Participatory Action Research: An Example from the *Stand Up to Bullying* Project

Figure 1. CCO Public Domain.

Despite a flurry of recent attention, we have not made sufficient progress in how we address bullying. Bullying, defined by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is the intentional, unwanted, aggressive behavior between youths that are not siblings or dating partners that is repeated, or is likely to be repeated, and involves a perceived or real power imbalance. Almost all youth are exposed to bullying behavior as a perpetrator, victim, bystander, or combination of. Most evidence-based interventions have focused on equipping bystanders with the confidence and strategies to address bullying that they see either in-person or online. While these interventions may have other merits, they

> "To increase bystander responses, it might be advantageous to conceptualize bullying ecologically—that is, as a problem of school climate."

are generally ineffective in reducing bullying. This is particularly true when bystander interventions occur without the necessary cultural and climate changes to sustain those interventions where they occur (e.g. schools, sports teams, youth groups, etc.). The *Stand Up to Bullying* (SU2B) project uses participatory action research as an ecological approach to the problem of bullying.

Highlights

Many interventions for bullying are ineffective because they do not address the school culture and climate where the bullying occurs.

Participatory action research can be used to identify unaddressed issues and build a shared understanding of the needed climate changes.

PhotoVoice is a promising method to identify youth concerns and facilitate conversation around bullying.

Methods

Twenty university undergraduates taking a community and applied social psychology course facilitated the SU2B intervention to 78 low-income middle school students over a span of 6 weeks. The undergraduate students trained the middle school students to serve as "ambassadors" to their peers. This built leadership skills and helped ambassadors change their self-perspective of "at-risk youth" to a crucial and active change agent for an improved school climate. The ambassadors were trained in best practices in bystander intervention. In addition to this training, the middle school students conducted a PhotoVoice project during the second half of the intervention. Students generated between 5 and 30 photos, selected 2, and wrote a paragraph describing why the image was meaningful to them in terms of bullying at their school. The undergraduate leaders qualitatively analyzed the photographs and paragraphs thematically.

Results

The qualitative analysis of the PhotoVoice project revealed:

> ➢ Common locations of bullying in and near the school of which teachers and administrators were previously unaware.

> ➢ The types of physical and emotionally bullying behavior experienced by the middle school students. Contrary to other research, physical bullying was more sentient to the intervention participants.

> ➢ The impact of bullying on the victim, including depression, sadness, unhappiness, and even suicidal ideation.

> ➢ A general consensus that bystanders—including school teachers and staff—did not effectively address bullying.

> ➢ New student terminology for bullying.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES, RESULTS, AND IMPLICATIONS?

Students perceive that bullying-intervention programs aimed at addressing student issues at the individual level alone will be ineffective. Rather, students acknowledge the need for a more community-based intervention that will impact the entire school climate.

"Thirty-two (25.8%) of photos contained imagery of inspirational or anti-bullying posters in school . . . despite this presence, however, photos indicated that students perceived a lack of effective bystander response."

What Does This Mean For?

Practice— Ecologically based interventions that address campus climate beyond student intervention and bystander training show great promise at reducing the incidence and severity of bullying in middle schools.

Research and Evaluation— Photovoice, and qualitative research in general, may identify the nuances of bullying more accurately than more common quantitative measures, such as frequency counts of reported behavior. For example, students in this study perceived physical bullying as more frequent and problematic than was known to teachers and administrators.

Summary and Discussion by Ashley Simons-Rudolph

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