purpose, methodology, population, data collection, and survey instruments. Formal permission was granted on December 1, 2020 through a letter that was provided to the researcher. This letter is provided in Appendix H and has been redacted to maintain confidentiality.
APPENDIX I

Approval Letter

December 1, 2020

James Christian
Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Dear Mr. Christian:

Your request to conduct research for your doctoral degree at Liberty University is approved. Specifically, you are approved to contact those in your target audience regarding your study – Recognizing Threatening and Aberrant Behavior: An Applied Study to Develop Online Training for the Support Staff at John Doe High School. The approval is granted with the understanding that the following conditions will apply:

☐ Participation of school personnel is strictly voluntary. Approval to contact specific groups does not guarantee participation.
☐ Mr. [redacted] will act as the district liaison to collaborate with and review the online training module created and
☐ Parent permission must be obtained for student participation (if applicable).
☐ Names of individuals, school names, or the name of the school district cannot be used in the reporting of your data or your findings without prior permission from the Department of Strategic Planning and Partnerships.
☐ All copies, distribution, retrieval of materials, and arrangement of interviews/collections will be your responsibility.
☐ Questions/procedures must be limited to those detailed in your prospectus.

You may use this letter as a cover letter when contacting administrators and teachers in [redacted]. However, please be advised that all contact and distribution will be your responsibility. Should you have further questions, feel free to contact me at [redacted]. Best wishes with your research study and continued pursuit of your educational goals.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Supervisor of Strategic Initiatives
(Research Review)

Cc: [redacted], Supervisor of Safety and Security