

Maintaining Anti-Bullying Program's Effects Through Middle School by Implementing Booster Sessions: A Research Prospectus

Abstract

This research prospectus introduces a proposed study of the effects of booster sessions on a previously introduced anti-bullying program. Bullying is a major problem in the United States that can affect students' academic achievement. A review conducted of the anti-bullying program literature found that many studies implementation of a maintenance program to maintain program effects. A longitudinal, QUAL-Quan study is proposed that would introduce booster sessions to elementary school that have already implemented the Steps to Respect (STR) anti-bullying program. The control group would receive no treatment. The treatment group would receive the booster sessions. Data would be collected bi-yearly for seven years, until the students reach eighth grade. The results of this study would suggest whether or not booster sessions had any impact on students' retention of anti-bullying behavior.

Keywords: bullying, anti-bullying program, booster sessions, longitudinal, QUAL-Quan, symbolic modeling

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Introduction

Students deserve to belong to a school community that promotes a learning environment conducive to all students. This is not possible for many students because they are experiencing bullying. Bullying is an ever-present problem at every level of school and creates an unfriendly, hostile school environment. The key elements that define bullying are a power imbalance between students, the intent to harm (which includes behavior such as physical aggression, verbal insults, rumors or gossip, threats of exclusion), and is a repeated activity. Both the victims of bullying and the bullies are adversely affected in aspects of their academic and social lives as a result of bullying behavior. Bullying can negatively affect a student's academic achievement, increase school avoidance, and create discordant relations between peers and between teachers and students. Bullying can also create negative psychological, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for students (Brown et al., 2011; Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). Bullying perpetuates more bullying and creates a never-ending cycle of hostility that is unlikely to stop without the implementation of an effective anti-bullying program.

Finding an effective anti-bullying program that produces short-term results is not difficult but finding an anti-bullying program that maintains its effects in the long-term is difficult. Some anti-bullying interventions used in elementary schools effectively reduce bullying behavior in students but the effects of the interventions wear off over time and bullying behavior increases again. It could be helpful to implement a follow-up system, or booster sessions, that works with the anti-bullying program to remind students of what they previously learned from the anti-bullying program. This could create longer-lasting anti-bullying results and help students receive

the best education possible.

This proposed study was inspired by a perceived bullying problem occurring in the United States. Bullying seems to be a growing problem and is commonly referred to as an “epidemic”. Bullying among peers not only affects a child’s social life but can also affect their academic performance. Students who are bullied seem to have a harder time focusing and retaining information. It makes sense to assume that bullied students have a higher tendency toward school-avoidance, which can affect their academic achievement. The literature supports the idea that bullying can affect a student’s academic performance. Showing evidence of a bullying “epidemic” is hard to determine, though. Records of bullying have not always been stringently kept. For the purpose of this study, it is unimportant whether or not there has been an increase in bullying. It is only important that bullying is present and that it can be harmful to students.

The expectations of this study are based on the social cognitive theory. The students must learn that there are behavioral expectations for them and that there will be consequences if they do not follow those expectations. If the students are taught correctly they will have developed mental processes regarding bullying that will help them choose not to bully and to help stop bullying when they see it happening.

In social cognitive theory, *learning* is “a change in mental processes that creates the capacity to demonstrate different behaviors” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013, p. 311). Eggen and Kauchak (2013) also note that learning might not result in immediate behavioral change. This is why, in addition to an anti-bullying program, booster session are so important to a true change in behavior. The one-time anti-bullying program does not create lasting effects because the students

need more time to change their mental processes regarding bullying. Being taught how to react to bullying in different situation will prepare them to deal with any bullying situation if they ever face it.

Modeling is an important concept in social cognitive theory and is the basis of the booster sessions. It is defined by Eggen & Kauchak (2013) as “behavioral, cognitive, and affective changes deriving from observing the actions of others” (p. 312). Anti-bullying behaviors can be learned through different forms of modeling. A live teacher in a classroom showing the students how to do something is *direct modeling*; the characters in a storybook or a video reacting to different bullying situations can be used in *symbolic modeling*; and the students will be able to use *synthesized modeling* by combining these observed behaviors in new situations. *Vicarious learning*, or learning by watching others, is important in social cognitive theory as it is for this study because bullying is harmful and should not be directly demonstrated on students. Symbolic modeling is useful in vicarious learning and is heavily utilized in this study.

Social cognitive theory also emphasizes the use of *feedback*. Feedback, or the information teachers provide to students that helps them determine the correct knowledge, is important to the learning process because it reinforces correct behaviors and helps ingrain the concepts into the students’ way of thinking (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013). The booster sessions act as feedback to the initial anti-bullying program. They will help reinforce the concepts learned during the program.

The main research question this study aims to answer is: How do booster sessions for an anti-bullying program affect the maintenance of anti-bullying behavior? Other questions include: What are other effects of the booster sessions? Do bullying behaviors decrease even more over

time? Do caring social behaviors increase? What happens to the control groups when no booster sessions are given? The study also aims to determine if there could be other factors, such as SES status, besides the booster sessions that affect the maintenance of anti-bullying behavior. These factors could lead to further study about how to develop effective anti-bullying programs that will create the longest possible effects.

The data and information collected during this study will help answer the research questions posed. By determining how booster sessions, in addition to an anti-bullying program, affect the maintenance of anti-bullying behavior, schools will be closer to determining how to create the best learning environment for students. If the study shows that booster sessions help maintain the anti-bullying behaviors learned from an anti-bullying program, more schools could be willing to try this treatment. This could help the treatment become widely recognized and could help many schools effectively reduce bullying for the long-term. By answering these research questions, we will be able to determine, or at least come closer to determining, the best way to reduce bullying behavior. By reducing bullying behavior, students' academic achievement could be positively affected.

Literature Review

A review of related literature was conducted based on the following factors: definitions of bullying, types of bullying behaviors, effects of bullying on victims, measures of bullying, factors that influence bullying, anti-bullying programs, instruments used to measure bullying, and follow-up behavior modification programs. It is so important to discover ways to reduce bullying behavior because it has such a negative effect on students. Bullying and teasing were two predictive behaviors of the school drop-out rate in secondary schools in Virginia (Cornell,

Huang, Gregory & Fan, 2012). Bullying can result in negative psychological, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). Cook et al. (2010) also warn of the social-psychological costs that bullying can have and found that the negative effects it has on students mental health warrants the public's attention. All students need to feel safe and welcome in school to achieve academically, but bullying threatens the feelings of safety and belonging and does not create a positive school climate (Goldweber, Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2013).

Bullying behavior is defined by the creators of the Steps to Respect anti-bullying program as a power imbalance between students, the intent to harm (which includes behavior such as physical aggression, verbal insults, rumors or gossip, and threats of exclusion), and repetitive activity (cfchildren.org). Mean behavior is not always considered bullying but once a power imbalance occurs, the intention becomes hateful, and the behavior is repeated, the behavior can be classified as bullying. Depending on the behavior, the effects of bullying can be measured in many ways, including victimization, internalizing, and perception of school and bullying climate (Goldweber, Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2013; Cornell, Huang, Gregory & Fan, 2012). Being able to define the most effective factors in successful anti-bullying programs is crucial in analyzing a study. Wagaman, Geiger, Bermudez-Persai & Hedberg (2012) put into effect a school-based disciplinary intervention system. Their findings show that only parent-teacher conferences and loss of privilege deterred students from bullying behavior. This study did not go into detail about the long-term effects of these disciplinary behaviors. Whitley, Smith & Vaillancourt (2013) suggest that teachers and other school staff have a great influence on the identification, prevention, and intervention of behavioral problems seen in children. Including

teachers and staff in an anti-bullying program could be beneficial because they are influential to a young student's behavior.

The Steps to Respect (STR), WITS, and Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention (SS-SSTP) programs all utilize some form of anti-bullying instruction at different levels of school. STR was implemented in third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms. Results indicated that after the program was completed there was an improved perception of school climate, there were lower levels of physical bullying perpetration, and fewer school bullying-related problems. Results showed that it is an effective intervention in elementary bullying prevention (Brown, Low, Smith, & Haggerty, 2011). This program was successful in many ways but, as other studies have shown, perhaps it could be more successful if it was implemented in the primary grades (Bundy, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2011). The WITS program uses storybooks with peer-victimization themes and corresponding lesson plans (Hoglund, Hosan, & Leadbeater, 2012). Using the storybooks as a modeling technique follows the concept of *modeling* as seen in the social cognitive theory and was successful in getting the children to understand the importance of being kind to their peers (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013). The final program, SS-SSTP is a one year, 6th grade middle school program that focuses on reducing youth violence including peer aggression and peer victimization. The program goes over problem-solving and social emotional learning skills, including empathy, communication, bully prevention (Espelage, Low, Polanin & Brown, 2013). The program reduced bullying behavior by 42% but found the results did not last a long time. Booster sessions are suggested to maintain program results (Espelage, Low, Polanin & Brown, 2013; Bundy, McWhirter & McWhirter, 2011). Having a consistent reminder will help the students assimilate the behaviors into their minds.

Instruments used to measure different aspects of bullying include the Social Experience Questionnaire (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) which measures reports on physical and relational victimization as well as caring social behaviors, the Relationship Questionnaire (Schultz, Selman, & LaRusso, 2003) which was designed to determine a student's interpersonal negotiation strategies in made-up, bullying situations, and student-reported and teacher-reported measures (Hoglund, Hosan, & Leadbeater, 2012). Measuring physical and relational bullying covers all of the types of bullying as discussed earlier. Including a measure of caring behavior is important to have because the programs reviewed might not only discourage bullying behavior, but could also encourage caring behavior. Having student-reports is important in a study about bullying because it affects the way a student feels. It is not possible to measure a person's thoughts without asking them to describe them. Teacher-reports are also crucial when studying students because they can get closer to the students than any outside observer could. They are with the students every day of the school year and get to know them very well.

General Research Plan

The study will have control groups and treatment groups. The treatment being given is a series of booster sessions for the pre-administered Steps to Respect Program (STR) that the participants took part in the previous year as kindergarteners. The booster session reinforce the lessons about anti-bullying that were presented in STR. A booster session is a bi-weekly, 30-minute lesson on how to deal with bullying and how to respect and help your peers. The booster session can be a short video with a class activity and discussion, or a book that the teacher reads aloud to the students that leads to a class activity and discussion. The videos and books are part of the STR program and are easily incorporated into a busy school year. They do not take a lot of time out of the class or energy of the teacher.

The study will be a QUAL-Quan mixed methods study. The most important factor in bullying is how it makes a student feel. This is best measured by student self-reporting. Teachers will also be asked for their feedback because they are closer to the students than anyone else at the school and are able to observe the students all school-year long. The office staff, administrators, and special education teachers will also be asked to participate in data collection to get a well-rounded picture of the school climate. The students will be interviewed about their feelings toward bullying, being bullied, and what kinds of bullying and caring behavior they see at school. They will also participate in the Social Experience Questionnaire (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) at the end of the second quarter and the end of the school year each year. Around the same time they will also participate in a modified version of the Relationship Questionnaire (Schultz, Selman, & LaRusso, 2003). Teachers and staff will also be interviewed about bullying behaviors they see and their perception of school climate.

A stratified-random sample will be taken from elementary schools in the Mid-Atlantic area. Six schools will be chosen that have different varieties of students. The schools will start in kindergarten and go through but not past sixth grade. Each school will have had the STR anti-bullying program implemented in their kindergarten classes the year before the study starts. The schools will be suburban, with a wide range of ethnic/racial groups represented. No one ethnic/racial group will comprise more than 30% of the student population. Two of these schools will have 85% or more of their students receiving free or reduced lunch, two will have between 40-50% receiving free or reduced lunch, and two will have less than 5% of their students receiving free or reduced lunch. One out of each of the two schools at the three levels of free or reduced lunch will be randomly chosen for the control group and for the treatment group. This will allow for a comparison of the three different levels, low, middle, and high, of socioeconomic

status (SES). Adding the SES factor is a way for the study to determine if there could be outside factors affecting the school climate besides the anti-bullying instruction and booster sessions. The control group will not receive any booster sessions while the treatment group will receive the booster sessions. The study will follow the first grade students, who were introduced to the STR program in kindergarten the previous year, through seventh grade, looking to see if there is a difference in having the booster sessions or not based on bullying-behavior and perceptions of school climate.

Throughout the seven years, the students, teachers, and school staff will be asked to report their perceptions of bullying and school climate. This will be done by interviews and surveys. For the students, only interviews will be used in first and second grade. Their reading and writing skills are still developing so speaking their opinions might be more beneficial and informative than writing them would be. In third through seventh grade the students will continue to be interviewed but they will also participate in the Social Experience Questionnaire developed by Nicki R. Crick & Jennifer K. Grotpeter (1996). This instrument was created for public school students age 9-11. It is a self-report measure that reports on physical and relational victimization as well as caring social behaviors. For the purpose of this study, it will be used one year beyond the creators' age recommendation for the purpose of consistency in data collection. This questionnaire will be helpful for this study because it not only measures bullying behavior but also caring behavior. It will be beneficial in measuring not only the booster sessions and the amount of bullying behavior but also on the increase or decrease of caring behavior. They will also participate in our modified Relationship Questionnaire (Schultz, Selman, & LaRusso, 2003) which is designed to determine a student's interpersonal negotiation strategies in made-up situations. A series of bullying stories with four possible reaction choices will be given to the

student. The choices will represent help seeking, direct intervention, passive observation, or joining in bullying activity. The teachers and staff will be interviewed around the time that these surveys are presented to students to determine their feelings regarding bullying at the school.

To ensure the data collected are of high value interpretive validity and descriptive validity will be highly considered. Interpretive Validity could be hard to ensure because the teachers and students are being asked to self-report. Without inter-observer accuracy it will be hard to ensure that the reports received are accurate. To remedy this and give the study more interpretive validity, a designated observer from the research team will be in the classroom two days a month during the school years. The observer will observe each of the participating classes at each school during recess on one day and one hour of class on the second day. The observer will note the number of times any bullying behavior is demonstrated by students by using a behavioral check-list. The check-list will include behaviors such as: physical aggression, verbal insults, rumors or gossip, and threats of exclusion. The observer will also take brief field notes regarding their opinion about the school climate. To ensure more descriptive validity, the designated observers' observations in the school and classrooms will be compared to the students' and teachers' descriptions and feelings regarding the school and classroom climate.

The data from the control groups and the intervention groups will be norm-referenced and self-referenced. The student-surveys will be coded by key factors, such as bullying or caring behaviors and reactions to the bullying stories. To be norm-referenced the data from the control groups and from the intervention groups will be compared to look for patterns happening over time. The data from the similar SES schools will be compared, too. This will help determine whether factors of SES affect the intervention. The aforementioned data and the student interviews will be used as a self-referenced scoring approach to compare the changes in bullying

behavior and perceptions of school climate over time. The same will be done for the teacher and staff interviews. The interviews will also be coded for key terms relating to bullying behaviors (psychological, emotional, and behavioral) and terms relating to changes in amount (increase, decrease).

Anticipated Difficulties and Benefits

To be fair, the treatment will have to be available for the control group after the study is completed. This could be difficult because the booster sessions are designed for elementary-age students. By the time the study is over and the control group has the opportunity to participate in the treatment they will be in eighth grade. Some of the students might not want to participate at this point. The option will be given to the control group to participate in a modified version of the booster sessions but participation will be optional. This stipulation will be made known at the beginning of the study as parental consent is being asked for.

The STR program is gaining recognition but it might be difficult to find schools that match our demographic requirements as well as our STR participation requirement. If it proves to be impossible to find schools to match the study requirements, the region in which we search for schools can be widened to East Coast elementary schools. We could also look into adding an additional year to the beginning of our study to have schools implement the STR program before we start the study.

Students, teachers, and school staff can benefit from this research. A better knowledge and new insights on how to reduce school bullying will be gained. Schools will be able to implement anti-bullying programs and learn how to better maintain the positive effects of the anti-bullying program. With reduced bullying, schools could see an increase in academic

achievement, decrease in school avoidance, and see better relationships between peers and between teachers and students. The negative psychological, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for students that bullying creates could be alleviated. These positive effects could be applied to all students, including the victims of bullying and the bullies. Since bullying is a cycle, by reducing it at one point, it is being reduced for the future as well. The cycle is interrupted and bullying will not be perpetuated as much in future students.

If the treatment does prove to be beneficial to students, the students from the control group could be disturbed. As described above as a possible pitfall of this study, the students in the control group will not have the option to receive the treatment until they are in eighth grade. The literature, as reviewed above, has shown that anti-bullying programs are more effective if introduced at an earlier age. The effects of anti-bullying treatments have not proven to be as effective after primary school. The students who receive the treatment after seventh grade, in this case, might not benefit as much as the treatment group because of the difference in age when treatment is received. Having the treatment after seventh grade could disturb the control group even more due to the increased academic intensity that they could start to experience. High school students usually face a busier schedule as their school work load increases and they are preparing for life after high school. High schools might not have time to fit the booster sessions in the same way the elementary school did.

Conclusion

This study will introduce booster sessions to a treatment group to determine if they could be beneficial to the maintenance of anti-bullying behavior learned from an anti-bullying program. It will also determine if there could be any other factors that affect the maintenance of

these behaviors. A review of the literature has suggested that younger students might be more susceptible to anti-bullying programs. It is suggested that they will retain more of the anti-bullying behaviors learned during an anti-bullying program through middle school if there are follow-up sessions throughout elementary school.

Bullying is a harmful problem that affects many students' academic performance. Many anti-bullying programs are effective but their effects wear off over time. Determining a way to increase the retention of these effects will help reduce bullying behavior and increase positive school climates in which students will be able to thrive in academically. Booster sessions have been shown to improve the retention of these effects and should be studied more to help solve the bullying problem.

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