The Effects of an Empathy Building Program on Bullying Behavior

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Abstract

This article discusses the development, implementation, and effects of a middle school empathy building program that was designed to reduce bullying behavior. Results show that participants in the intervention group reported engaging in significantly less bullying behavior as compared to the control group, and the program was particularly effective for the female participants.

The Effects of an Empathy Building Program on Bullying Behavior

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that more than one fourth of the 12-18 year old U.S. students surveyed indicated they had been bullied at school during the previous 6 months (Dinkes, Forrest-Cataldi, & Lin-Kelly, 2007). According to the survey of Nansel et al. (2001) involving more than 15,000 sixth through tenth grade students across the United States, almost 30% of the participating students reported involvement with bullying, either as a victim (10%), a bully (13%), and 6% as both. Bullying behavior begins slowly in elementary school, peaks in middle school, and then decreases significantly but never disappears (U.S Department of Education, 2003). Bullying is a continuous, relentless activity and is a learned behavior which can be identified, unlearned, and changed (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). Bullying is especially painful in the middle school years because of the school building transitions, awkward physical growth of students, and increased interest in peer relationships, which are most important and fragile at this time (Pepler et al., 2006). Unfortunately, few schools escape bullying (Bulach, Fulbright & Williams, 2003; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Schaefer, 2007).

Sullivan's (2000) definition of bullying captures the consensus of the many definitions that have emerged: "Bullying is a conscious and willful act of aggression and/or manipulation by one or more people against another person or people" (p. 9). Bullying behaviors can include verbal threats, harassment, psychological intimidation, teasing, taunting, annoying, spreading rumors, striking, slapping, pushing, shoving, and instigating fights (Newman, Horne, & Bartolomucci, 2000; Osler, 2006). Bullying behaviors in person or via the internet can threaten the physical and emotional safety of

school communities and often result in violence (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). Bulach, Fulbright, and Williams (2003) asserted that bullying behavior has played a primary role in all recent school shootings. Pepler et al. (2006) purported that bullying is a relationship problem starting in childhood which sets the stage for much of the violence throughout our society.

Successful bully prevention programs have demonstrated that a systems approach with teachers and peer support significantly alleviated bullying behaviors (e.g., Dake, Price & Telljohann, 2003; Natvig, Albrektsen & Qvarnstrom, 2001; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). In addition, literature supports the notion that students and teachers believe they need to work together to effectively address bullying behaviors (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Crothers, Kolbert, & Barker, 2006). Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, and Sarvela (2002) have shown that student attitudes toward bullying can significantly predict involvement in bullying prevention.

Craig and Pepler (2003) demonstrated that 75-80% of students are relatively uninvolved in bullying. Because uninvolved students are the vast majority of the school population, numerous researchers are reporting that it may make most sense to focus on the uninvolved students to develop a model of empathy in order to empower youths to apply helping and pro-social attitudes in everyday life (e.g., Genzale, 2008; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Menesini, Codescasa, Benelli & Cowie, 2003). In addition, according to Gamliel, Hoover, Daughtry, and Imbra (2003), middle school students believe aggressive retaliation is the least desirable method by which to cope with bullying behavior, and instead they would rather work through the problems with teacher support.

Background

Teachers, counselors and administrators identified an increase in bullying problems at an average size Rocky Mountain middle school with daily occurrences of students in the hall pushing smaller students, threatening them, knocking books out of their hands, etc. The bullies were usually able to avoid adult observers, or when apprehended, falsely claim they were just fooling around. The students being bullied went along with the excuses for fear of retaliation from the bullies.

To address the school bullying, the first researcher, a professional school counselor in the school, decided the best approach would be to take the lead regarding a systems approach to the bullying problem in order to team teachers and students to effectively address the bullying behavior (Crothers et al., 2006; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). Based upon cited research and materials (Crothers et al., 2007; Gini et al., 2008), the researchers developed an empathy building bully-prevention program to be delivered by the counselor and several teachers who volunteered to attempt to change attitudes and the bullying behavior in the school. Chosen curriculum materials designed to enhance empathy and meaningful relationships included *The Bully Free Classroom* (Beane, 2005), a bully prevention and user-friendly source, *The Bullying Prevention Handbook* (Hoover & Oliver, 2008), which integrates research, theory, coping strategies, and prevention tools. Also included was an audio recording (Goldstein, 2003) to illustrate the emotional consequences of bullying, and "Stories About Bullying" (Bully B'Ware, 2002) to read to students in order to build their sense of empathy. Thus, the research question for this study was: Does an empathy building program for middle school students affect bullying behavior?

Method

Participants

The study sample consisted of 172 seventh and eighth grade students, ages 13 and 14, all from the same middle school. Of the 172 participants, 67% (n=116) were girls and 33% (n=56) were boys, of whom 3.5% were Hispanic, 1% African American and the remaining Caucasian. The experimental group consisted of 58 girls and 28 boys (n=86), and the control group also consisted of 58 girls and 28 boys (n=86). Students in the experimental group were in seven seventh and eighth grade classes taught by four interested teachers, two men and two women, who volunteered to be part of the effort to effect change. Regarding the control group, Julia entered the seventh and eighth grade study hall classes, randomly selected students, asked if they would be willing to participate in the study by completing the paper/pencil survey on bully proofing (described later) and continued until she achieved an n of 86 in order to try to match the number and gender of the experimental group. The control group attended their regularly scheduled classes with normal academic content and learning activities. With institutional permission in place, the program curriculum was made available and explained in a newsletter to the parents who were offered opt-out forms if they did not want their children to participate in the empathy building-bully prevention program. All allowed participation.

Instrument

Beane's "Are You a Bully" (1999) 12-question survey was used as a post empathy building test. In this study, the overall alpha reliability coefficient for the survey instrument was 0.781, which well exceeded Nunnally's (1978) minimum criteria of at

least 0.70 to demonstrate internal consistency. Based on reliability standards set by Springer, Abell, and Nugent (2002), the reliability for this scale is "very good" and thus was used for the study.

The survey asks for self-reported student bullying behavior. Sample questions included: "When you play a game or sport, do you always have to be the winner?" "Do you want other students to think you're the toughest kid in school?" "Do you blame other people for things that go wrong in your life?" The survey scores non-bullying behavior as 2 points and bullying behavior as 1 point, with a maximum possible score of 24 and minimum of 12. Thus, a higher total score indicates fewer bullying behaviors.

Research Design

The researchers implemented a quasi-experimental post test research design using Gender and Group as covariates. The researchers conducted a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) of the post test scores on the "Are you a Bully?" scale, and an ANOVA was used to find the effect of treatment on male and female participants.

Procedures

The four teachers reserved class time for Julia to implement the seven-week program by going into their seven classrooms (five Life Skills classes, one Intermediate Spanish class, & one Reading Lab) one day each week for 15 minutes at the beginning of each of the classes to deliver the day's planned activity. Weekly, Julia gave the four teachers a written copy of the program activity (Please see Appendix A) and discussed the goal of the activity and the teachers' responsibility for follow-up in the classroom.

Each of the four teachers remained in the classroom while Julia presented the day's empathy building activity tied to an outcome of reducing bullying behavior. When

Julia left, each teacher expanded upon the theme of the day for another 10 minutes by further personalizing Julia's lesson of the day and leading discussions related to strategies to reduce bullying behavior in the school.

Program Summary

Drawing upon the literature and personal experience specific to the school, Julia created the program goals, activities and discussion questions (Please see Appendix A for the complete program) to help students and teachers team together to:

- Become aware of bullying behavior in the school

- Enhance personal connections and build empathy

- Understand how bullying can hurt everyone

- Set attitudes and expectations for positive change

- Accept personal responsibility within the system of care

- Strategize possible actions to stop bullying

- Support each other to take action

Results

The research question for this study was: Does the empathy building program for middle school students affect their bullying behavior? Shown in Table 1 is a two-way analysis of covariance of post test scores on the "Are you a Bully?" scale. There is a significant difference between the experimental group posttest mean of 22.34 and control group posttest mean of 21.83, F= 6.86; $p < 0.05$. There is also a significant difference between female participants' posttest mean of 22.29 and male participants' posttest mean of 21.04, F= 13.02; $p < 0.05$. The effect size, Cohen's d= 0.41 is weak to

Table 1

Analysis of covariance of post test score between groups and gender

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	31.45	1	31.45	6.857*
Between Gender	59.71	1	59.71	13.018*
Groups * Gender	0.01	1	0.01	0.002
Within Group error term	770.58	168	4.59	
Total	832.36			

*$p<0.05$

moderate for the experimental and control groups. The effect size, Cohen's d= 0.60, is moderate to large for the gender variable.

As seen in Table 2, further analysis showed the female participants in the experimental group engaged in significantly less bullying behavior as compared to their counterparts in the control group ($p<0.05$). The effect size, Cohen's d, between means of the female participants in the experimental and control groups, was 0.39. Effect size shows that the magnitude of this intervention has a moderate (Cohen, 1988) effect for the female participants. Further analysis shows that there was no significant difference on the "Are You a Bully" scale for the male participants in the experimental and control groups ($p>0.05$).

Thus, results show that the experimental group participants reported engaging in significantly less bullying behavior towards others as compared to the control group,

Table 2

Mean, standard deviation, and comparative statistics for the male and female participants in the experimental and control group after implementing the Empathy Building Bully Prevention Program

	N	Mean	SD	F
Male				
Control	28	20.57	1.81	3.624
Experimental	28	21.50	1.84	
Female				
Control	58	21.85	2.86	4.499*
Experimental	58	22.74	1.47	

*p<0.05

and the Empathy Building-Bully Prevention Program was particularly effective for the female participants.

Discussion

The seven-week empathy-building program had statistically positive effects. The experimental group reported engaging in less bullying behavior towards others than reported by the control students. There was more of an effect for girls than boys. One explanation for the gender-specific results is that when girls realize what behaviors are considered as bullying, an empathy building program may appeal to their inherent orientation toward relationships (Gruber & Finerean, 2007). Thus, girls may be more open to changes regarding relationships and more sensitive to their feelings regarding their friends and others.

Another explanation is that bullying behaviors may be more in-keeping with the traditional male stereotype (Pepler et al., 2006). Thus, boys may be more willing to report bullying behaviors in order to maintain their male image. Meanwhile, as girls realize that creating rumor, isolation, and humiliation are identified as bullying behaviors, they may choose to underreport their actual bully behavior. In addition, as students begin to realize the negative emotional impact of bullying behavior and possible institutional consequences for being a bully, their empathy may increase, which in turn may result in an increase in social awareness that causes the students to underreport any bullying thoughts and behavior.

Therefore, in future studies, it may be worthwhile to explore different ways to reach boys and girls in order to successfully address interactional styles of direct and indirect aggression by which to establish power and control over others. Perhaps same-sex groups where middle school students may speak more openly may be more effective in acknowledging and decreasing bullying behaviors.

There are several limitations of this study. First, there was no long-term assessment conducted to gauge if the decrease in bullying behavior continued or if bullying started up again at some point. Second, it may have been helpful for the researchers to have measured *observed bullying*, in addition to self-reported bullying, in order to determine the most accurate interpretation of the statistical results of the study. However, in this school, the administrators and teachers anecdotally reported a continued lessening of bullying behavior with increased student and teacher strategic action conducted against bullying throughout the school year. Third, collecting data of a

pre/post test with the experimental and control groups would have been a more robust research design.

Despite these limitations, the study may offer insightful findings for school counselors whose responsibilities include the facilitation of the academic success of all students while supporting their career and social/emotional development (American School Counselor Association, 2005). The researchers of the present study acknowledge research advocating a whole-school anti-bullying approach (Dake et al., 2003). Yet, it may be beneficial to explore other strategies that are more accessible and applicable. A whole-school approach can be difficult to implement in a large school setting, especially at the middle school level, because of logistics and accessibility to students as well as the possible problems of limited staff support.

On the other hand, school counselors may have more success in implementing small-scale efficient programs which may be more likely to be accepted by staff and administrators since such programs will not interfere for an extended period with class time, which often is needed to focus on standards and institutional benchmarks. Professional school counselors may want to carefully consider the impact of time in planning service delivery in order to demonstrate program effectiveness. Intense, brief sessions with the counselor may provide the impact needed for middle school students and thus be more powerful than drawn out sessions.

Of special note in this study is how the impact of a counselor's intentional message and experiential activities during a brief but intense period of time, while accompanied by thoughtful follow-up from teachers, can make a significant difference. Teaming with interested classroom teachers for a few weeks of lively interaction can

produce a dramatic impact. Counselors can collaborate with teachers to enhance

students' pro-social behavior and healthy development by means of brief, meaningful

activities as part of a developmental school counseling program.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Current research indicates that bullying is a serious problem. It can affect

students in every aspect of their lives and can even keep them from coming to school

(Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). The research cited in this article reveals that almost

30 percent of students either bully others, are bullied by others, or both, on a daily

basis. Importantly, research also finds that the majority of students are not affected as

often by bullying, and it is this group that is the focus of this study. This group of

students has the potential power and ability to help bullied students defend themselves

as well as to help the bullies stop the bullying behavior. By building confidence and

empathy in this group, along with counselor and teacher assistance, schools can

decrease bullying behavior regarding both the victim as well as the perpetrator.

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Description of the Empathy Building Program

Session #1. Goal. To increase understanding and awareness of bullying behavior.

During this introductory session, Julia explained the empathy building program as well as identified specific behaviors that are defined as bullying. Next, the students discussed bullying they had observed or heard about in school as well as the incidences of cyber bullying. Then, in order to increase students' awareness of bullying behaviors, the classroom teachers asked the class, "What do you think about bullying in our school?" Focused discussions followed.

Session #2. Goal. To make connections between the students in the stories and students they know, or perhaps even themselves, in a way to build empathy.

The students listened to 6 brief stories selected from "Stories About Bullying" (Bully B'Ware, 2007) that seemed especially appropriate to the school community and which were read aloud by the counselor. They then responded to the stories in a free-write activity which was followed by a discussion in which they were encouraged to focus on the following:

1. What is your reaction to these stories?

2. Do these stories remind you of anyone/anything?

Students were challenged to think critically about the link between the way they think and the resulting behavior, as well as the emotions involved with that linkage.

Session #3. Goal. To increase awareness and understanding of bullying behavior and how that behavior can be hurtful to individuals as well as entire communities.

The students were asked to verbally define what a gossiper is and then to offer their ideas to the entire class about how gossip can be hurtful to victims of the gossip.

Next, the counselor read aloud a parable (Cicero, 1967) and asked the students to draw a picture of a gossiper, using markers and colored paper as they listened to the following story.

<center>The Gossiper</center>

A woman repeated a bit of gossip about a neighbor. Within a few days the whole community knew the story. The person it concerned was deeply hurt and offended. Later, the woman responsible for spreading the rumor learned that it was completely untrue. She was very sorry and went to a wise old sage to find out what she could do to repair the damage.

"Go to the marketplace" he said, "and purchase a chicken, and have it killed. Then on your way home, pluck its feathers and drop them one by one along the road." Although surprised by this advice, the woman did what she was told.

The next day the wise man said, "Now, go and collect all those feathers you dropped yesterday and bring them back to me." The woman followed the same road, but to her dismay the wind had blown all the feathers away. After searching for hours, she returned with only three in her hand.

"You see," said the old sage, "it's easy to drop them, but it's impossible to get them back. So it is with gossip. It doesn't take much to spread a rumor, but once you do, you can never completely undo the wrong." (p. 13)

A discussion followed which included the prompts listed below:

1. What do you see or envision when you think of a gossiper?

2. What is your experience with gossip?

3. Is gossiping a type of bullying?

After the students came up with a visual image of a gossiper, they were encouraged to share their drawings and consider their perceptions of gossipers, and wonder if everyone is guilty of gossiping at one time or another. Next, the students considered probable emotions that might emerge as a result of gossip.

Session #4. Goal. To realize the long lasting impact of bullying behaviors, whether aggressive or covert, as well as the possibilities for change.

The students listened to an excerpt of an audiotape called "Allure of the Mean Friend" from *This American Life* (Goldstein, 2003). The recording focused on an adult man interviewing the now adult woman who had bullied him in the eighth grade. The interviewer and his former bully discuss:

1. Her power as a bully

2. Mean things she had done to him and his friends when they were in the 8th grade

3. How she felt when she was engaging in mean behavior

4. How she feels as an adult about being mean when she was young

5. How her behavior may have changed as an adult

The students explored several themes in this recording. First, people can be scarred lifelong by experiences they have early in life. Second, bully behavior can be very subtle and covert. Third, many bullies learn bullying behaviors from their families at home. Fourth, sometimes mean kids can be popular kids. Finally, mean kids can change into kind adults.

Session # 5. Goal. To understand personal responsibility and appreciate individuality.

The students participated in two experiential activities. In the first activity, a volunteer student came to the front of the room and squeezed some toothpaste onto a piece of paper, and then was asked to put the toothpaste back into the tube. Of course, the student was not able to put the toothpaste back into the tube when it was already out. The counselor engaged the students in a discussion about the toothpaste metaphor by means of the following questions.

1. If you say or do something unkind to someone else, can you ever really take it back?

2. How does this relate to the previous stories and the audiotape of last session?

For the next activity, the counselor created a large paper cutout of an animal of the counselor's choice. Julia found a rabbit picture, enlarged it and elongated the neck, then named him Larry the Long-Necked Rabbit. The counselor related the following magical story to the students.

1. Larry has a very long neck, much longer than anyone else. Most of Larry's friends like his long neck as he can see over everyone and also spot friends all the way to the end of the hall and they can spot him.

2. But Larry feels insecure about looking different from the other kids, so he goes to the neck doctor and has his neck reduced. At this time, a student volunteer comes to the front of the classroom with the counselor who folds Larry's neck in half and the student then cuts a little bit off the neck.

3. Because the activity is magic, the counselor ensures that Larry's neck and head stay intact despite it being cut. This same routine of Larry continuing to feel

insecure and the volunteer cutting off more and more of his neck continues until

Larry has a neck that is the same length as everyone else's neck.

4. Now no one really notices or recognizes Larry anymore because he looks like

   everyone else and can no longer do awesome things, such as see all the way

   down the hall.

The point of the story is that by changing what is unique and different to look/act

like everyone else, a person may no longer be noticed and appreciated in the same way

as before. The students were encouraged to appreciate and embrace their uniqueness

and resist the urge to change if and when they are teased or bullied. The counselor next

asked the students to share with a partner something unique or special about

themselves as well as ask their partner to share something unique about the other

person.

Session #6. Goal. To commit to action when observing bullying behaviors.

The students are read a story called "The Freshman," which is an anonymous

email relating a story about a severely bullied boy being helped by another more secure

boy on the day the bullied boy was going home to commit suicide.

<div align="center">The Freshman</div>

One day, when I was a freshman in high school, I saw a kid from my class was

walking home from school. His name was Kyle. It looked like he was carrying all of his

books. I thought to myself, "Why would anyone bring home all his books on a Friday?

He must really be a nerd." I had quite a weekend planned (parties and a football game

with my friend tomorrow afternoon), so I shrugged my shoulders and went on. As I was

walking, I saw a bunch of kids running toward hi. They ran at him, knocking all his books

out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt. His glasses went flying, and I

saw them land in the grass about ten feet from him. He looked up and I saw this terrible

sadness in his eyes. My heart went out to him. So, I jogged over to him as he crawled

around looking for his glasses, and I saw a tear in his eye. As I handed him his glasses,

I said, "Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives." He looked at me and said,

"Hey thanks!" There was a big smile on his face. It was one of those smiles that showed

real gratitude.

I helped him pick up his books, and asked him where he lived. As I turned out, he

lived near me, so I asked him why I had never seen him before. He said he had gone to

private school before now. I would have never hung out with a private school kid before.

We talked all the way home, and I carried his books. He turned out to be a pretty cool

kid. I asked him if he wanted to play football on Saturday with me and my friends. He

said yes. We hung all weekend and the more I got to know Kyle, the more I liked him.

And my friends thought the same of him.

Monday morning came, and there was Kyle with the huge stack of books again. I

stopped him and said, "Boy, you are gonna really build some serious muscles with this

pile of books everyday!" He just laughed and handed me half the books. Over the next

four years, Kyle and I became best friends. When we were seniors, we began to think

about college.

Kyle decided on Georgetown, and I was going to Duke. I knew that we would

always be friends, that the miles would never be a problem. He was going to be a

doctor, and I was going for business on a football scholarship. Kyle was valedictorian of

our class. I teased him all the time about being a nerd. He had to prepare a speck for

graduation. I was so glad it wasn't me having to get up there and speak.

Graduation day, I saw Kyle. He looked great. He was one of those guys that

really found himself during high school. He filled out and actually looked good in

glasses. He had more dates than me and all the girls loved him! Boy, sometimes I was

jealous. Today was one of those days. I could see that he was nervous about his

speech. So, I smacked him on the back and said, "Hey big guy, you'll be great!" He

looked at me with one of those looks (the really grateful one) and smiled. "Thanks," he

said.

As he started his speech, he cleared his throat and began. "Graduation is a time

to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years. Your parents, your

teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach…but mostly your friends. I am here to tell all of

you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell

you a story." I just looked at my friend with disbelief as he told the story of the first day

we met. He had planned to kill himself over the weekend. He talked of how he had

cleaned out his locker so his Mom wouldn't have to do it later and was carrying his stuff

home. He looked hard at me and gave me a little smile. "Thankfully, I was saved. My

friend saved me from doing the unspeakable." I heard the gasp go through the crowd as

this handsome, popular boy told us all about his weakest moment. I saw his Mom and

dad looking at me and smiling that same grateful smile. Not until that moment did I

realize its depth.

Never underestimate the power of your actions. With one small gesture you can change a person's life. For better or for worse, God puts us all in each other's lives to impact one another in some way. Look for God in others.

The message of the story is that one small act can save a life. The students are then given 5-6 minutes to write about the story to include:

1. Has anyone ever helped you through a difficult time in your life?

2. Have you ever helped anyone through a difficult time in life?

3. Describe the experience of helping or being helped.

The counselor collected the written responses of the students and on each one wrote a personal reply to the students which would be distributed during the following session. The highlight of the program was when the counselor and the teachers challenged the students to take action when they encounter someone being bullied. Drawing upon the lesions and activities of all the previous sessions, Julia and the teachers emphasized the need to be observant, to recognize bullying behavior wherever it occurs, and to have the confidence, empathy, and commitment to help resolve the situation before it becomes a bullying crisis. Lastly, the students, teachers, and counselor accepted responsibility to support each other in order to prevent and/or appropriately intervene with bullying behaviors.

Session #7. Goal. To offer a meaningful personal connection by which to inspire behavior change related to bullying behaviors in the school.

First, Julia returned the students' responses from the previous session with her supportive written comments and thanked the students for their participation. Next, the students completed the post-test. The teachers and the counselor thanked each other

for their time and empathic willingness, and then facilitated a discussion with the

students about what plan of action each one would follow if they observed bullying

behavior and what support they would need from others to give them the courage to

continue their anti-bullying campaign.

Biographical Statements

Stacey Stanbury is a professional school counselor at Lander Valley High School in Lander, Wyoming. Stacey's specialization is effective bullying prevention in her school district.

Mary Alice Bruce is a professor and the school counseling program coordinator at the University of Wyoming. Her specializations include developing spirituality across the lifespan.

Sachin Jain, assistant professor at the University of Idaho- Coeur d' Alene, is the school counseling program coordinator. Sachin's expertise involves multiculturalism as well as inspiring motivation in K-12 students.

John Stellern is a professor of special education at the University of Wyoming with a special interest in successful programs related to RTI and PBIS.