

A Look at How Students Who Receive Daily Virtue-Based Class Meetings and Students Who
Receive None View Levels of Bullying in Their Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation between frequency of class meetings and instances of bullying in two fifth grade classrooms. The measurement tool was a simple three question survey given to students at the end of the six-month study. No statistically significant difference was found between the frequency of class meetings and instances of bullying. Future research should attempt to measure the impact of class meetings on other areas of school climate rather than simply focusing on bullying.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As schools work to improve their effectiveness, many factors should be examined to find opportunities for growth. One area where a concerted effort should be placed is school climate. Teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders would have a hard time arguing that school climate does not play an enormous role in determining the success of students and the quality of the school. In fact, Jones and Shindler (2016) argue that school climate is a key factor in predicting student academic success. Improving the school climate is a task that is multifaceted and requires a thoughtful approach. It is an area of school improvement that cannot be overlooked.

One of the many facets of school climate is safety. This in and of itself involves even more dimensions the most basic of which is the level at which a student feels safe at school. How can a child be expected to learn in an environment where they do not feel safe? Removing fear and creating a safe place for students is essential for academic success.

At the Title 1 elementary school in Baltimore County where this research took place, students indicated that bullying was an issue at the school. Furthermore, according to the Baltimore County Public Schools Stakeholder survey from the 2017 school year, 45% of students and nearly 60% of staff in the county reported that bullying is a problem at their school (BCPS Stakeholder Survey, 2017). Ineluctably, this issue is not limited to one school or one county. According to the U.S. Department of Education, one in four students in the United States reported being bullied at school (US Department of Education, 2016). These rates of incidence are at crisis level. Creating a school climate where students feel safe and bullying is eliminated should be a goal of all educators and a focus for school improvement.

Schools work thoughtfully and tirelessly to end bullying as they navigate the complicated task of providing the optimal learning environment for students. One approach that has taken root with many educators in tackling the bullying crisis is restorative practices, particularly community circles. Community circles are essentially class meetings where students and teachers meet to restore the learning community to a more positive place to feel safe and learn.

This research attempts to identify any correlation between instances of bullying and the use of class meetings in a fifth-grade classroom.

Statement of the Problem

Can restorative practices, specifically daily community circles, reduce the instances of bullying in a fifth-grade classroom?

Hypothesis

Instances of bullying will not decrease in a fifth-grade classroom after two semesters of daily virtue-based community circles.

Operational Definitions

Bullying: Repetitive aggressive behavior with an imbalance of power. The actions can be physical, verbal, and/or digital.

Class meetings: Whole group discussions within the classroom involving the teacher and students of that classroom with everyone sitting in a circle. It lasts anywhere between 10 and 30 minutes and occurs once a day. During the class meeting time, virtues are introduced, studied, demonstrated, and discussed. Students are expected/invited to practice these virtues throughout the day.

Degree of bullying: Measured through scheduled questioning and a survey given to students. A question about bullying was given three times over the course of six months. First in October, again three months later in January, and finally in April. Students chose the best answer from the choices below.

There is no bullying	Very little bullying	Some Bullying	Bullying is a major issue	Not sure
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At the end of the six months, students were presented with a three-question survey in which they answered the following questions:

1. How often do you have class meetings?
2. How often are you bullied at school?
3. Do you think class meetings helped stop bullying at school?

Virtues: The content of our character. A list of 52 virtues will be randomly selected and used for the class meetings. The virtues that will be studied are: Acceptance, Faithfulness, Accountability, Fidelity, Appreciation, Flexibility, Assertiveness, Forbearance, Awe, Forgiveness, Beauty, Fortitude, Caring, Friendliness, Certitude, Generosity, Charity, Gentleness, Cheerfulness, Grace, Cleanliness, Gratitude, Commitment, Helpfulness Compassion, Honesty, Confidence, Honor, Consideration, Hope, Contentment, Humanity, Cooperation, Humility, Courage, Idealism, Courtesy, Independence, Creativity, Initiative Decisiveness, Integrity, Detachment, Joyfulness, Determination, Justice, Devotion, Kindness, Dignity, Love, Diligence, Loyalty, Discernment, Mercy, Empathy, Mindfulness, Endurance, Moderation, Enthusiasm, Modesty, Excellence, Nobility, Fairness, Openness, Faith, Optimism, Orderliness, Patience, Peacefulness, Perceptiveness, Perseverance, Prayerfulness, Purity, Purposefulness, Reliability, Resilience, Respect, Responsibility, Reverence, Righteousness, Sacrifice, Self-discipline, Serenity, Service,

Simplicity, Sincerity, Steadfastness, Strength, Tact, Thankfulness, Thoughtfulness, Tolerance,
Trust, Trustworthiness, Truthfulness, Understanding, Unity, Wisdom, Wonder, Zeal.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This literature review examines the importance of school climate and its connection to student achievement. It will delve into the dimension of safety and the need for schools to provide a safe learning environment. It will review the past and current use of restorative practices in establishing and maintaining a safe learning environment. This review will then focus specifically on bullying in the classroom as an aspect of school safety and the success of community circles in stemming the prevalence of bullying in the classroom.

Climate-Achievement Connection

Principals and teachers realize all too well the connection between school climate and student achievement. One simply needs to spend time in a school to understand how important a quality learning environment is. According to Jones and Shindler (2016), there is a strong relationship between achievement and school climate. They, along with others have concluded that schools can't have achievement without a strong school climate. In fact, Jones and Shindler say school climate is likely a key factor in student achievement.

School Safety as Part of Climate

School climate is a term that is all encompassing. Wang and Degol (2016) say that school climate "represents virtually every aspect of the school experience" (p. 315). The National School Climate Center lists 13 dimensions of school climate. They include: Rules and Norms, Physical Security, Social-Emotional Security, Support for Learning, Social and Civic Learning, Respect

for Diversity, Social Support – Adults, Social Support – Students, School Connectedness-Engagement, Physical Surroundings, Social Media, Leadership, and Professional Relationships (National School Climate Center, 2017). This review will focus on two of the first three dimensions which fall under the sub-category of school safety: physical security and emotional security.

School Safety is a fundamental right that should be guaranteed to all students. According to Wang & Degol (2016), school safety refers to “the physical and emotional security provided by a school and formed by its members, along with the degree of order and discipline present” (p. 324). A sometimes-underappreciated aspect of a school’s responsibility is to provide this safety to all students. Rather, all schools attempt to provide this right to their students yet few if any schools achieve 100% levels of student safety. Many forces stand in the way of complete feelings of safety by students, not the least of which is bullying in the classroom.

Bullying is a problem that many students face. According to Smith (2016), bullying is “repetitive aggressive behavior with an imbalance of power” (p. 519). In other words, an individual is victimized either physically or emotionally by another or others repeatedly and from a position of power. As of 2013, nearly 1 in 4 students in the United States reported being bullied at school, down from nearly 1 in 3 in 2007 (US Department of Education, 2016). This negative aspect of the school environment is an impediment to school safety and one any administrator, student, teacher, and parent would want to curtail.

Restorative Practices and Schools

One avenue to reduce instances of bullying and improved school safety that schools are implementing is restorative practices. There is no universal definition of Restorative practices,

but Steiner and Johnson (2003) would say it is the “obligations to make things right (restorative) practice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions which promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance” (p. 55).

Schools use restorative practices in several ways. First, it is used to better meet the needs of students (Evans & Lester, 2013). Once teachers understand why students act the way they do, they can create plans to address those needs (Gaier, 2015). Many unwanted behaviors stem from the needs of students not being met. Restorative practices is used as an umbrella term that refers to the efforts schools take to address these needs.

The second way schools use restorative practices is to provide accountability and support within the school community. Again, restorative practices is used as an umbrella term. In other words, if someone wrongs another, they are held accountable for their actions and support is given to the victim and offender during the process. This support and accountability applies to the educators as well (Evans & Lester, 2013).

Third, they are used to learn from behavior. In other words, when students reflect on what happened and who was affected, restorative practices are being used. There are other ways schools use restorative practices such as emphasizing the need to make things right. When unwanted behavior occurs, actions that are taken to correct the community are considered restorative. This is mainly done when schools view the offense as an offense against the members of the school community not the school itself (Evans & Lester, 2013).

Schools attempt to meet the tenets of restorative practices in several ways. One popular technique is using community circles. Community circles are group meetings that are an essential part of most restorative practices. The University of Maine (2017) defines community

circles as a place that “...offers participants the opportunity to share thoughts, feelings, insights and concerns, and to deeply listen to others without judgment, in a supportive atmosphere.”

Community circles take a great deal of planning, thought, and consideration to be successful at meeting the needs of restorative practices. They are used to build community and deliver content (Brown, 2015). To this end, community circles have shown to be a successful way to create a better learning environment for students.

The Relationship between Community Circles and Bullying

Schools have shown to have success with these practices. A comprehensive implementation of restorative practices was undertaken in about half of Minnesota’s school districts in 1995. A study showed that the use of restorative practices drastically reduced major disciplinary actions over the period of five years (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

Norwood Elementary school in Baltimore County, Maryland has been using restorative practices and have seen a tremendous effect from their efforts. They have seen a 55% decrease in the number of referrals to the office, a 55% decrease in physical aggression, 98% of students feel safe in the school, and only 7% of students feel bullied since they started using restorative practices (Goldys, 2016).

Another study in Ontario found a significant reduction in the number of behavioral infractions, including bullying, after the implementation of restorative justice practices and community circles (Rideout, Roland, Salinitri, & Frey, 2010). Positive results were also seen from a study of troubled and less fortunate students in South Africa in which Reyneke (2015) found that, “traditional punitive response to disciplinary problems in schools is exacerbating problems and adding to the stress children experience” (p. 69).

Summary

There is a clear connection between a positive school climate and student achievement. Feeling safe at school is essential to having a positive school climate. One way to promote a positive school climate is with restorative practices. Schools have had success using restorative practices and community circles.

CHAPTER III

Methods

The goal of this research was to determine the relationship between classroom level bullying and whether or not daily class meetings were held.

Design

This research followed a correlational research design that utilized a survey with both cross-sectional and longitudinal aspects. The variables that were investigated included the level of bullying students encounter and the frequency of class meetings. A convenience sample was used comprised of the researcher's class and the fifth-grade class next door.

Participants

The participants in this study were 44 fifth grade students from a large public Title 1 elementary school Northwest of Baltimore City. Half of the students were from the researcher's class and the other half came from the fifth-grade classroom next to the researcher's classroom. Students were ages 11-12 and represented a near equal number of boys and girls.

Instrument

A survey created by the researcher was used to gauge student feelings about bullying. At three points throughout the study, first in October, again in January, and finally in April, students indicated the level to which bullying was an issue in their classroom. A Likert scale was used to measure this. See example below.

There is no bullying	Very little bullying	Some Bullying	Bullying is a major issue	Not sure
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At the end of the study, students were then asked three questions. Each question also used a Likert scale on a 1 – 5 gradation.

1. How often do you have class meetings?
2. How often are you bullied at school?
3. Do you think class meetings helped stop bullying at school?

Results were tallied by class.

Procedure

Student groups were formed prior to the onset of this study and remained intact throughout the study consisting of two fifth grade classes. A veteran teacher of 25 years taught one class while the researcher, a teacher of six years, taught the other. The veteran teacher never held class meetings while the researcher implemented them near daily.

Class meetings consisted of a whole group teacher facilitated discussion based around several virtues. Discussions involved introduction of the virtue, ways in which students can practice the virtue, celebration of student use of the virtues, and ideas to promote the virtues within the classroom and school. Some of the virtues discussed were: understanding, self-discipline, tact, and moderation. Two goals of the class meetings were to build a sense of community and improve the learning environment by reducing instances of bullying.

At the onset of the study, students were asked to what degree they felt bullying was a problem in their classroom. In January students were asked the same question again and results were gathered. Finally, after six months of class meetings students were polled one final time using the same survey. They were also asked two additional questions: 1) How often do you have class meetings? 2) Do you think class meetings help stop bullying? Results were compiled and correlation determined.

The Chi-Square statistic will be used to measure the degree of relationship between students' self-perception of changes in the incidence of bullying and whether or not daily class meetings were held. The null hypothesis is that the students' self-perception of the degree of bullying in school will not be related to whether daily class meetings were held.

CHAPTER IV

Results

The goal of this action research was to determine if daily classroom meetings built around establishing community and virtues would reduce bullying for fifth grade students.

Two fifth grade classes of 22 students were selected for the study. The classes were similar in demography and ability. The school was located in northwest Baltimore County and eligible for Title I services because of high poverty levels. The treatment class participated in daily classroom meetings, while the control class did not have daily meetings.

The study spanned October 2017 through April 2018. Students completed a self-report modified Likert scale survey at the conclusion of the study. There were three survey questions: how often class meetings were held, the frequency of personal bullying, and the degree to which bullying had been reduced between October and April.

The responses to the survey were cross tabulated with whether students were members of the control or treatment classes. Pearson's Chi-Square statistic was used to assess the statistical significance of the relationship between the treatment and the reduction in bullying. The customary $p=.05$ level was used to establish statistical significance.

Table 1

Daily Meetings

meeting	control	treat	Total
never	18	0	18
almost never	3	0	3
sometimes	1	0	1
almost daily	0	5	5
daily	0	17	17
Total	22	22	44

Pearson chi2(4) = 44.0000 Pr = 0.000

The results show that students in the treatment class reported meeting almost daily or daily, while *students in the control class generally did not meet*.

Table 2

Incidence of Being Bullied

bullied	control	treat	Total
never	11	15	26
almost never	5	4	9
sometimes	6	2	8
almost daily	0	1	1
Total	22	22	44

Pearson chi2(3) = 3.7265 Pr = 0.293

The difference in the frequency of personal bullying between the control and treatment classes was not statistically significant at the .05 level.

Table 3

Reduction in the Incidence of Bullying

reduction	control	treat	Total
definitely not	4	2	6
not really	4	2	6
maybe	6	9	15
probably	6	7	13
absolutely	2	2	4
Total	22	22	44

Pearson chi2(4) = 2.0103 Pr = 0.734

The difference in frequency of the perceived reduction in bullying between the control and treatment classes was not statistically significant at the .05 level.

Summary

The treatment class students generally reported that they met daily, while the control class students generally reported they did not meet. The difference between the treatment and control classes was according to the design of the study. There was no statistically significant difference between the treatment and control classes in the student perceptions of how often they were bullied, nor how much bullying had been reduced. According to the students' self-perception, 73% of the control class and 86% of the treatment class had never or almost never been bullied. Therefore, the respective null hypotheses that the population distributions of personal experiences with bullying and reductions in bullying could not be rejected at the $p=.05$ level of significance. There were no significant treatment effects on the degree of bullying or the reduction of bullying, as far as student self-perceptions were concerned.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The goal of this research was to determine the relationship between classroom level bullying and whether or not daily class meetings were held. The null hypothesis stated that instances of bullying will not decrease in a fifth-grade classroom after two semesters of daily virtue-based community circles. Therefore, what resulted from the study was an understanding that the targeted intervention did not display statistically significant results when comparing reported instances of bullying from the experimental group to the control group. Therefore, the null hypotheses could not be rejected at the .05 level of statistical significance. There was insufficient evidence that there was a treatment effect on personal bullying and reductions in the degree of bullying.

Implications and Future research

After review of the study, there was no statistically significant correlation between frequency of class meetings and student perceptions of classroom bullying. 73% of the control class and 86% of the treatment class had never or almost never been bullied as reported on the survey. These results as with County and National data indicate that bullying is still a problem for at least one-quarter of the students.

It was noted by the researcher that 3 confrontations, during the study, were resolved peer-to-peer peacefully using language discussed in class meetings. Interestingly, this peaceful resolution could be attributed to the class meetings as the researcher had not seen this type of behavior prior to conducting the meetings. These are anecdotal observations rather than statistical, and no causation can be established. Nevertheless, this behavior leads the researcher

to believe that future studies should attempt to measure how many altercations that are resolved peacefully can be attributed to class meetings.

A follow-up to this study should focus on the correlation between class meetings and how students resolve conflicts. A self-reporting system for students and teachers to indicate how conflicts were resolved along with teacher and researcher observations could be used to gather the required data. Also, a more scripted approach to delivering the class meetings must be followed to eliminate another variable. Another implication is that perhaps data should be used that documents incidences of bullying and subsequent reductions in bullying, in addition to self-perception surveys. System wide and national statistics on the incidence of bullying for fifth grade, as well as reductions or increases in bullying over the school year whether or not interventions were used would provide normative data for future program evaluations.

Threats to Validity

There were several threats to the internal and external validity of this study. Internal validity refers to the degree to which observed differences on the dependent variable are a direct result of manipulation of the independent variable, not some other value. External validity refers to the degree to which results are generalized outside the experimental setting (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011).

Internal validity was threatened for the fact that correlation does not mean causation. Given that the study measured the correlation of class meetings and instances of bullying, no conclusion can be drawn as to the effectiveness of class meetings on levels of bullying from this study. Furthermore, results produced no statistically significant difference between the treatment and control classes in the student perceptions of how often they were bullied, nor how much bullying had been reduced.

A major threat to external validity is the fact that the teacher of the treatment group for this study did not follow a script when conducting his class meetings. Without a script or directions on how to facilitate class meetings based on virtues, this study will not be fully generalizable.

Another threat to validity is that a survey was used to gather data. Student answers on the survey may not have reflected true circumstances regarding how often they were bullied. They may have answered falsely for a few reasons such as they did not want to look weak or that they were not clear what the definition of bullying was. Also the majority of students reported never being bullied. Therefore there was only a small group of students for whom reductions in bullying were even possible.

The sampling method chosen for this study further threatens the external validity. A convenience sample was used which limited the diversity within the study. All participants were from two fifth grade classrooms from the same school. It was a Title I school with little racial, socio-economic, or geographic diversity.

Conclusions

This study did not reveal a statistically significant correlation between the frequency of classroom meetings and instances of bullying. Threats to validity include the convenience sample that was used which lacks diversity, the survey as the sole means of data collection, and an unscripted daily meeting format. Further research should follow a more scripted approach to class meetings and attempt to gather data on how students resolve conflicts at school. Studies with more classrooms in different types of schools could provide meaningful results as to what works to reduce bullying in the upper elementary school.

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