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A Quasi-Experimental Test of K-12 Faculty Training in Bullying and Cyberbullying Prevention

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One can safely say that bullies and their victims have existed in schools for centuries. However, the frequency and severity of bullying incidents has reached new levels in the past few decades (Olweus, 1993). The amount of bullying and aggression seen in schools today has risen so drastically that many researchers are calling it an epidemic (Nansel et al, 2001). While the behavior itself is not new, the frequency and methods by which it is perpetrated are. Abusive behaviors begin in elementary school and peak during middle school, showing a steady downward trend in frequency as children progress into their high school careers (Smith, Moody, & Madsen, 1999). The severity of these behaviors can vary but at any level, bullying can be considered one of the most common and serious forms of youth violence. As many as 10% of students report extreme victimization (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988) and nearly 30% report being involved in bullying either as a victim or perpetrator (Nansel et al., 2001). The 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Massachusetts found that 24% of Massachusetts teenagers reported being bullied in the year before the survey. Three-quarters of high school freshman in a 2008 survey report that during high school bullying was a “significant” problem and over fifty-percent of those surveyed felt that students avoided coming to school as a result (Englander, 2009). In a December 2006 survey, 54% of Massachusetts schools indicated that bullying has become *more* of a problem “in the last few years” (Englander, 2007).

As society progresses into the technologically advanced twenty-first century, with Internet usage increasing 380.3% from 2000 to 2009 (Internet World Stats, 2010), First World teenagers’ lives are dominated by these technologies. With the ubiquitous nature of the Internet and cell phones, cyber bullying may become – or may already be – the dominant form of bullying behaviors among children. The National i-Safe Survey (2004) conducted a nationwide survey of 1,566 students grades four through eight and found that between 53% and 57% of students report involvement in saying mean or hurtful things online either as a victim or perpetrator. Between 35% and 42% report being threatened or bullied online with as many as 7% saying it happened ”quite often” (Keith & Martin, 2005). Another survey conducted in 2006 found that one-third (32%) of teenage Internet users say they have been targeted for online bullying (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). The most recent surveys conducted by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) of 18- and 19-year old college freshman in Massachusetts found that 42% reported having been “harassed, bullied, stalked, or threatened via instant messaging” (Englander, 2009). Almost one-quarter (24%) of the respondents in those studies also admitted being a cyberbully themselves with the primary reason for perpetration being that they were “angry” (65%) or “joking” (35%). Over two-thirds (73%) had seen an insulting, threatening, or degrading profile on a social networking website such as MySpace (Englander, 2009). In the same MARC surveys (Englander, 2009), more than two-thirds of students knew a friend that had been victimized and almost one-fourth (24%) reported that cyberbullying was either “prevalent or very prevalent” in their high school. A 2006 poll of 1,000 children conducted by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, found cyberbullying frequencies of about 33% - similar to those found by Pew and MARC (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). These numbers suggest that cyberbullying (with about 35-40% admitting victimization) may be more common than traditional bullying (with about 20-24% admitting victimization).

Cyberbullying seems to evoke bullying behaviors among some adolescents who otherwise might not bully. Only 13% of the college students in MARC’s study (above) expressed the opinion that most cyberbullies “would bully no matter what;” instead, they saw bullying online as an opportunistic crime, reporting that it was “easier because you don’t see the person” (69%) and/or because “you can do it anonymously” (65%). More than two-thirds of the respondents (72%) characterized cyberbullies as predominantly female – a stark contrast to the traditional view that males are predominant in aggression (Englander, 2009).

CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING / PEER ABUSE

The term “bullying” has been criticized as a euphemism (Hobson, 2005), and the behavior it refers to may more accurately be termed “peer abuse.” Bullying is defined as an on-going, abusive relationship between two or more children, characterized by three criteria: (1) it is an aggressive behavior intended to harm (2) it is carried out repeatedly over time (3) it occurs in a relationship with a power differential (Olweus, 1994). No longer seen as a primarily physical behavior, bullying today is frequently verbal or psychological – or written, as in cyberbullying. Every year, MARC studies college freshman for their experiences with bullying and cyberbullying while in high school. In the current academic year (2009-2010) subjects are reporting that their bullying victimization was primarily psychological, verbal, and online. In fact, only 21% of victims report being victimized physically, while 100% of victims have reported being victimized verbally or psychologically (e.g., through social exclusion and cyberbullying).

Bullies have evolved to a high social status among many children in schools today (Nansel et al., 2001). They typically engage other children to help and sustain their abusive behaviors, thus both involving other children in high-risk activities and effectively threatening the remainder of the school population (ibid). Bystanders, both adults and children, unprepared to cope with these behaviors, are uncertain about how to respond, and thus may not know what is the most effective method for reducing these behaviors. We now know that *all* children in a school are at risk for serious consequences when bullying is frequent or tolerated (Englander, 2006). In fact, witnesses to peer abuse may suffer *more* psychological damage than the victims themselves (Rivers, 2009). Bystanders frequently expend valuable mental energy to avoid being bullied themselves or coping with the emotional aftermath of failing to help victims, thus draining their ability to succeed academically – a fact which costs the country economically in the long run (Rigby, 2001). Ongoing MARC research is finding that students who see bullying happen report feeling “bad for the target,” “guilty, if you don’t do something,” and anxious, worried, sad, and/or depressed (Englander, 2009). Victims of bullies may experience mental health problems (depression, anxiety, violent acting-out) and suppressed academic achievement, while “eggers” or “henchmen” – those children who are recruited to help aid bullies – are rewarded for engaging in abusive and violent behaviors. Finally, victims of bullying carry emotional scars into adulthood which may limit their productivity as taxpaying adults (Hoover & Stenhjem, 2003).

Bullies – children who engage in abusive behaviors towards targeted victims – are also children at profound risk. In a classic longitudinal study, Olweus (1973) found that of the bullies identified in grades 6-9 (through teacher nominations and peer ratings) a full 60% had been arrested for a crime by age 24 – a risk factor that exceeds that of having a father in prison (Clemens, 2005). Bullies are more likely to show aversion to school and have low academic achievement, especially in middle school, which can lead to higher drop-out rates (Smokowski, P. & Kopasz, K.H., 2005).

The sheer number of students at risk and the severity of emotional and psychological consequences demands that research is done about how to best combat this problem in our schools. Olweus (1994) suggests that permissiveness towards aggressive behaviors can lead to an increase in their frequency and severity. When adults are tolerant and permissive towards bullying behaviors, without setting clear limits, a child’s level of aggression is likely to increase (Olweus, 1994) which puts all players (bullies, victims, eggers or henchman, and bystanders) at greater risk. Educating and training school faculty about bullying and cyberbullying may be the most effective way to begin the fight against bullying and cyberbullying in schools.

EFFECTIVE TRAINING METHODS

Chen, Sok, & Sok (2007) define training as a planned learning experience designed to create change in an individual’s knowledge, behavior, or skills and facilitates the learning of specific skills that employees, i.e. teachers and other school personnel, need to be successful in their jobs. A good training program allows trainees and trainers to share real world experiences and does not rely on theory alone. Training must be relevant, interesting, and engaging and supported by the administration and other colleagues in order to encourage participation (Chen et al., 2007). In order to allow transfer of knowledge from training to real life situations, it is necessary that trainees are confident in their new skills, there must be an awareness of when to use the new skills, and trainees must believe that the skills and knowledge are relevant to their work (Nikandrou, Brinia, & Bereri, 2009).

It is important to note that the current study was conducted as part of larger outcomes research. In the current academic year (2009-2010) faculty report that prior to receiving MARC services, bullying could be characterized as moderate or moderately serious (72%) in their school. Twenty eight percent of respondents stated that an incident was reported at least once a week and 20% report daily incidents. When surveyed about the quality of the faculty training received, 92% of faculty said they found the training “interesting and engaging” as well as “useful and practical”. This paper is reporting on one specific survey based on knowledge obtained during the faculty training, rather than reporting on general satisfaction with the program.

There are many methods by which training programs can be designed and executed. Lauro (1995) compared five approaches to professional development in schools: **comprehensive training programs** are ongoing and consist of a series of trainings; **one-shot programs** offer information about a specific topic and are the most common type of training; **conferences** are similar to the one-shot model but require travel and are often very expensive; **in-house training**  can be one-shot or ongoing and makes use of a trained professional to disseminate information without staff having to use valuable travel time; and **holistic video-based** offers monthly support in the form of video (usually developed by a professional). Lauro (1995) found that regardless of the *type* of training, the most important factors in determining effectiveness is the resource and cost efficiency as well as the level of faculty and administrative buy-in. Every training approach has its advantages and disadvantages, but each method may fulfill the needs of different learners and the best approach is to use a combination.

There has been much research about violence prevention programs in schools. As one of the most common forms of youth violence, it is the assumption of the authors that such research can be extrapolated to include the issues of bullying and cyberbullying. Many view schools as a place for students to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to become productive members of the work force. Others see schools as a place where important socialization occurs, reinforcing students’ sense of social “right and wrong.” No matter the purpose of schools, the public school setting is the ideal setting in which to deliver primary violence prevention programs with the emphasis on fostering healthy development of all students (D’Andrea, 2004).

Similar to any type of training, school based violence prevention programs must have the support and involvement of administration and faculty in order to be successful (Daniels, Arredondo, & D’Andrea, 1999). While school faculty is often aware of the need for such programming, they may not be aware of how to begin or sustain such efforts. School counselors can play a pivotal role in identifying needs and introducing programs into the professional development of other school staff (Daniels et al., 1999). In the current academic year (2009 – 2010) 12% of MARC faculty trainings were requested by school counselors, psychologists, or social workers.

Trainings must work to increase teacher and administrative knowledge of practical things they can do to combat violence in schools. Daniels et al. (1999) recommends that to increase the likelihood of success, trainings must assist school personnel in four ways: learning how to identify warning signs of violence; increasing awareness of the *specific* things they can do to help children refrain from using violence; acquiring new skills that can be implemented in the classroom and throughout the school day; and increasing knowledge of community resources available. Current MARC research shows that 80% of faculty report that the training “improved the ability of adults in [their] school to react effectively to bullying.

The catastrophic violence associated with bullying and cyberbullying in recent years (i.e. the increase in school shootings, the number of suicides as a result of chronic bullying) speaks to the importance of school based violence prevention programs. However, extensive reviews of the literature reveal paucity in research examining the effectiveness of such comprehensive prevention programs. It is no question that public schools across the country are struggling with a lack of time and resources for the professional development of their staff. In light of this, the authors sought to evaluate the effectiveness of faculty trainings provided at no cost by the MARC program. MARC faculty trainings are a one-shot, in-house training designed to increase knowledge and awareness of issues surrounding the issues of bullying and cyberbullying in K-12 schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

**METHODS**

The current study was a within-subject, pre- and post-test quasi-experimental design.

*Participants*

Participants for this study were 89 current faculty members of a middle/high school in Massachusetts serving students in grades 6 through 12. Participants attended the faculty training during a professional development day. The sample size of 89 participants was not random and was determined by the actual number of faculty members at the school who attended the faculty training. This included all middle and high school teachers, the school nurse, and the middle and high school guidance staff. The researchers ensured the anonymity of participants by including two questions designed to allow for the matching of pre and post test results for each participant without asking for any identifying information.

For the current study, the independent variable was identified as faculty before a two hour MARC faculty training and faculty after the training. The dependant variables in this research were faculty scores on the Bullying and Cyber Bullying Knowledge Scale (BCBKS), collected before and after the training session. This instrument was designed specifically for this study. This scale was developed to accurately gain information about participants’ level of knowledge concerning bullying and cyber bullying.

*Instrument*

The Bullying and Cyber Bullying Knowledge Scale developed for the current study was used to measure the achievement levels of faculty knowledge about issues surrounding bullying and cyber bullying. The survey was designed around the current presentation used by the MARC program for faculty trainings. The presentation was divided into sections based on the major topics covered. These topics included: defining bullying and cyber bullying; gender issues in bullying; psychological components of bullying; “digital natives” and the differences in adult vs. youth usage of technologies; trends in cyber bullying; appropriate reactions and interventions; working with parents; and the principles that need to be communicated to keep youth safe while using technology. Multiple choice questions were then developed to highlight those points. The survey was limited to twelve questions in an effort to minimize completion time.

While the data collected through this survey was part of a larger outcomes research, the BCBKS was developed specifically for this study. Criterion validity of the scale was established by emailing the survey to a panel of experts.

*Data Collection*

Data for the current study was collected as part of ongoing outcomes research conducted by the MARC program. One week before the faculty training, surveys were administered to the 89 faculty members who would be attending the training. Surveys were distributed in faculty mailboxes and returned to the guidance office to be retrieved by the researcher. A school wide email was sent the day the surveys were administered to explain the purpose of the study. Another email was sent three days after the survey was administered as a reminder to submit finished surveys.

Participants were given the survey which included a consent form. Participants who did not give their consent were not included in the data analysis. Once consent was obtained, participants were instructed to answer two questions designed solely to allow for the matching of pre and post tests. Surveys that could not be matched were not included in the data analysis. There were no time restraints for completion of the survey.

Directly following the faculty training, the same survey was administered to faculty present.

*Procedures*

Faculty were surveyed about their basic knowledge of psychological and behavioral facts associated with bullying and cyberbullying behaviors. For example, they were asked to identify the distinction between bullying and conflict, or the association between bullying and social success. For the pre-test, faculty were asked to complete the survey by placing it in their faculty mailboxes. 89 faculty members completed and returned the pre-test. Subsequently, at the faculty training session, the post-test was handed out after the training was completed and faculty were asked to complete it then, with an option to hand it in anonymously by placing it in a box in the main office. All faculty opted instead to merely complete the post-test and hand it in immediately. Because of the short nature of the survey it was not difficult for them to complete the post-test and hand it in a few minutes after the training had ended. Thus, this post-test is examining immediate recall of factual items associated with bullying, rather than long-term retention of material.

**RESULTS**

There were 89 surveys administered. Upon completion of the post test, researchers were able to match 22 pre and post tests. Pre- and post-test data were matched via use of an anonymous code, but not by name. Participants were specifically instructed not to put their name on either test but rather to put on a “code” consisting of the first 2 digits of their street address, the first digit of the day on which they were born, and the last digit of the year in which they were born. This code generally permitted us to match pre and post tests but unfortunately also resulted in a fairly high number of errors (i.e., the participant entered the code incorrectly either on the pre or post test making it impossible to match the data). Overall, data showed that knowledge of issues surrounding bullying and cyberbullying increased significantly after the intervention (the faculty training). Pre-test mean was 7.09, versus post test mean of 11.05 correct. The difference between the two mean scores was 3.95 and the 95% confidence interval is between 4.71 and 3.20. A paired *t*-test showed that the difference between conditions was significant (*t* = 10.89, df = 21, *p* < 0.0001, one tailed).

**DISCUSSION**

The current study showed a significant increase in knowledge achievement between the two conditions. The mean difference showed that participants improved their scores by an average of 4 correct answers following the faculty training. These findings support previous outcomes research findings that MARC faculty trainings are effective, perhaps due to the practical and engaging nature of the training. As suggested by previous research (Chen et al., 2007; Nikandrou et al., 2009) training effectiveness can be greatly impacted by the training programs ability to offer relevant and interesting information that can be easily translated into the “real world.” Transfer of skills to the real world is also impacted by the level of confidence trainees have in their new skills and their level of awareness of when to use such skills. Previous outcomes research indicated that participants did feel more confident in their ability to react effectively (80%) which is further supported by current research showing that faculty scored significantly better on questions concerning appropriate interventions.

The current study did not have a control group. Such a group would have been useful in showing that other middle and high school faculties in Massachusetts have similar levels of knowledge concerning issues of bullying and cyberbullying at the baseline. It was not possible to create a control group at the site. Withholding the training from any faculty could be potentially harmful to those students whose teachers were not trained in recognition and response to bullying and cyberbullying. It would be possible to survey another faculty before a future training.

Due to the nature of the study, the sample used was a convenience sample of current faculty at a middle/high school in Massachusetts. It was not possible to randomly assign faculty as faculty attendance was required. It is the researchers’ assumption that random sampling would not have made a difference in the current research findings. Clearly, however, this study does not definitively prove the impact of the training intervention, as only a double-blind, random assignment condition could have rendered such data. The researchers administering the survey were the same personnel conducting the training and thus were not blind to the conditions, although it would not have been possible for them to alter the content of the surveys in any way. Still, it is reasonable to conclude on the basis of this quasi-experimental design that the training intervention increased the knowledge basis of the participants regarding bullying and cyberbullying prevention.

The current study was conducted at one school in Massachusetts, which limits the ability of the researchers to generalize the efficacy of such trainings in other schools and areas. However, previous research conducted by the MARC program at other schools in Massachusetts supports current findings. The MARC program is only in Massachusetts but the authors assume there are similar programs in the United States and would suggest that similar research be conducted in an effort to expand upon the current findings.

The current research findings support prior outcomes research conducted by the MARC program. MARC faculty trainings have been found to be interesting, engaging, and effective. Faculty report that following training, they are better able to identify and offer resolutions to bullying and cyberbullying behaviors among their students. The success of the MARC program is also due, in part, to its resource and time efficiency; it is offered at little or no cost to schools and faculty trainings are designed to take no more than three hours. However, as with all training interventions, the confidence of institutions to utilize this resource increases with quasi experimental designs such as the current one and would increase even more with true experimental designs.

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