Effects of Bullying Prevention Curriculum on Reading Levels

Kelly Garrick

Dr. Helena Miranda

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**Literature Review**

Recent research and media attention has been focused on the prevention of bullying, especially with the high profile case of Phoebe Prince, a Massachusetts teenager who committed suicide as a result of school bullying. This bullying included defamation of personal belongings, threatening text messages and phone calls, and physical violence (NY Daily News, 2010). Bullying can be defined as the use of one's strength or status to intimidate, injure, or humiliate another person of lesser strength or status (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). Bullying can be categorized as physical, verbal, or social. *Physical* bullying involves physical injury or threat of injury to someone, while *verbal* bullying refers to teasing or insulting someone. *Social* bullying refers to the use of peer rejection or exclusion to humiliate or isolate a victim. Bullying must be distinguished from other forms of peer aggression or conflict; bullying always involves a power imbalance between the bully and the victim (Besag, 1989; Olweus, 1993).

Research indicates that approximately 30% of school age children report being victimized by bullies at some point in their school careers (Brewster & Railsback, 2001; Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003; Shore, 2009). This behavior is often undetected by adults (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). The most effective way to deal with bullying is to prevent it from happening in the first place (Shore, 2009). Current research practices focus on bullying prevention through behavior modification, such as team building activities, role playing, tolerance building, and anti-bullying lessons.

Unfortunately a pattern of school failure starts early and persists throughout a child’s school career. Longitudinal studies show that there is an almost 90% chance that if a child is a poor reader at the end of grade 1 he or she will be a poor reader at grade 4 (Strickland, 2002). There has been much attention paid to reading programs and interventions and due to this many teachers are told that they must have a 90 minute block of uninterrupted reading time each day. This along with the other core subjects such as math, writing, science, and social studies, leaves little, if any, time at all for character education or social skill building.

Reading intervention strategies and anti-bullying intervention strategies have both been shown to positively affect students’ academic experience. In a study conducted by Robert Savage and Sue Carless result showed that various reading intervention strategies, when implemented in the classroom either whole-group, small group, or one-on-one, lead to the acquisition of early reading and spelling (Savage & Carless, 2005). The authors of this study administered two types of reading interventions to at-risk students. Both strategies were found to produce positive results in overall student achievement leading readers to believe that interventions of most kind can be beneficial to struggling and proficient readers alike.

Likewise, there has been much research conducted regarding the effects of bullying intervention. The Olweus Program from Norway is the most widely studied bullying prevention program (Evers, Prochaska, Van Marter, Johnson, & Prochaska, 2007). This program involves highly intensive interventions that require considerable commitments of time and effort from teacher, parents and school administrators. According to Evers et al. (2007) when using this intervention in the United States, there was shown to be a 25% reduction in rates of bullies. Another popular bullying intervention program, LEAPS (Life Excelerator/Assessment of Personal Skills), is an instructor led curriculum for behavior modification and social skills training (goleaps.com). A 2000 study found that the LEAPS model resulted in a significant increase in social skills and appropriate behaviors as exhibited by the six individuals who participated.

If there is a correlation between these reading and anti-bullying interventions, and no research has been found to support this as of yet, teachers can use the anti-bullying curriculum to support reading instruction, while simultaneously fostering student emotional well-being by decreasing bullying behaviors. In other words, time would not need to be taken away from core curriculum; rather bullying intervention can be considered *part* of the reading curriculum. Teachers recognize the responsibility to provide students with programs and curriculum that provide scaffolded support for reading and socio-emotional development. By implementing these interventions jointly, educators can decrease the amount of bullying behaviors exhibited in their classrooms while facilitating higher reading achievement at the same time.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether anti-bullying curriculum will enhance students’ reading level as indicated by the Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR) when compared to students who do not receive the anti-bullying interventions. I hypothesis that the results of this study will show that anti-bullying curriculum can have a positive effect on students’ reading achievement. Results may be used by reading curriculum specialist and school administrators to draft reading strategies that make time for anti-bullying intervention within their reading curriculum.

**Research Plan**

The research proposed here will use a Randomized Pretest – Posttest Control Group. The independent variable for this study is the anti-bullying instruction. The dependent variable is the students’ reading ability.

**Sample**

This study will use a convenience sample including 48 second graders from ABC Elementary School. The population will be divided by simple random sampling into two twenty-four student groups, one being the control group and the other the experimental group. The general population for the schools in this county is 51% male and 49% female. Students are 67% Caucasian, 28% Hispanic, 3% Black, with the remaining 2% being Asian, Haitian, or mixed-race children. 17% of the population is ESE and 29% are English Language Learners. Students with low economic status make up 37% of the population.

**Ethical Considerations**

 As a Category II proposal, currently awaiting IRB approval, this study presents no more than minimal risk to the participants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). All participants in this study must provide written parental permission (Appendix A). While the possibility of harm is minor, it is foreseen that the students not receiving the intervention will experience no socio-emotional benefit from the anti-bullying curriculum. Control group participants may also experience emotional trauma from feeling “left out.” To prevent this possibility, the control group will receive the same anti-bullying curriculum at the conclusion of the experiment.

 No confidentiality problems are expected during this study. However, some deception is necessary to maintain the internal validity of the research. The concern is that if parents and teachers know the purpose of the study, extra reading support may be provided at home or in the classroom, thus affecting the outcome of the research. This is also true for the teacher administering the anti-bullying intervention. Therefore, parents and teachers will be instructed that the purpose of the experiment is to study the effectiveness of anti-bullying curriculum.

**Instruments**

All of the 48 students will be tested via the Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR). The purpose of the STAR is to provide information to teachers about student growth and achievement. Students take the assessment via the computer and it is scored automatically by the software. Teachers and administrators are able to view and print a number of reports at the individual, classroom, and grade level in order to monitor progress. Teachers can then tailor instruction to individuals and small groups based on the results.

*Validity and Reliability*

 The reliability of the STAR reading test has been assessed by the split-half method and the test-retest method. Results indicated that the reliability of the scores was approximately 0.95. Coefficients ranged from a low of 0.89 to a high of 0.93. These estimates are consistent across grade levels. The standard error of measurement for the STAR test is 51 scaled score units, and ranged from a low of 36 to a high of 83.

 The validity of the STAR reading test has been determined using the construct validity method, by a study linking the STAR reading test to the Degrees of Reading Power comprehension assessment. A raw correlation of 0.89 was observed between the two tests, indicating that reading comprehension measured by the two tests are nearly indistinguishable (Renaissance Learning, 2009).

**Procedural Details**

 Participants will be tested on the STAR reading assessment at the onset of the study. After being randomly assigned into the control group and the experimental group, by simple random sampling, the experimental group will begin receiving anti-bullying instruction. This instruction will be implemented using the LEAPS curriculum. The program will consist of predetermined lessons with each week focusing on one aspect of social development, including building self-esteem, peer awareness, self-discipline, and appropriate physical communication. The intervention will continue for six weeks, with students receiving the instruction twice a week during PE time. The control group will receive regularly scheduled physical education instruction. At the conclusion of the six week program, students will be tested again using the STAR reading test. The data of the two tests will be analyzed for results.

**Data Analysis**

 Data from the STAR test will be collected and a T-test will be performed to compare means for experimental and control groups. Scores are expected to improve for both experimental and control groups due normal reading growth over a six week period. However, researchers will analyze data to determine if the experimental group showed marked gains when compared to the control group. Results will be published in a bar graph format for visualization and distribution purposes.

**Internal Limitations**

 Because subjects will be chosen using stratified random sampling, student characteristics should be controlled. However, the results of this study will not be generalizable due to the fact that a small convenience sample was used and some groups may not be represented. Generalizability will be limited to schools with similar demographics. Subject mortality should be minimal and should be limited to student relocation. Any event will be documented in the study. The location of both the anti-bullying intervention and the STAR assessment will be in a controlled, classroom environment. All students will be STAR tested in the morning in the technology lab with a researcher present to monitor testing. All intervention instructors will receive training in LEAPS curriculum prior to beginning the study. There is a small threat due to the fact that the LEAPS instructor may not feel strongly about the program or believe in its effects. To lessen this affect, a researcher will sporadically attended LEAPS classes to observe instruction techniques. Data collector bias is not expected to affect internal validity because data is collected electronically by the STAR reading test, eliminating possibility of manipulation of data.

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**Appendix A**

*Informed Consent Form*

A researcher is conducting a study on the effectiveness of anti-bullying curriculum in elementary schools. Major findings of the study will provide information that can be used to improve instructional programs and to provide information for future research studies. Participating students will be attending an anti-bullying class for six weeks. The sessions will be held during participants’ regularly scheduled PE classes, held twice a week. This has been scheduled in cooperation with the classroom and related arts teachers to ensure a minimum of interference with academic programming.

Upon completion of the project, copies of the major findings of the study will be available upon request to all participants, including the principals of participating schools. However, no individual student profiles and/or assessment results will be provided.

A copy of this consent form is provided to each participant and parent/guardian. Additional information concerning the procedures of this research project can be obtained by contacting Kelly Garrick at 239-293-2196.

 I have read the description of the above research study and give permission for my child to participate according to the procedures outlined above. I understand that this evaluation will not affect my child's academic grades at his or her current school. I understand that participation is on a voluntary basis and I may withdraw from the project at any time. I also understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form and may request a copy of the major findings of the study at the conclusion of the project.

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of student participant: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_