Does the Bully Busters Intervention Reduce Bullying in Middle School Students?

Newman-Carlson, D. & Horne, A. M. (2004). Bully busters: A psycho-educational intervention for reducing bullying behavior in middle school students. *Journal of Counseling & Development, (82)*, 259-268.

Bullying is one of the most widely-practiced forms of aggressive behaviors in American schools (Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler, 1994) and threatens students' perception of school as a safe place, disrupting the learning process on every level. Interventions often try to prevent bullying by working with students who are the perpetrators or victims, or through whole-school interventions, but the literature shows that teachers play a critical role in sanctioning bullying, either intentionally or unintentionally. Newman-Carlson and Horne (2004) hypothesized that training teachers to look for and prevent bullying (utilizing the program detailed in *Bully Busters Teacher's Manual for Helping Bullies*, *Victims and Bystanders* (Newman et al., 2000)) would have a significant effect on reducing bullying in middle school students. They looked at four factors: 1) Does a psycho-educational intervention for middle school teachers affect teachers' knowledge of and, 2) use of bullying intervention skills? 3) Does such an intervention affect teachers' self-efficacy? 4) Does the Bully Busters program have an effect on the number of student disciplinary referrals? (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004).

Method

Research Design: This study utilizes a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest control group design. All participating teachers (both experimental and control groups) completed a demographic questionnaire, the Teacher Inventory of Skills and Knowledge (TISK), the Teacher Efficacy Scale (TES) and the Teacher Efficacy and Attribution Measure (TEAM). Two weeks before the implementation of the intervention, the Osiris School Administration System Activity Tracker (OAS) tracked the number of disciplinary referrals the participating teachers made. The treatment group teachers then participated in the Bully Busters training program for three weeks, followed by 8 weeks of bi-weekly support team meetings, while the control group did not participate in any intervention. Upon completion of the interventions, all teachers completed the post-assessment TISK, TES, and TEAM measures. In addition, the OAS was used to assess total disciplinary referrals for the 11 weeks of the study.

Participants: Participants were comprised of 6th, 7th, and 8th-grade middle school teachers from a southeastern public school district in the U.S. The 30 participants were self-selected, in that the treatment group was comprised of the 15 teachers that volunteered to take part, and the control group consisted of 15 teachers who declined to participate but who completed the pretest and post-test questionnaires. The treatment group consisted of 5 males, 10 females, 2 African-Americans and 13 whites, and had 11 members with advanced graduate degrees. The control group consisted of 4 males, 11 females, 3 African-Americans and 12 whites, and had 9 members with advanced graduate degrees.

Instruments: In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment program and answer the four research questions, Newman-Carlson and Horne used the four instruments cited in "Research Design." The TISK (Newman et al., 2000) is a self-report questionnaire that was developed as the pretest for this project, to assess teachers' knowledge and use of bullying intervention skills before going through the training. The researchers measured teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy with the TES and the TEAM. The TES is a self-report survey focusing on personal teaching efficacy (beliefs about responsibility for student learning) and general teaching efficacy (beliefs that one's behavior will lead to the desired outcome). The TEAM is a vignette-driven survey that specifically assesses the degree to which teachers feel successful when working with students around seven behavior clusters ranging from "well-adapted" to "severe psychopathology." Lastly, the OAS is a computerized database system for tracking disciplinary offenses, and the researchers utilized OAS to determine the quantity and details of disciplinary referrals.

Intervention: The Bully Busters bully prevention program was designed to 1) help teachers acquire skills, intervention techniques, and prevention strategies for bullying and victimization, and 2) to enhance teachers' self-efficacy for confronting bullying and victimization in the classroom. The training curriculum was implemented in this case as a professional development workshop that consisted of three 2-hour meetings, held once a week over a three week period. The program consists of seven modules, each focused on specific goals: 1) Increasing Awareness of Bullying, 2) Recognizing the Bully, 3) Recognizing the Victim, 4) Taking Charge: Interventions for Bully Behavior, 5) Assisting Victims: Recommendations and Interventions, 6) The Role of Prevention, and 7) Relaxation and Coping Skills. After the training the teachers were divided into two groups, which met with the instructor for one hour every other week for eight weeks to share advice, successes and failures, and to provide support to each other.

Results

On each part of the "Knowledge" subscale of the TISK post-test, the treatment group demonstrated significantly higher knowledge of the interventions than did the control group ($p < .01$). On each dimension of the "Use" subscale of the TISK, the treatment group demonstrated significantly higher use of bully interventions ($p < .01$), and they demonstrated greater "Personal Teaching Efficacy" as measured by the TES ($p < .01$). The treatment group had significantly higher Teaching Efficacy for 5 of the 7 child typologies (for students whom the TEAM labeled "average," "disruptive behavior disorder," "learning disorder," "severe psychopathology," or "mildly disruptive") ($p < .01$). There were not significant differences found for the other 2 typologies, "well-adapted" and "physical complaints/worry." Finally, the OAS results showed that the treatment group had an average of six fewer disciplinary referrals than those in the control group over the course of the study ($p < .05$).

Implications

The results of this study indicate that the Bully Busters training program effectively increased teachers' knowledge and use of bullying intervention skills, and increased their feelings of personal self-efficacy and their perceived effectiveness in working with specific types of students. The implications of this research validate the effectiveness of a curriculum focused on training teachers, and counter the widely-held belief that bullying can only be combated effectively by whole-school interventions. By isolating the teachers' role as an integral part of the process, bullying interventions become more time-efficient, cost-effective and perhaps even more sustainable in that teachers can facilitate a continuously safer environment in their classrooms. Finally, exposing teachers to the program changed their beliefs in their abilities to influence students, as those in the treatment group showed a significant increase in their sense of personal responsibility for their students' learning and/or behavior. The findings of this study establish far-reaching implications for empowering teachers to believe they have the skills to bring about desired outcomes in their classrooms.

Critical Perspective

One question is whether the authors' primary assertion is accurate: Did bullying actually decrease in the classroom, or did the teachers simply make less disciplinary referrals? An assessment that surveyed students' pre- and post- treatment perceptions of bullying in the classroom would have helped to clarify this, as what the students experience is ultimately more important than what the teacher observes. Likewise, the authors acknowledge that, after the study, the teachers admitted that before the intervention they referred students to the counselor before trying to deal with the students' problematic behaviors themselves. While this is positive in suggesting that teachers were in fact empowered by this training, the question remains as to what the decreased number of referrals means in this context. A limiting factor in this study is that the authors worked on every aspect of this project (developing the intervention, training the teachers, analyzing the results). Further studies are necessary to explore whether the degree of investment the researchers had in the program made a difference, or if the intervention works no matter who does the training. A final concern is the self-selected nature of the participant pool as a possible confounding factor. It is possible that the teachers who volunteered to take part were already optimistic about and dedicated to the concepts of the program, so that improvements seen in this study may be more pronounced than they would have been in a professional development training where not all teachers are enthusiastic.

In spite of these questions and concerns, this research appears sound as a jumping-off point for others studies to determine whether Bully Busters is an evidence-based practice. The study is straight-forward in design and procedure and thus easy to replicate. Consequently, if other studies also yield promising results, Bully Busters could be a valuable tool in our quest for safe schools for all students.

References

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