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The Bullying Project

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Introduction

Bullying is an issue that appears frequently in professional literature, as well as in the mainstream media. The focus on the subject has resulted in an increased awareness of the need for prevention programs in schools and legislation in some states. This paper details a collaborative project between a School Counselor Education program and a charter school. The project was comprised of several elements including classroom guidance lessons, teacher education sessions, and parent education sessions. The project also included a trip to the state capitol to advocate for legislation related to bullying in schools. The individuals involved included graduate students, two fifth grade classrooms, a university professor, classroom teachers, school administration, and parents. Reflection data from all stakeholders indicated the project was successful in changing the social climate within the classrooms.

The Bullying Project

Bullying has become the focus of attention of a wide variety of individuals including counseling professionals, educational professionals, parents, and the media. It is difficult to determine whether this attention is due to an increase in bullying activity or an increase in awareness of the harmful effects of this behavior. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; U.S. Department of Education, 2010), student bullying is the most common discipline problem with the highest incidence in middle schools. However, the NCES also published results from a 2007 survey of students that indicated a greater sense of safety at school or on the way to school than in the previous 12 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Despite the increased feelings of safety, in a recent survey of 40,000 high school students (Josephson, 2010), nearly 50% of students admitted to bullying, teasing, or taunting someone at least one time during the last year. In the same survey, 47% of students reported being bullied, teased, or taunted to the point of creating serious

emotional distress. Adults may not have a full understanding of the seriousness of the problem in schools because they typically observe only about 4% of the incidents (Kadzin & Rotella, 2009). Students are more likely to engage in bullying behaviors at times in which no adults are present to intervene. Although adults may not observe the bullying, 85% of bullying is witnessed by peers. Despite evidence that intervention from peers usually stops the bullying, this only occurs about 10 to 20% of the time (Kadzin & Rotella, 2009). A 2010 survey conducted by Petrosino, Guckenburger, DeVoe, and Hanson found that only 36% of students report bullying, and that is often only after repeated incidents or physical harm. These statistics are an indication of a need for a comprehensive approach to addressing the problem of bullying among today's youth.

A review of the literature suggests that bullying prevention programs are effective at achieving the desired goals. Farrington and Tfofi (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 44 programs and found that school-based anti-bullying programs were effective in reducing bullying and victimization. Programs that are solely focused on increasing the coping skills of the victims or addressing the bullying behaviors are less effective than programs that take a comprehensive approach and address bullying as a systemic issue (Kadzin & Rotella, 2009). By addressing the climate, the problem is addressed at all levels and empowers all stakeholders to be involved in changing the culture of a school so that bullying behaviors are not tolerated. With this information in mind, a collaborative service-learning project was developed by a counselor educator for implementation with the graduate School Counseling students and a Charter School affiliated with the university.

Project Description

Background

The university is located in a rural area of East Texas and offers a CACREP accredited School Counseling program. The Charter School is an open enrollment school for grades K-5, with enrollment based upon a lottery system. The demographics of the Charter School represent a diverse population, and many of the students have been in class together since Pre-K. This particular 5th grade cohort has a history of social issues and behaviors that are indicative of bullying. During the 2010-2011 school year, the counselor educator began providing school counseling services to the school. During the spring semester, a graduate level school counseling course was offered by the university. In this course, students are required to develop a classroom guidance curriculum, a teacher education presentation, and a parent education presentation. Based upon the identified need of the Charter School to address the bullying problem, the decision was made to create a comprehensive bullying prevention program in order to fulfill the course requirements of the graduate students. This format provided the graduate students with a real world opportunity to engage in professional activities designed to foster acquisition of professional knowledge and skills. Because the graduate students were all working full time as classroom teachers, they were unavailable to work directly with the students during school hours. They were available after school hours to work with the teachers and the parents. The counselor educator coordinated the collaboration between the Charter School administration and faculty and the graduate students in the implementation of the project.

Classroom Guidance Curriculum

Classroom guidance lessons are one component of the delivery system for a comprehensive counseling and guidance program. It is an effective and efficient method to develop counseling related student outcomes with all students within a population (Akos, Cockman, & Strickland, 2007). The classroom guidance curriculum consisted of six lessons delivered over a 6-week period of time. The graduate students developed the lessons and the counselor educator presented them to the two fifth grade classrooms. Feedback from the lessons was brought back to the graduate students in order to prepare for the next session. An overview of each session is provided below.

Session 1. Students were asked to identify negative ways in which they interacted with one another. Using chart paper, a list of their responses was recorded and included behaviors such as being rude, name calling, rumors, excluding, and hitting. The actual list contained approximately 15 different behaviors. Once the list was generated, the students were asked to indicate which of the behaviors would be considered bullying. All of the items on the list were identified as things a bully might do. The students were then asked to indicate whether or not they had behaved in any of the identified ways. The majority of students admitted to exhibiting those behaviors at some time. The counselor educator then asked the students if that meant they were all bullies. A discussion followed in which the students were able to come to the conclusion that a bully is someone who engages in the identified behaviors repeatedly. Additional information was provided to the students regarding the elements of power differential, a pattern to the behavior, and a target for the behavior. The students in each classroom were then broken into four groups and were given the assignment to write a definition for bullying based upon the information they had learned. This was to be completed prior to the next session.

Session 2. The second session began with a review of the Session 1 assignment in each class. Each group reported on the definition they had written. Upon reviewing the definitions, it was determined that all the groups in one of the classrooms had written a definition of a bully rather than the term bullying. A discussion was held about the difference and adaptations were made to the definitions. Similarities and differences were noted among the different definitions and each classroom worked together to create one classroom definition upon which they could all agree. At the conclusion of this session in both classrooms, the two classes came together and repeated the process of looking at similarities and differences in their two class definitions and coming to agreement upon one definition. This final definition was then utilized by the entire school as the commonly agreed upon definition. The definition the students agreed upon was “bullying is a pattern of mental and physical actions that hurt, embarrass, or humiliate by tearing down others for the feeling of power and control. Bullying includes teasing, taunting, terrorizing, targeting, name calling, hitting, gossiping, starting rumors, or excluding.” The students believed it was important to include actual examples of the behaviors in the definition.

Session 3. The third session focused on determining how prevalent bullying behaviors are in the fifth grade. The graduate students researched established surveys that were available online. Some of the surveys were determined to be developmentally inappropriate for a fifth grade population. After reviewing a number of surveys, the graduate students adapted and combined items from different surveys to create their own. This survey was then given to the fifth grade students. At the time of the survey

administration, the fifth grades were learning about charts and graphs in the mathematics curriculum. The counselor educator coordinated with the classroom teachers to utilize the surveys as a way to integrate the classroom guidance and mathematics curriculum. After the surveys were completed, the students worked in groups to tally the responses and create a graph or a chart with the results for each question. These charts were then given to the graduate students to utilize in their presentations to the teachers and the parents.

Session Four. The results of the survey were discussed in the fifth grade classrooms to determine how often bullying was occurring among the students. Due to the increase in awareness of the topic, the teachers had reported problems with the students labeling all negative behavior toward one another as bullying. When normal conflicts arose, the students were accusing each other of bullying. The definition was revisited, and the students acknowledged that there was often not a pattern to the behavior. They came to the conclusion that they often interacted with one another in rude and disrespectful ways. While they understood this was not bullying, they determined the behavior was still unacceptable within a learning community. The students decided on their own to hold each other accountable to being more respectful and friendly with one another.

Session Five. The goal of this session was to help the students understand the role each of them played in bullying. After researching, the graduate students decided to use The Bullying Circle model developed by Olweus (2001). The roles include the bully, the victim, the henchman, supporters or passive bullies, passive supporters or possible bullies, disengaged onlookers, possible defenders, and defenders. A graphic of the Bullying Circle was used to define and describe the actions of each of the roles. To further illustrate the roles in bullying, cartoon webisodes from Stop Bullying Now (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.) were shown. The students watched several of the webisodes and identified the role each character was playing in the Bullying Circle.

Session Six. The final session also utilized the Stop Bullying Now (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.) webisodes to demonstrate how the possible defenders and defenders could intervene and support the victim. Students discussed the actions they observed the characters taking and how the bully and the henchmen responded to those actions. The students were given an assignment to write several short skits in which they would teach others about the different roles in the Bullying Circle. The students would then present those skits to their parents at the parent education session and younger grades during classroom guidance lessons. The classroom teachers incorporated the writing and practice of the skits into the writing curriculum and assisted the students in being prepared for the presentations to others.

Teacher Education Sessions

A commonly agreed upon definition of bullying is a critical element in successful bullying interventions (Maunder, Harrop, & Tattersall, 2010). A lack of agreement on what constitutes bullying can result in inconsistency in intervention and consequences for the behavior. The graduate students utilized the definition written by the fifth graders in their presentation to the school faculty. Information was presented on the harmful long-term effects of bullying. The graduate students created a music video that told the stories of several students under the age of 13 who had recently committed suicide after being

bullied. Appropriate intervention strategies were shared with the teachers in order to determine a consistent school-wide response to bullying behavior. Classroom teachers were also given the opportunity to sign up for classroom guidance sessions presented by the counselor educator and the fifth graders.

Parent Education Sessions

Parents are a critical element in a comprehensive anti-bullying program in schools (Farrington & Tfofi, 2009). The graduate students conducted research to provide evidence based information to the parents on behavioral indications of bullying in their children and successful intervention strategies. The presentation addressed some of the commonly utilized parenting strategies and why those strategies do not work. An example would be telling your child to ignore the bully. The fifth grade students presented their definition of bullying, the results of their survey, and their skits on the roles in the Bullying Circle. Information was presented to the parents regarding how the teachers and school administration would respond to incidents involving bullying behaviors.

Legislative Field Trip

During each state legislative session, the counselor educator accompanies graduate students to the state capitol to engage in advocating for legislation related to their profession or the clients that are served. A legislative session was occurring during the semester of this project. All of the students enrolled in the school counseling course participated in the field trip. Advanced preparation for the trip identified proposed legislation related to bullying and the key legislators involved. The graduate students found that much of the proposed legislation was reactive in nature and did not include any prevention mandates. Several bills were being proposed that mandated how schools must respond, development of school policies, and rights of the victims. The students prepared statements to be delivered to the legislators regarding a comprehensive school approach based upon evidence-based practices.

Upon arriving at the capitol, the group was informed that the Senate Education Committee was hearing testimony that morning on the proposed bills. The students attended the Committee meeting and observed the counselor educator testifying. An overview of the project was presented to the Committee as an example of the need for more comprehensive legislation to address the problem. None of the legislation included the role of a professional school counselor as a key element in intervention strategies. Following the Committee meeting, a legislator who authored one of the bills contacted the state counseling association and requested assistance in rewriting the bill to incorporate the school counselor in the process.

After returning from the field trip, the counselor educator shared information about the proposed legislation with the fifth grade students and how their project had been included in the testimony. Students and their parents were encouraged to contact their legislators and request their support of the related bills. The fifth graders then followed the legislation throughout the session as it progressed through the process and was successfully passed into law. Although this was not originally a part of the project design, it was an excellent lesson in the legislative process for the students, and they felt a sense of ownership in being a part of the new laws.

Results

Success of the project was determined through qualitative analysis of the reflections of the students, the teachers, and the parents. All of the stakeholders determined the project to be successful. The teachers reported a change in the overall climate of their classrooms. They reported fewer incidents of bullying related behaviors and an overall improvement in the level of respect observed in student-to-student interactions. They observed students holding one another accountable to the agreed upon norms related to behavior.

The students reported being happier in their classrooms and improvement in how they treated one another. One student stated “We are nicer to each other now. We are being better people” (personal communication, April 20, 2011). Parents reported an increase in knowledge and skills in addressing the issue of bullying. Several parents stated their children were excited about the project and discussed the information at home.

The graduate students also reported an increase in knowledge and skills related to professional development. Following is an excerpt from the student reflections.

Graduate Student A

When I started the Counseling Program, I assumed it would be like my undergraduate program—lectures and reading assignments. I can happily say I have been very pleased at the way the professors have incorporated learning experiences that will benefit me in my future job. Two such experiences are traveling to the capitol for Counseling Advocacy Day and presenting a program on bullying for teachers and parents... To do this before a group of school professionals and the parents of the students was a wonderful experience. We were allowed to see what it was going to be like to be a school counselor and the impact we can have on a staff and the parents. Again, I thank her for giving us an opportunity that will benefit us in the future (personal communication, April 27, 2011).

Graduate Student B

I believe that the knowledge gained from experiencing new things is more memorable and realistic and that it is the core of service learning projects. When asked about what has been learned in courses every service learning project I have completed always comes to mind first. I won't be able to remember test or assignments I have turned in years from now but the service learning projects I've been a part of will always stick. I really wish more professors would utilize them in their courses because they make learning concrete and interesting (personal communication, April 27, 2011).

Graduate Student C

I felt like being able to actually carry out the project prepared me for my future career as a school counselor much better than if I had simply turned something in. I will admit it is a lot harder and more effort is required but the benefits are so much greater. Not only did I learn about the topic at hand but I gained insight into

the logistics of handling a meeting and my confidence level rose (personal communication, April 27, 2011).

Conclusion

While bullying is not a new phenomenon among young people, the increase in awareness of the devastating effects requires adults to engage in prevention and intervention activities. Many of the approaches utilized in the past have not been successful in curtailing bullying behaviors (Farrington & Tfofi, 2009; Petrosino et al., 2010). Counseling and education professionals have a moral and ethical obligation to engage in action research that will result in an increase in evidence-based approaches available for those working with youth. The current research does support a comprehensive approach as more effective than simply intervening with the bully and the victim (Farrington & Tfofi, 2009). Counselor educators working with school counselors in training have an opportunity to train future professionals on appropriate methods in which to deliver an anti-bullying program. The training should include the use of evidence-based practices and engaging in action research as a practitioner in order to further the profession.

This service-learning project incorporated the needs of an elementary school with the training of future school counselors in order to provide a real world opportunity to engage in the work of a professional school counselor. Although small in scope, all stakeholders involved deemed the project to be successful. Implementation of the project on a larger scale needs to be conducted in order to establish the ability to generalize the success to other school populations.

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