BULLY PREVENTION PROGRAM IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL SETTING

Bully Prevention Program in a Middle School Setting

Action Research Project

Tracey A. Beagle

May 21, 2004

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share the results of an Action Research project that focused on the effects of a bully prevention program in a middle school setting.

Introduction

In light of the school shootings over the past few years, bullying is receiving increased attention by schools nationwide. The National Resource Center for Safe Schools [NRCSS] (1999) estimates that 30 percent of American students are either bullied regularly or are themselves bullies, with 8 percent reported being bullied at least once a week. Additionally, Hoover & Oliver (cited in Brewster & Railsback, 2001) reported that 14 percent of students in grades eight through 12 admitted that bullying affected their capacity to learn in school. According to Bonds and Stoker (2000), an effective comprehensive bully prevention program should be based on four main concepts:

1. A systematic and comprehensive program.
2. The focus of the program is on climate change.
3. The program teaches skills and strategies to avoid victimization.
4. The emphasis is on developing the caring majority.

For this action research project, a team of seventh grade students at Mt. Olive Middle School was chosen to participate in a bully prevention program.

School Background

Mt. Olive Middle School is comprised of 1,144 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. The school can be described as having a changing and moderately diverse student population. The number of minority students attending Mt. Olive has increased over the past 7 years. Currently, 25% are considered minority students, with Hispanic students comprising the majority
at 11%. Along with an increase in the minority student population, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch has grown to include 32% of the student population. Mt. Olive’s ESL program has been in place for the past three years. Over the past three years, the number of students served has increased by 144%, and the number of languages served increased to 17. Overall, the rate of increase for Mt. Olive in these areas mirror that of all middle schools in the district, however, with the exception of free and reduced lunch, Mt. Olive’s statistics are slightly lower than the district average.

**Area of Focus Statement**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of a bully prevention program with seventh grade students. The main focus of the program is on climate change rather than elimination of bullying. To accomplish this, the program focuses on the 85% of students who are in the role of bystanders or the “silent majority”. The program specifically teaches this silent majority the skills needed to stand up and take the responsibility for making the school safe, thus effecting climate change.

**Review of Literature**

Bullying can be defined as repeated, intentional negative behaviors designed to create and enforce an imbalance of power between bully and victim, causing physical and psychological harm (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). In boys, bullying is most often in the form of physical aggression. In girls, bullying is most often in the form of relational aggression such as malicious gossip and ostracism, resulting in social isolation (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, 2002). The increase of relational aggression by girls may be due to developmental factors (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001). Adolescent girls tend to be more relational and spend a tremendous amount of time and energy into social comparisons and peer acceptance,
leaving girls more vulnerable to the impressions of others regarding their physical appearance and acceptance as part of a social group. Additionally, girls use relational aggression within their friendship group, often turning the entire group against one, whereas boys target aggression outside of their group (McKay, 2003). Physical aggression seems to decrease with age, whereas, verbal abuse tends to remain constant (NRCSS, 1999). As a whole, bullying appears to peak during the middle school years.

Bullying can have serious consequences not only to the victim, but the bully as well. Both bully and victim are subject to an increased risk of substance use, lack of school connectedness, and maladaptive eating behaviors (McKay, 2003). For the victim, bullying can cause significant problems that include loss of friendship, feelings of isolation, anxiety, and low self-esteem, as well as lower school attendance and achievement (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000). In addition, those who bully are more likely to become physically abusive and have a criminal record as adults. Consequences are not limited to the bully and victim. Students who observe bullying on a regular basis experience a less secure learning environment, often filled with fear of being the next victim, so they say and do nothing (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). Garrity & Jens (1997) note that 85% of students make up this “silent majority”. Clearly, bullying affects the entire school climate. According to Hoover & Hazler (cited in Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000), bullying, when left unchecked, can create a negative atmosphere for all students. Given these consequences for the victim, bully, and the school, early intervention and prevention is a way to help minimize these risks.

Traditionally, the focus has been on bullies and their victims, however, to be effective, schools should adopt a systems approach to bully prevention that focuses its efforts on the entire school community, where the caring majority sets the tone of the school and holds the power
Bully Prevention (Garrity & Jens, 1997). An effective prevention program should have administrative support, with efforts integrated into school curriculum and discipline policies (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). Additionally, Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon (2000) recommend conceptualizing bullying as a continuum of behavior, which suggests a more developmental and comprehensive approach. They go on to note that rather than focus solely on individual behavior change, a prevention program should include an assessment of the sociocultural factors that may be contributing to bullying behavior, and then incorporate these aspects into the program.

Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland (2002) recommend a long-term sequential program that includes ways to empower and engage those who are targeted by bullies as well as the students who regularly witness bullying. The bully is rarely motivated to change because of the social power gained with their behavior (McKay, 2003). With knowledge and the skills to intervene, the caring majority can create the climate of the school so the power balance shifts away from bullies to the silent majority (Garrity & Jens, 1997). Ongoing programs that promote prosocial skill development may help to reduce the reliance on physical and relational aggression as solutions to problems (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, 2002). Interventions should be designed at the school, class, and individual levels (NRCSS, 1999). Because bullying is frequently experienced away from adults, classroom intervention is a key component that equips students with the skills necessary to intervene when adults are not present (Garrity & Jens, 1997). An effective bully prevention program helps students to be better equipped in their social interactions, be more assertive in dealing with aggressive students, and better able to cope when problems do arise (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001).
Data Collection/Methodology

One-seventh grade team was chosen randomly to participate in the bully prevention curriculum. Prior to implementing the program, an assessment was conducted to identify the extent of bullying, the types of victimization, levels of distress, and types of interventions attempted by students.

The curriculum, *Bully-Proofing Your School: A Comprehensive Approach for Middle Schools*, was chosen and purchased at the district level; however, prior to this project Mt. Olive Middle School had not implemented any component of this curriculum. Additional activities and videos were added to supplement this curriculum.

The curriculum consisted of five lessons, introduced over a five-week period during students’ core plus classroom time. The following is an overview of topics and activities covered for each lesson. Unless otherwise noted, these lessons were taken directly from the *Bully-Proofing Your School: A Comprehensive Approach for Middle Schools* curriculum.

Lesson 1: The Basics of Bullying

I. Pretest

II. Introduce the concept of bullying by showing a video from www.no-bully.com. Discussion.

III. Discuss guidelines for program.

IV. Explore students’ knowledge of the concepts of bully, victim, and bystander.

V. Summarize program goals

Lesson 2: Strategies to Avoid Victimization

I. Review difference between normal conflicts vs. bullying.

II. Introduce HA HA SO strategies to help students’ avoid victimization. Role-play.
III. Define difference between being assertive and aggressive. Role-play.

IV. Define difference between tattling and telling.

**Lesson 3: Empathy and Inclusion**

I. Introduce concept of empathy.

II. Skit

III. Discuss empathy for students outside of own groups or cliques.

IV. Explore formation of groups/cliques. Group activity.

**Lesson 4: Taking a Stand**

I. Activity: Walk a mile in someone else’s shoes experiment.

II. Review of previous lesson.

III. Introduce and explore the concept and challenges of taking a stand. Role-plays.

IV. Video: ABC News: The In Crowd and Social Cruelty. (Permission granted to school district by ABC News for classroom use).

**Lesson 5: Creative Problem Solving**


II. Review taking a stand by identifying low, medium, and high-risk behaviors.

III. Program review

IV. Posttest

V. Discussion of program/curriculum effectiveness.

**Data Analysis**

Thirty-one seventh grade students participated in this curriculum, of which 60% were girls and 40% boys. Over 70% of the students in the class were white, while 20% were Asian, and 4% Hispanic. As mentioned previously, a pre and post assessment was performed to
determine the extent of bullying, types of victimization, levels of distress, and interventions attempted. This assessment was the method used to determine curriculum effectiveness.

To determine the overall extent of bullying, the assessment asked students to respond to the number of times they were either a victim or bystander to various bullying activities, along with the number of times per week these events took place. Pretest results revealed that 66% of the students reported never being a victim to bullying activities, while posttest results showed that 68% have never been a victim. During the pretest, 20% reported being bullied less than one time per week. Posttest results indicated that only 19% reported being bullied one time per week. The largest decline in victimization occurred with students who reported being bullied at least one time per week. During the pretest, 23% reported being bullied one time per week, whereas, posttest results showed a decline to 12%. Only one student reported being bullied five or more times per week during the pretest and posttest. The majority of victims during the pre and posttest reported not being included as the major type of bullying taking place.

*Question:* *During the past month other students bullied (hit, pushed, said mean things, etc.) me*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRETEST</th>
<th>POSTTEST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 time/week</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 time/week</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 times/week</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ times/week</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked the number of times students were witnesses to bullying during the past month, 31% reported during the pretest as never observing bullying, while posttest results show that 35% never have observed bullying. Seventeen percent of students witnessed bullying between 2-4
times per week during the pretest while only 10% reported during the posttest. Those that witnessed bullying five or more times per week include 7% during the pretest and 4% during the posttest. Students reported during the pre and posttest that seeing someone being threatened was the most frequent form of bullying observed.

*Question: Have you seen this happen (hitting, pushing, saying mean things, etc.)?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRETEST</th>
<th>POSTTEST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 time/week</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 time/week</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 times/week</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ times/week</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For both victims and bystanders, both pretests and posttests show the hallway and lunchroom as the most frequent place for bullying activity.

To discover how bullying is handled by students, the assessment presented a variety of ways of handling bullying, either as a victim or a bystander, and then asked students to check all that apply. During the pretest, 28% of victims responded by getting help either from an adult, another student, or a parent. Posttest results show that 21% of students reported seeking help. The majority of students reported during the pre and posttest as either avoiding or walking away when being bullied. The most interesting finding is that 13% during the pretest and 18% during the posttest reported using bullying tactics such as hitting, kicking, or saying mean things as a way of handling being bullied.
Question: (If victim) What did you do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRETEST</th>
<th>POSTTEST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Got help</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walked away</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoided the person</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit, kicked, or said mean things</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did nothing</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of those observing bullying behavior, during the pretest over half said that they helped the person being bullied, while only 44% said they helped in the posttest. The most disturbing finding was that the number of students who reported doing nothing when observing bullying actually increased from the pretest to posttest, increasing from 34% to 36% respectively.

Question: (If bystander) What did you do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRETEST</th>
<th>POSTTEST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helped the person</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got help</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stood up to the person bullying</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did nothing</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who’s the bully? Pretest results reveal that of the students who reported being victims to bullying, 42% report being bullied by a group, however, that number decreases to 29% during the posttest. Victims also report that girls bully more frequently than boys, whereas, witnesses to bullying report that boys bully more than girls. However, for both the victim and bystander, bullies are most often in the form of a group rather than an individual, though posttest results reveal a decline in group bullying. There was a marked increase in the percentage of bystanders
reporting boys as doing the bullying. Pretest and posttest results show an increase from 17% to over 40% respectively.

**Question: (If bystander) Who was it done by?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRETEST</th>
<th>POSTTEST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who do the students tell when being bullied or observing bullying behavior? For victims, the majority of students told a friend or a parent during the pre and posttest, however the number of students telling a parent declined from 30% to 20% from pre to posttest. Another disturbing finding is that the number of victims telling no one actually increased from 9% during the pretest to 17% during posttest.

**Question: (Victims) Who did you tell?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PRETEST</th>
<th>POSTTEST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult at school</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As with victims, the majority of bystanders also either tell a friend or no one. These numbers remained stable from pre to posttest. Bystanders tell parents less frequently than victims. Of most interest is that from pretest to posttest, no students who witnessed bullying reported this behavior to an adult other than a parent.
Overall, how safe do students feel at Mt. Olive Middle School? Over half of the students reported during the pretest as feeling kind of safe to very safe at school. During the posttest, this figure jumps to 89%. The number of students who feel unsafe and scared at school remained stable from pre to posttest, representing 12% of the students. Nine students reported feeling very unsafe and scared during the pretest, whereas during the posttest only one student reported feeling very unsafe and scared. During the pretest and posttest, going to and from school was the place reported as causing the most amount of distress for students. The bathroom and locker room were also places students’ reported feeling unsafe and scared.

Implications

Even before the bullying curriculum was implemented, the majority of Mt. Olive Middle School students never experienced being bullied, as evidenced by pretest results. Research indicates that around 8% of students report being bullied at least one time per week. The percentage of Mt. Olive Middle School students reporting the same was much higher than research reports initially, however, posttest results show the curriculum did have a positive effect on students, as fewer reported being bullied. What accounted for this decline? When looking at the components of the curriculum, some time was spent on instructing students in ways not to become an intended victim of bullying. Several role-plays were performed, along with videos showing the various techniques. Though it is difficult to determine if this was the sole reason for the decrease, the data does suggest that the curriculum did have an effect on victimization.

After implementing a bullying curriculum, one might predict that reports of bullying by the bystanders would increase due to the increased awareness of bullying. This was not the case with Mt. Olive Middle School, as data showed an overall decrease in the reporting from bystanders. This does correspond, however, with the data that shows an increase of students who
tell no one when witnessing bullying behavior. One reason for this increase in non-reporting could be that many of the students during class revealed their reluctance in reporting was due to the fear of retaliation by the bully.

Victims reported that girls bullied more frequently than boys and that the way they did this was by not including others. Bystanders, however, reported boys as bullying more by threatening to hurt someone. This could be due in part because the bullying behavior of girls is more covert, making it more difficult for anyone other than the victim to see. Boys, on the other hand, use physical aggression, which is more readily seen by others. The increase in witnesses to bullying behavior by boys could be due in part by the fact that over the course of the curriculum students are made aware of what specifically constitutes bullying behavior. Thus, after the program more students were able to determine the behavior they were witnessing was actually bullying.

During the curriculum students were instructed in the various ways to handle bullying behavior, should they become a victim. Special emphasis was given to distinguishing between assertive and aggressive behavior, with the preference for the former. However, the data shows that instead of aggressive behavior decreasing in response to bullying, it actually increased. At the conclusion of the curriculum students were asked to verbally report what they felt worked and what didn’t work. Several students mentioned that the techniques given were “stupid” and they didn’t feel they were effective. For future programs, techniques should be provided that are more realistic and appropriate for the developmental level of students.

The curriculum focuses on empowering the “caring majority”, by empowering the bystanders. This is done through lessons in empathy and inclusion as well as providing ways to help others being bullied. So, it was surprising to discover that not only did the number of
students helping others who are being bullied decrease, but also the number of students reporting doing nothing in response to witnessing bullying increased. It is unclear as to why these changes would occur during the course of the curriculum. One speculation is that because bullying reaches its peak during seventh grade, it would take more than a five-week curriculum to change patterns of behavior.

**Limitations**

As mentioned above, it is very difficult to change behavior of one class over the course of five weeks. In order to effect overall change, it would be important to make this a school wide curriculum, implemented over the course of the year. In addition, it would be important to include classroom teachers in the instruction of such a curriculum. Students indicated that the curriculum needed more games, activities, and role-plays and less straight instruction and worksheets.

**Conclusion**

The research on the importance of bully prevention programs is encouraging. Schools need to develop a systemic approach to bully proofing their schools rather than piecemeal programs. Though beneficial in certain areas, the overall impact of this action research project was not clearly demonstrated, however, it did show an increase in the awareness of bullying. And, awareness is the beginning of change.
References


