The Bully in Sheep’s Clothing:
A Look at Bullying in the Middle School

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Action Research

School Counseling Continuing Licensure Program

Portland State University

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Professional Responsibility: This project has been reviewed by collegial professional peers and has been submitted for on-line publication before being evaluated by faculty members from Portland State University. I am the author and take full responsibility for the project’s contents and quality. This work serves as a baseline for my professional school counselor skills and demonstrated what I have done to develop and/or assess my actions directed toward serving students and schools. In other words, this is a snapshot or one indicator of my work at this stage of my career.

Focus Statement:
The purpose of this study is to get an idea of how much the students at the middle school are being bullied and where it is happening most often. This paper will share the findings of a study of what the parents, teachers and students think about bullying at the middle school where I work.

Introduction:
In the past three years I have seen an increase in bullying and violence at the middle school where I work. For example, last year we had two drug busts where students came forward to help the administration. These students were later bullied by other students through verbal aggression, which then led up to physical aggression at the end of the school year. As it stands now, the middle school does not have a bullying or violence prevention program.

My Rural Middle School is placed in an impoverished, high migrant population area with diverse cultures. The middle school has approximately 350 students, 5th through 8th grade. The middle school’s population houses around 56% Hispanics, 28% Caucasians and 16% Russians. Currently 87% of our student body is receiving free and reduced lunch as a result of financial need. Sixty percent of our students are considered English Language Learners (ELL), meaning that English was not their first language.
Review of Related Literature:

It is the students that live everyday with bullies and it is their voices that need to be recognized in all of this. In 2002, Families and Work Institute produced a report based on a nationally representative sample of 1,000 students in grades 5-12. The student responses indicated that 32% of the sample had been bullied at least once in the month prior to the survey, and 12% had been bullied five times or more in the same time period. (Ferrell-Smith, 2003)

Bullying behavior has also been studied from the teachers’ perspective. Though teachers reported lower levels of bullying than the students, they did feel it was a serious student behavior. A study of Canadian teachers found that 85% reported they intervened often or nearly always to stop bullying, while only 35% of the students from the same schools reported that teachers intervened. (Dake, Price & Telljohann, 2003)

We know that bullying can have adverse effects on both the victim and the bully. A study of 3,000 students from London found that victimized children were more likely to have problems sleeping, experiencing more than occasional headaches and stomachaches. (Dake, Price & Telljohann, 2003)

Another study showed that though victimized students were absent more often, there was not a difference in unexcused absences. This finding indicated that if the victimized students were missing more school, they were doing it with their parents’ permission. (Dake, Price & Telljohann, 2003)

Studies also show the adverse affects of being a bully, not only on themselves, but when they enter the community. A study showed that children who bully others began dating at a younger age than others did, and these relationships often evolved at a more
advanced level. Bullies also reported more acts of physical and social aggression toward their dating partners. (Dake, Price & Telljohann)

Research conducted in 1993 indicated that children who were bullied often suffered from depression and low self-esteem well into adulthood. The act of bullying can become a “gateway” to other negative behaviors. Sixty percent of males who were bullies in grades sixth through nine were convicted of at least one crime as adults. Forty percent of these former school bullies had three or more convictions by age 24. (Ferrell-Smith, 2003)

Studies are also showing that bullying can evolve into violence. A report by the US Secret Service investigated characteristics of students involved in school shootings in the United States. Of 37 different school shootings, two-thirds involved attackers who “felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident.” Though two-thirds of the cases did not directly involve school bullying, “a number of the attackers had experienced bullying and harassment that was longstanding and severe. In those cases, the experience of bullying appeared to play a major role in motivating the attack at the school.” (Dake, Price & Telljohann)

Despite the many prevention programs that are out there, many studies now show that these programs are unable to be replicated elsewhere or are just ineffective.

“The US Department of Health and Human Services found that almost one half of the violence prevention strategies they studied were ineffective. A few of the strategies were even harmful. Ineffective strategies included peer counseling and peer mediation.” (Hermann & Finn, 2002)
Variables:

The factors of my study that could change are the attitudes and perceptions of the students on any given day. For example, if a student is being bullied on a certain day then they may not feel as safe at school as they feel when they take the survey. Their fears may show differently in their answers.

The data of the survey could also vary. Though all parents, teachers and students will have the opportunity to take a survey, the outcome may vary depending on who actually takes the survey.

Although I will get the view of a certain group this year, I will lose a group of students because they graduate to high school in the spring and gain a new set of 5th graders in the fall. The data could vary if the surveys were done at a different time. Each year the climate of the school can change drastically with new kids.

Research Questions:

How often are students being bullied at the middle school?

Do they think telling someone about a bullying situation is “tattling” or “snitching”?

Where does most of the bullying occur at school?

How safe do the students feel at school?

Have they missed school or had any physical symptoms due to being bullied?

Are teachers and parents aware of the bullying going on?
Description of Intervention:

From this research, I hope to find a bullying and violence prevention program that will meet the needs of the middle school.

Data Collection:

Qualitative data collection techniques were used as the primary research methods for this study.

I was also a Privileged, Active Observer by going into classrooms acting as a helper but at the same time. I was also there as a Passive Observer when I went and just observed.

Data Sources:

Surveys:

All teachers, parents and students were given surveys in order to answer the survey questions.

Observation:

I was a Privilege, Active Observer and a Passive Observer.

Existing archival sources with in the school:

Attendance rates, referral numbers and reasons, Free/Reduced lunch numbers, and ethnicity numbers.

Interviews:

Talked with students about the bullying going on. Reviewed the questions to see if they had more information to give me that wasn’t an option on the survey.
Data Analysis:

The surveys were mailed out to the parents with English on one side and Spanish on the other after the information sheet and consent form went out. Only one parent didn’t want their child to participate and only 11 parent surveys were returned. As a result, I did not feel I got a very accurate view of the parents’ perspective. None-the-less, the information gathered was helpful. Out of 32 surveys send out less than half of the faculty (12) returned their surveys. This is a common occurrence for our staff; if it isn’t required, they don’t do it. However, 274 out of the 350 (78%) students took the survey.

The definition of bullying laid out for all the surveys was that “bullying is unfair and one-sided. It happens when someone repeatedly hurts, frightens, threatens, teases, picks on or leaves someone out on purpose.” This currently is our middle school bullying policy’s definition.

Using the research format, I noted the following results.

- Sixty-four percent of the parents felt that their child had not been bullied at the middle school. This seemed to coincide with the 55% of the students that felt that they have not been bullied. However 25% felt that they had been bullied in the last month.

- Fifty-seven percent of the students hear classmates being bullied on a daily basis and 82% have stood up for a friend or classmate that was being bullied.
- Forty-six percent of the students hear on average at least one classmate being bullied a day and 30% hear three or more classmates being bullied.

- So where does most of the bullying happen at our school? The students checked all the places where they hear bullying happening and the tallies were counted. The ranking was as follows: 1) Recess, 2) Classroom, 3) Hallway, 4) Cafeteria, 5) Locker Room, 6) Bathroom, and 7) Bus or on the way home.

- From talking with students, many students admitted that in the past they did not come forward about the bullying because they felt that they were “tattling,” or “snitching.” From what the students were saying, they implied that most of the students felt this way. This contradicted the survey results, because they said that 65% of the students did not consider telling an adult that they were being bullied a form of “tattling,” or “snitching.” Fifty-eight percent did not think that telling an adult about a classmate being bullied was a form of “tattling,” or “snitching.”

- Fifty-five percent of the parents surveyed said that their child had not talked to them about being bullied.

- Missing school and having physical symptoms due to being bullied can make coming to school rough for some students. Seven percent of the
students not only had physical symptoms of being bullied, but also missed school in the past year due to being bullied. Only 3% of the total students surveyed had missed school due to being bullied. Eight percent of the students had just physical symptoms due to being bullied. That was in sharp contrast to what the parents revealed. Zero parents reported their child staying home due to being bullied. Our daily average is 93.2% of our students in attendance, and yet 10% have reported staying home in the past year due to being bullied.

- How safe do our students feel at school?

11% of the students do not feel safe at school.
38% feel somewhat safe at school.
42% feel safe at school.
19% feel very safe at school.

- How safe does the parents feel their child is at the middle school?

Zero mentioned not feeling safe.
36% feel their child is somewhat safe at school.
45% feel their child is safe at school.
18% feel their child is very safe at school.

- How safe do the teachers feel the students are at the middle school?

42% feel that the students are somewhat safe at school.
58% feel that the students are *safe* at school.

Zero felt that the students were either *not safe* or *very safe* at school.

- So how is bullying resolved? The students said that *most* of the time the bullying is ignored; although *some* ended in a fight. Lastly an adult was told. This was in sharp contrast to what the teachers thought happened. The teachers thought that *most* of the bullying was referred to an adult, *some* were ignored, and only a little may end in violence or a fight. Seventy-five percent of the teachers felt that they were aware of most of the bullying going on, but that how the students solve the issue varies greatly from how the teachers perceive the bullying ends.

- In the first semester of the 2004-2005 school year, there were 138 referrals. Most were listed for the following: fighting, defiance, profane/rude remarks, minor insubordination, harassing/bullying.

- So, is bullying just part of adolescence? Fifty percent of the faculty feel that bullying is part of adolescence and 55% of parents felt that way too.

**Themes to look at:**

- Forty-five percent of the students have been bullied within the past year. Many parents are unaware of the fact that their children are being bullied. Therefore, we have a lack of communication.
- A little less than half still believe that by saying something about bullying, it is “tattling,” or “snitching.”
- Over half of the students hear classmates being bullied on a daily basis.
- We have students that who either missing school or having physical symptoms due to being bullied.
- The top two places where bullying is happening are recess and the classroom, and yet 75% of the teachers feel that they are aware of the bullying going on.
- We have students who don’t feel safe at school.

**Action Plan:**

Bullying is obviously happening in the confines of our middle school walls. Based on what the data sources have told me, I am convinced that we need a research-based bullying/violence prevention program to address these issues, one that will align with American School Counseling Association’s National Standards.

According to the New Jersey Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention, the key principles to selecting programs is to look for a comprehensive and ongoing approach. They recommend 11 characteristics to look for:

1. A framework based on empirical research and a sensible theory.
2. Involves the entire school community.
3. Addresses the role of adults in childhood bullying.
4. Integrated elements (program components fit together).
5. Long-term and adequate intensity.
6. Includes baseline measurements of the nature of bullying in the setting and follow-up assessments to determine effectiveness of the interventions.

7. Developmentally appropriate.

8. Culturally responsive (accounts for program differences in communities and populations).

9. Community-based (extends beyond the school, and partners with community organizations).

10. Parent/caregiver/family oriented (helps caregivers address bullying in home and community environments).

11. Actively supports at-risk or targeted students.

Aligning with National Standards:

As I review programs, one of my goals is to make sure that the program can be supported by the National Standards. Here is how a Bullying Program would fit in with the National Standards.

Personal/Social Development:

Standard A: Students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect self and others.

Student Competencies:

- Develop a positive attitude toward self as a unique and worthy person,
- Identify and express feelings,
- Distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors,
- Recognize personal boundaries, rights and privacy needs,
Standard B: Students will make decisions, set goals, and take necessary action to achieve goals.

Student Competencies:
- Use a decision-making and a problem-solving model,
- Understand consequences of decisions and choices,
- Identify alternate solutions to a problem,
- Develop effective coping skills for dealing with problems,
- Demonstrate when, where, and how to seek help for solving problems and making decisions.
- Know how to apply conflict resolution skills.

Standard C: Students will understand safety and survival skills.

Student Competencies:
- Learn about the relationship between rules, laws, safety, and the protection of an individual’s rights,
- Learn about the difference between appropriate and inappropriate physical contact,
- Demonstrate the ability to assert boundaries, rights, and personal privacy,
- Differentiate between situations requiring peer support and situations requiring adult professional help,
- Identify resource people in the school and community and know how to seek their help,
- Learn techniques for managing stress and conflict.
Final Thoughts:

As I have begun to evaluate various research programs, I have seen many that sound good on paper (have been published into a book or have a fancy website) but are not research-based. Even if the program was studied and tested, it might never have been replicated or shown to have success in replication. In order for me to even attempt to get staff buy in at the middle school, I have to show them hard facts of how it has worked in communities similar to ours. Our middle school staff has tried various bullying programs with no success. Teachers said that they stopped because they didn’t see immediate results. They implemented the program for a year and then quit. Now they are callous to the thought of beginning another program. They do not want to have to set aside more of their core class time to integrate such a program. These are some of the barriers I must face.

The journey to find a program is just beginning.
References:


Appendix:

Parent Notification Form
   Was translated into Spanish

Parent Survey
   Was translated into Spanish

Student Consent Form

Student Survey

Student Interview Questions

Faculty Consent Form

Faculty Survey

Caption in Newsletter

List of items that collected from pre-gathered school data
Bullying and Violence Prevention Programs in Middle Schools

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by the School Counselor, Hilary Grey who is a student at Portland State University. The researcher hopes to better understand bullying in the middle school and then hopes to find a program that will fit those needs. This study is in conjunction with the Continuing Licensure Program at Portland State University. All families at the middle school are invited to participate in order to obtain your opinions and attitudes towards bullying and violence. The study will take approximately this school year to finish.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to fill out a survey and any of your children that attend the middle school will also fill one out at school. A few students may be asked to be interviewed for more information. Though you may not receive any direct benefit from taking part in this study right now, the study may help increase our knowledge of bullying and violence in our school. It is the hope that this information will help the researcher find the most appropriate bullying and violence prevention program for the school.

Any information that is obtained through this study will be kept anonymous and only your children’s grade and/or the grades of your children here at school will be identified.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, and it will not affect any part of your child’s education. Your family may also withdraw at any point in time. Please keep the upper portion of this letter for your records. By participating you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies.

If you have concerns or problems about your participation in this study or your rights as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-4288. If you have questions about the study itself, contact Hilary Grey at Gervais Middle School, PO Box 176, Gervais, Oregon, 97026, (503) 792-3808 x301.

Sincerely,

Hilary Grey
School Counselor
Gervais Middle School

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information and wish to not participate in this study. My child’s name is ________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature ____________________ Date ___________
Bullying Survey For Parents

Definition of Bullying: Bullying is unfair and one-sided. It happens when someone repeatedly hurts, frightens, threatens, teases, picks on or leaves someone out on purpose.

1.a. Based on the definition of bullying, has your child been bullied while at the middle school?

Circle One: YES  NO

1.b. If your child has been bullied at school, have they stayed home because of it?

Circle One: YES  NO  DOES NOT APPLY TO ME

1.c. Did you excuse the absence if they did stay home from school because of being bullied?

Circle One: YES  NO  DOES NOT APPLY TO ME

2. Do you feel that your child is safe at Gervais Middle School?

Circle One: Not Safe  Somewhat Safe  Safe  Very Safe

3. Has your child ever talked about being bullied?

Circle One: YES  NO

4. Do you feel that most bullying is part of growing up?

Circle One: YES  NO
Student Consent Form

My parents (guardian) have given permission for me to participate in a project about bullying at the middle school. If I choose to participate, I will be asked to fill out a survey. A few students may be interviewed in order to gain more information about bullying. Participating in this project is voluntary and I understand that I won’t get in trouble if I decide not to participate. Also, I understand that if I have any questions about what we will be doing, I need to ask Hilary Grey, my counselor.

By signing below, I understand that I am deciding to participate in the project.

________________________________________  ________________________
Student Signature                      Date
Student Survey

Definition of Bullying: Bullying is unfair and one-sided. It happens when someone keeps hurting, frightening, intimidating, threatening or leaving someone out on purpose.

1. Based on the definition above, have you been bullied?
   ___ In the last month
   ___ Last 3 months
   ___ Last 6 months
   ___ Have not been bullied

2. Have you ever stood up for a friend or classmate who was being bullied?
   ___ Yes     ___ No

3. Do you consider telling an adult that you are being bullied a form of “snitching,” or “tattling?”
   ___ Yes     ___ No

4. Do you consider telling an adult that a classmate is being bullied a form of “snitching,” or “tattling?”
   ___ Yes     ___ No

5. Do you hear classmates being bullied on a daily basis?
   ___ Yes     ___ No

6. Where do you see bullying happen?
   Check all that applies:
   ___ Classroom
   ___ Hallway
   ___ Bathroom
   ___ Locker room
   ___ Cafeteria
   ___ Recess
   ___ Bus/on the way home
7. On an average day, how often do you hear another classmate being bullied?
   ___ 1
   ___ 2
   ___ 3 or more

8. How safe do you feel at school?
   ___ Not safe
   ___ Somewhat safe
   ___ Safe
   ___ Very safe

9.a. Have you ever missed school in the past year due to being bullied?
   ___ Yes  ___ No

b. If Yes
Did you have any physical symptoms from worrying about the bullying? (example: headache, stomach ache, nausea)
   ___ Yes  ___ No

c. How was the bullying resolved?
   ___ Ignored
   ___ Adult was told
   ___ Fight
   ___ None of the above

10. Have you had a bullying referral in the past year?
   ___ Yes  ___ No
**Student Interview**

**Definition of Bullying:** Bullying is unfair and one-sided. It happens when someone keeps hurting, frightening, intimidating, threatening or leaving someone out on purpose.

Based on the definition that was just read to you, have you been bullied?

What do you consider bullying?

How often do you feel you are bullied?

How often do you see classmates being bullied during the course of a day?

Where do you see the most bullying happen?

Do you think teachers catch most of the bullying?

What do you see most teachers do when they catch another student bullying someone?

How do you think we can lower the amount of bullying in school?
Faculty Consent Form

I realize that I am being asked to participate in a project about bullying at the middle school. If I choose to participate, I will be asked to fill out a survey. Participating in this project is voluntary and I understand that I won’t get in trouble if I decide not to participate. Also, I understand that if I have any questions about what we will be doing, I need to ask Hilary Grey, the counselor.

By signing below, I understand that I am deciding to participate in the project.

_____________________________  ________________
Teacher Signature       Date
Faculty Survey

1. What grade(s) do you teach? (check all that apply)
   ____5  ____6  ____7  ____8

2. Do you feel that you are aware of the bullying going on in your classroom?
   Circle One:  YES  NO

3. What do you do with this information?
   (Check all that apply)
   ___ Deal with it in classroom
   ___ Bullying referral
   ___ Refer to counselor
   ___ Ignore it

4. Do you feel that most bullying is a part of adolescence?
   Circle One:  YES  NO

5. How safe do you feel the students are at the middle school?
   Circle One:
   Not  Somewhat  Safe  Very
   Safe  Safe  Safe

6. How do you think most bullying is resolved?
   ___ Ignoring it
   ___ Refer to adult
   ___ Fight
   ___ Violence

7. What issues do you think are behind bullying?

8. What do you think needs to be done to help lower bullying in our school?

Caption in Newsletter:

The School Counselor will be surveying the parents, teachers and students on the issue of bullying and violence at the middle school. That information will help in finding a prevention program that will best fit the school’s needs. Any questions can be referred to the School Counselor, Hilary Grey at 503-792-3808 x301
List of items that will be collected from pre-gathered school data:

Population Number

Threat Assessment:
   Numbers
   Purpose

Drop Out Rate

Move In/Move Out Rate

Attendance:
   Numbers
   Purpose

Ethnicity

Referrals:
   Number
   Purpose

Free/Reduced Lunch Rate

Class Size

Bullying Referrals:
   Number
   Purpose