Layering of Character Education and Bullying Prevention Programs to Reduce Bullying in a Mexican Middle School

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Abstract

This case study examines the effect of adding a research-based bullying prevention program to a long running character education program in a Mexican middle school. A pre-test survey of students self-reported bullying was applied to students before beginning the implementation of the bullying prevention program. After one year of implementation, the same survey was applied as a post-test. Pre and post-test data were compared for self-reported bullying behavior, self-reported bystander behavior, self-reported victimization, and student reported teacher and staff intervention behavior. These same analyses were done whole school, within grade, and by gender.

Keywords: character education, bullying prevention, Mexican schools, bullying

Statement of Problem

The Tec Blue Middle School in northern Mexico has been implementing character education as an integral part of the school's day-to-day activities for over five years. The school has just completed the first year of implementation of a research-based bully prevention program. The school has a need to understand if the addition of a program designed specifically to prevent bullying has had an additional impact to bullying prevention beyond that of the general character education program.

Background Information

The Blue Tec Middle School is located in northern Mexico. It is a private suburban school for 7th-9th graders with an enrollment of approximately 200 during the period of the study. When the school was opened in 2007, character education was established as one of its foundational pillars. The school worked to build a culture of caring through its comprehensive character education program. Teachers and administrators were trained in character education. The program held a four-pronged approach. Teachers wove character education throughout many of their lessons, the school embedded character education in the majority of the whole school activities and projects including a school-wide service learning program, the school worked to inform parents regarding character education through workshops and seminars, and the school's discipline policy was based on a character education philosophy. The school received national recognition for its Promising Practices in Character Education from the Character Education Partnership based in Washington, D.C. in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013.

In 2011, with a growing concern about bullying within the country, the school began implementing the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. The program included a program kickoff, introduction of the students to the definition of bullying and the rules against bullying, a two-day training for all school faculty and staff by the bullying prevention team, and weekly class meetings. The class meetings were used for community building and discussing bullying issues. In addition, a visual campaign with the four rules against bullying was installed in every classroom and in every hallway. All of these activities were mentored by an Olweus bullying prevention trainer who trained the bullying prevention committee and spoke with the committee every six weeks via skype.

Theoretical Framework

First, it is important to understand what character education is. Character education loosely can be considered a term for moral education (Arthur, 2008). More specifically, Swartz (2008) describes character education as:

A national movement encouraging schools to create environments that foster ethical, responsible, and caring young people. It is the intentional, proactive effort by schools, districts, and states to instill in their students important core, ethical values that we all share such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others.

Effective good character education is comprehensive; it is integrated into all aspects of classroom life, including academic subjects, and is infused throughout the school day in all areas of the school (playing field, cafeteria, hallways, school buses, etc.). It provides long-term solutions that address moral, ethical, social, emotional, and academic issues that are of growing concern about our society and the safety of our schools (p. vii).

Character education has been linked to creating a positive school community (Vincent, 1999). The existence of a positive school community has an impact on many aspects of school life. Having a sense of community in school has been linked to bullying prevention (Lickona, 1991). This community includes student-student relationships, student-teacher relationships, and in-school adult-adult relationships. Positive relationships between staff and students can be key in helping students to stand up to students who bully others (Syvertsen, Flanagan, &Stout, 2009).

However, in addition to whatever other efforts are made to prevent bullying, many schools opt to implement a particular bullying prevention program. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is generally accepted to be the most widely researched bullying prevention program available.

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, which has been developed and evaluated for more than 20 years, builds on four key principles: (1) warmth, positive interest, and involvement from adults, (2) firm limits on unacceptable behavior, (3) consistent application of non-punitive, nonphysical sanctions for unacceptable behavior or violation of the rules, and (4) the involvement of adults who act as authorities and positive role models (Yerger&Gehret, 2011, p.320).

While schools may choose to use a specific bullying prevention program in conjunction with a homegrown character education program there is little research at this time measuring their combined impact.

Methods and Procedures

A school wide self-reported survey was given to all students six months prior to the implementation of the bullying prevention program and after one and a half years of implementation of the program. The pre and post-test survey were applied to in December 2011 and March 2013. In the pre-test, 191 of 194 students answered the survey. In the post-test, 156 of 199 students answered the survey. For the post-test two sections of students, one from 7th grade and one from 9th grade, were away from school the day of the application of the survey. Both surveys had the same questions. The pre-test survey was a paper booklet with a multiple choice answer sheet. The post-test was an online version of the same survey. The survey was applied in its Spanish version as Spanish is the first language of the students in the school.

The survey used was the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire ® provided by the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is part of the implementation design. The survey contains 42 multiple choice questions which deal with five separate categories: a) general information, b) bullying problems: prevalence, forms, location, duration and reporting, c) feelings and attitudes regarding bullying, d) how others react, and e) friends and general (dis)satisfaction with school.

For purposes of this study, the following questions and possible answer choices were the focus of analysis:

1. How often have you been bullied in the past couple of months?

  a. Haven't been bullied
  b. Once or twice
  c. 2-3 times a month
  d. About once a week
  e. Several times a week

2. How often have you taken part in bullying another student(s) at school in the past couple of months?

   a. Not bullied others
   b. Once or twice
   c. 2-3 times a month
   d. About once a week
   e. Several times per week

3. How often do other students try to put a stop to it when a student is being bullied at school?

   a. Almost never
   b. Once in a while
   c. Sometimes
   d. Often
   e. Almost always

4. How often do the teachers or other adults at school try to put a stop to it when a student is being bullied at school?

   a. Almost never
   b. Once in a while
   c. Sometimes
   d. Often
   e. Almost always

5. How do you like school?

   a. Dislike very much
   b. Dislike
   c. Neither like nor dislike
   d. Like school
   e. Like school very much

For these five questions, frequency distributions were compared to for 2011 and 2013 by whole school results, results for boys and for girls, and results by grade. They were also contrasted to a national comparison provided by the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. However, it is important to note that the national comparison used is a national comparison for the United States while the school being studied is in Mexico.

Results and Conclusions

While interpreting the data, students who answer that they are bullied, or bully others 2 to 3 times a month or more were considered to show these traits. The Olweus definition of bully lists a repetition of the behavior as one of the components to the definition of bullying.

Victim Behaviors

When students were asked how often they had been bullied in the past 2 or 3 months, the number of students who answered 2-3 times per month or more showed the following results (Table 1):

- in 2011 boys were three times as likely to be victims than girls
- in 2011 the number of boys who were victims was .2% higher than the national comparison
- in 2011 the total victim behavior for boys and girls was a third less than that of the national comparison
- from 2011 to 2014 the victim behavior for girls remained steady, the victim behavior for boys drop by 4.1%, and boys and girls victim rate drop by 2.2%
- for 2011 the boys and girls victim rate was 4.4% lower than the national comparison
- for 2013 the boys and girls victim rate was 7.1% lower than the national comparison

Table 1: Victim Behavior

December 2011					March 2013			
	7th	8th	9th	TOTAL	7th	8th	9th	TOTAL
Girls	8.7% (2)	3.3% (1)	2.6% (1)	4.3% (4)	3.1% (1)	4.0% (1)	7.4% (2)	4.8% (4)
Boys	13.3% (4)	20.0% (6)	12.8% (5)	15.2 (15)	0% (0)	13.8% (4)	16.7% (4)	11.1% (8)
Girls and Boys	11.3% (6)	11.7% (7)	7.7% (6)	9.9% (19)	2.0% (1)	9.3% (5)	11.8% (8)	7.7% (12)
Girls (National Comparison)	14.7%	15.0%	11.9%	13.6%	17.1%	16.3%	13.4%	15.4%
Boys (National Comparison	16.5%	15.0%	13.7%	15.0%	16.4%	13.8%	12.8%	14.1%
Girls and Boys (National Comparison	15.7%	15.0%	12.8%	14.3%	16.8%	14.4%	13.1%	14.8%

Bullying Behaviors

When students were asked how often they had taken part in bullying another student(s) at school in the past 2 or 3 months, the number of students who answered 2-3 times per month or more showed the following results (Table 2):

- 7th grade bullying for girls and boys went from 5.3% to 0.0% from 2011 to 2013. 1.8% and 6.5% the national comparison respectively
- The total for boys and girls in all grades together was consistently higher than the national comparison.
- The total for boys and the total for girls rose from between 1.2% and 1.9% respectively

Table 2: Bullying Behavior

December 2011					March 2013			
	7th	8th	9th	TOTAL	7th	8th	9th	TOTAL
Girls	0.0% (0)	10.0% (3)	10.3% (4)	7.6% (7)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	29.6% (8)	9.5% (8)
Boys	10.3% (3)	20.7% (6)	15.4% (6)	15.5% (15)	0.0% (0)	17.2% (5)	29.2% (7)	16.7% (12)
Girls and Boys	5.8% (3)	15.3% (9)	12.8% (10)	11.6% (22)	0.0% (0)	9.3% (5)	29.4% (15)	12.8% (20)
Girls (National Comparison)	7.5%	8.0%	6.2%	7.1%	6.5%	6.8%	6.2%	6.5%
Boys (National Comparison	10.5%	11.4%	11.0%	10.9%	7.0%	8.6%	9.7%	8.6%
Girls and Boys (National Comparison	9.2%	9.7%	8.6%	9.1%	6.7%	7.8%	7.8%	7.4%

Bystander Behaviors

When students were asked how often do other students try to put a stop to it when a student is being bullied at school, the number of students who responded often or almost always showed the following results (Table 3):

- From 2011 to 2013, girls willingness to try to put a stop to bullying was reduced by 8.8% while boys remained the same
- In 2011 both boys and girls respectively were more willing to stand up to bullies than the national comparison
- In 2013 girls dropped 4.1% behind the national comparison for girls

Table 3- Bystander Behavior

	December 2011			March 2013		
	7th- 8th	9th	TOTAL	7th-8th	9th	TOTAL
Girls	17.0% (9)	17.9% (7)	17.4% (16)	13.0% (7)	0% (0)	8.6% (7)
Boys	23.7% (14)	2.6% (1)	15.3% (15)	17.0% (8)	12.5% (3)	15.5% (11)
Girls and Boys	20.5% (23)	10.3% (8)	16.3% (31)	14.9% (15)	5.9% (3)	11.8% (18)
Girls (National Comparison)	14.5%	11.0%	13.0%	13.3%	11.5%	12.7%
Boys (National Comparison	12.3%	13.9%	12.9%	12.2%	16.3%	13.6%
Girls and Boys (National Comparison	13.3%	12.5%	13.0%	12.8%	13.7%	13.1%

Student Reported Teacher/Staff Intervention

When students were asked how often do teachers or other adults at the school try to put a stop to it when a student is being bullied at school, the number of students who responded often or almost always showed the following results (Table 4):

- From 2011 to 2013, both boys and girls perceptions of teacher/staff intervention when a student was being bullied decreased. They overall decrease was 4.2%
- For both 2011 and 2013 and in every category the students perceived that teachers/staff intervene in bullying more than the national comparison.
- For 2011 student perception of teacher/staff intervention in bullying was 16% higher than the national comparison
- For 2013 student perception of teacher/staff intervention in bullying was 9.4% higher than the national comparison

Table 4- Student Reported Teacher/Staff Intervention

	December 2011			March 2013		
	7th- 8th	9th	TOTAL	7th-8th	9th	TOTAL
Girls	54.7% (29)	53.8% (21)	54.3% (50)	58.9% (33)	40.7% (11)	53.0% (44)
Boys	61.0% (36)	43.6% (17)	54.1% (53)	55.3% (26)	29.2% (7)	46.5% (33)
Girls and Boys	58.0% (65)	48.7% (38)	54.2% (103)	57.3% (59)	35.3% (18)	50.0% (77)
Girls (National Comparison)	38.8%	34.2%	36.8%	47.1%	33.1%	38.9%
Boys (National Comparison	40.3%	38.1%	39.4%	43.5%	41.3%	42.7%
Girls and Boys (National Comparison	39.6%	36.1%	38.2%	42.5%	36.9%	40.6%

Feelings about School

When students were asked how do you like school, the number of students who responded dislike very much or dislike showed the following results (Table 5):

- In 2011 the school had 13.8 points lower than the national comparison regarding boys and girls who do not like school.

- In 2013 the school had 12.7 points lower than the national comparison regarding boys and girls who do not like school.
- From 2011 to 2013 girls who do not like school increased 2.6 points
- From 2011 to 2013 boys who do not like school decreased 1 point

Table 5- Student Feelings about School

	December 2011			March 2013		
	7th- 8th	9th	TOTAL	7th-8th	9th	TOTAL
Girls	0.0% (0)	5.4% (2)	2.2% (2)	5.3% (3)	3.7% (1)	4.8% (4)
Boys	5.1% (3)	5.3% (2)	5.2% (5)	6.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	4.2% (3)
Girls and Boys	2.7% (3)	5.3% (4)	3.7% (7)	5.7% (6)	2.0% (1)	4.5% (7)
Girls (National Comparison)	13.9%	17.9%	15.6%	15.4%	13.8%	14.9%
Boys (National Comparison	18.5%	20.6%	19.3%	20.6%	18.3%	19.8%
Girls and Boys (National Comparison	16.3%	19.2%	17.5%	17.8%	16.0%	17.2%

The school seemed to have mixed results in the five target areas studied as contrasted with the national comparison. A smaller percentage of students reported being victims of bullying, a larger percentage reported a positive perception of teacher/staff intervention in stopping bullying, and a larger percentage of students reported liking school. On the other hand, a larger percentage of students reported bullying others and a smaller percentage reported bystanders taking action against bullying behavior. Only in the area of reduction of the percentage of victims did the school see an improvement from 2011 to 2013. In the other four key areas, there was no improvement, as the situation grew less desirable.

It is important for this school to understand, what if any, effect the laying of adding a bully prevention education initiative has had. In this case, the school could see some minor improvements in the students' self-reported instancesof victim behavior within the school. In the end, this is the factor which seems to be most important. Because the school holds to the idea that one child bullied is too many, any reduction in bullying is desirable. With the mixed results that were present, it is not clear that adding the bullying prevention program made an impact on bullying in the school.

Suggestions for Further Study

While this study looked at self-reported bullying activities before and after a year-long implementation of a bullying prevention program, two opportunities for further study are apparent. First, a five year study to explore long term effects of implementing bullying prevention as the faculty and staff become more adept at implementing the program, could be helpful. Second, a comparative case study of several schools which looked at the issues in fidelity of implementation of the bullying prevention program, could shed some light on how schools can be more effective with the bullying prevention programs they adopt.

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