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A Multiyear Investigation of Combating Bullying in Middle School: Stakeholder Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: Working collaboratively to address bullying among middle school students is an ongoing challenge. This study used participatory action research to collaborate with key stakeholders within a middle school to identify needs and implement more effective practices. Extensive qualitative and quantitative data are presented, along with process recommendations for bringing different stakeholders together for a sustained change effort.

In line with growing public awareness and concern, the antibullying literature has mushroomed. Seemingly every week there is a major news story describing a bullying situation that has spiraled out of control, causing great harm to children and great regret and embarrassment among school officials. Even if there are no dramatic and tragic results such as suicides and homicides, the cumulative impact of bullying is troubling. As one example, Juvonen, Wang, and Espinoza (2011) found that higher levels of self-reported peer victimization through bullying were associated with lower GPAs and lower levels of academic engagement over a 3-year period.

Although there is no doubt of the need and desire to reduce or even eliminate bullying, the outcome research is still emerging and significant research to practice gaps remain (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). As documented by Cascardi, Brown, Iannarone, and Cordona (2014) some of this challenge is definitional. They note that the definition of bullying varies from state to state and across different researchers, thus making it harder to extrapolate findings and build consensus. They also distinguish bullying from other forms of aggression by the power imbalance and repetition inherent in any bullying situation, which reflects the widely accepted definition provided by Olweus (1993). They note that this definition of bullying is often expanded by states to include other forms of peer aggression and harassment and that the criterion for repetition and power imbalance are not always followed.

Similarly, examining state antibullying laws and policies as of August 2010 on the following dimensions—definition of bullying, policy, notice, reporting, investigation, and consequences—Kueny and Zirkel (2012) found great variation. Seven states did not have any antibullying laws. Only three states had all three components—intention to harm, repetition, and power imbalance—of the

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Olweus (1993) definition, with power imbalance being the most frequently omitted criteria. Additionally, 23 states did not define bullying at all. This same variation in definition and the common tendency to overlook the power imbalance component of bullying also plagues bullying measurement efforts (Bradshaw & Waasdorf, 2009).

Perhaps not surprisingly due both to the inherent difficulty of the problem to be solved and different definitional and measurement approaches being applied, the findings from bullying intervention studies have been mixed (Swearer et al., 2010). There has been much research conducted on different types and forms of bullying in schools, leading to several meta-analyses. For example, Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, and Isava (2008), examining the effect sizes of 16 antibullying intervention studies published between 1980 and 2004 covering children ages 6–12, found support for positive changes in knowledge and attitudes related to bullying, but no significant reductions in student self-reported bullying behaviors. A meta-analysis of the effect sizes of 44 antibullying programs in schools—covering students from ages 6–16—completed by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) was more promising. They found reductions in bullying and peer victimization at the rates of 17 and 23%, respectively, in experimental schools as compared to control schools. They also found that the more comprehensive the antibullying program—that is, the more elements to the program—the more likely it was that positive outcomes ensued. This finding is similar to that of Barbero, Hernandez, Esteban, and Garcia (2012) who also conducted a meta-analysis of antibullying efforts in schools covering ages 6–16, in their case examining 32 studies. They concluded that stronger positive effects were associated with multidisciplinary endeavors and efforts that reflected the unique school culture. Finally, with the recent emphasis on the potentially critical role of bystanders, Polanin, Espelage, and Pigott (2012) conducted a meta-analysis from the lens of how effective bullying prevention programs in schools—their analysis covered schoolchildren of all ages—are in increasing bystander intervention in bullying situations. Across the 12 studies examined, they found statistically significant positive changes in bystander behavior, with the largest effects at the high school level.

BULLYING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Although bullying is a major challenge at all levels, the frequency of bullying appears to peak in middle school (Swearer et al., 2010). For example, Nishina and Juvonen (2005) found that close to half of middle school students report being bullied during their first year of middle school. In a large-scale survey, Hughes, Middleton, and Marshall (2009) found that 18% of fifth graders and 15% of seventh graders worried about bullying either “often” or “daily.” Additionally, 12% of fifth graders and 11% of seventh graders reported being victims of physical bullying “often” or “daily” and 24% of fifth graders and 21% of seventh graders reported being victims of social bullying “often” or “daily.” A study of the drawings of middle school students conducted by Biag (2014) supports the common finding (e.g., Vaillancourt et al., 2010) that the spaces that students identify where they feel the least safe are the spots within the school walls where there is the least structure and adult supervision (e.g., lunch room, outdoor areas, bathroom). Comparing the results of student focus groups across multiple age groups (elementary, middle, high school), Guerra, Williamson, and Sadek (2012) found that younger children were more likely to go to adults and to see adults as sources of support when bullying occurred. Additionally, as children got older they described a wider range of persons—particularly popular girls—as more vulnerable to bullying. Older children were more likely to describe bullying as being related to boredom, dramatic value (for bystanders), and as a result of kids feeling insecure about themselves and/or trying to get the attention of others. Among their primary recommendations based on these student focus groups was the importance of bringing bullying and its causes out in the open with middle and high school students through dialogue and problem solving.

ACTION RESEARCH

One of the challenges noted by Swearer et al. (2010) regarding bullying prevention and intervention is a lack of research connected to an overarching theoretical framework. Participatory Action Research (PAR) offers a lens from which schools not only can evaluate the effectiveness of a specific program, but also identify the needs in their school and take an active role in addressing them. The philosophical underpinning of PAR is that research is done in collaboration *with* people rather than done *to* people by the researchers (Stringer, 2013). In fostering active participation of stakeholders in the research process, PAR strives to facilitate ownership of interventions across all stakeholder groups. The idea is that this kind of involvement will produce a commitment to culturally relevant and effective change that will be sustained after the completion of the project (Hughes, 2003; Song, Anderson, & Kuvinka, 2014).

Although nonprescriptive, there are four action steps characteristic of the PAR approach (Stringer, 2013). The first step is *planning a research process*. At this stage, the primary goal is relationship building and laying the groundwork for effective collaboration. The second step is *building a picture*. At this stage, the research team devises a methodology for gathering pertinent data that have the potential to advance the designated structure toward the shared goals and vision. In the third step, *interpreting and analyzing*, qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed utilizing an iterative process whereby tentative conclusions are brought to the research team and shared with stakeholders. These conclusions are then revised based on feedback from all parties. The final stage is *resolving problems and implementing sustainable solutions*. Depending on the outcome of this implementation, the group may revisit one or more stages.

STUDY PURPOSE

There has been limited bullying research based on the PAR framework. Given the culture-specific and participatory nature of this approach, however, PAR may be particularly well suited to address a challenge as complex and multidisciplinary as bullying. That is, as evidenced by the divergent findings of the meta-analyses of the impact of antibullying programs in schools, the presence of an antibullying program, no matter how well run or how research based, may or may not translate into systemic change.

METHOD

This study describes a 2-year PAR project between the university-based research team and Austin Middle School (AMS, which is a pseudonym). This project had different goals and research questions each year. During the first year, the primary goal was to conduct a needs assessment and create a picture of the bullying climate at AMS from the perspective of different stakeholder groups. Based on data obtained during the first year, the goal for the second year was to develop greater coherence in policy and practice and to evaluate the potential impact of these revised policies and practices on stakeholders. As such, this section is divided into two phases for ease of reading and to underscore how the first phase led to the second phase.

Phase I: Needs Assessment

AMS is a middle school located in a midwestern suburb. At the close of this study, AMS consisted of 417 seventh- and eighth-grade students and 49 faculty and staff members. According to state data, as of July 2014, 86.8% of the students at AMS qualify for free or reduced lunch. The racial breakdown of the students is 86.8% African American, 4.8% biracial or multiracial, 4.4% Caucasian, and 3.9% Hispanic/Latino(a). Linguistically, 0.5% of AMS students are English language learners. 20.3% of students at AMS are students with disabilities, and 3.7% of AMS students are chronically truant.

Participants

Eight students and eight educators were interviewed. All eight educators were female. Educator participants included all three administrators (two principals and a vice-principal) for this school, two social workers, the school psychologist, and two teachers. Two of these educators were African American and six were Caucasian. Their years of experience at this school ranged from 3 to 10 years, and their total years in education spanned from 2 to 25 years. Of the eight students who participated in the initial interviews, four were in seventh grade and four were in eighth grade. Four were female and four were male, and all were African American.

A total of 334 students across both seventh and eighth grade were surveyed. Of the students who chose to provide demographic information, there were 165 seventh graders (52.2%) and 151 eighth graders (47.8%), of which 166 (52.0%) were female and 153 (48.0%) were male.

Measures

Two measures were used: interviews and surveys. For the interviews, a semistructured interview protocol was developed by the university researchers and the school-based team. Two versions of the interview protocol were developed (see Appendix A), one using language targeting school staff and the other using student-centered language. The questions were designed to gain an understanding of how key stakeholders, including staff and student leaders involved in the antibullying efforts, perceived the school's antibullying initiatives and their own role in stopping bullying at AMS.

The survey was multifaceted and borrowed from several sources. The first 18 items in these student surveys had to do with whether students engaged in bullying behaviors, were victims of bullying, and/or engaged in fighting behavior. These items have been found to load into three subscales: bullying (Cronbach's alpha=.87), fighting (Cronbach's alpha=.83), and victimization (Cronbach's alpha=.88) and came directly from the Illinois Bullying Survey (Espelage & Holt, 2001).

The next questions consisted of selected items from an empirically validated measure developed by Varjas, Henrich, and Meyers (2008) that focused on the location of bullying observed by students at AMS. In addition to asking about the frequency and type of bullying behaviors, the survey also inquired about students' reactions to bullying behaviors and their beliefs as to what they should do and what the school should do in response to bullying incidents through researcher-developed questions. Further, the survey asked about the students' knowledge and their opinion of the effectiveness of the various antibullying programs enacted at the school. These items were created by the researchers and the school-based team. A full copy of this survey is appended. This information can also be accessed at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/P98TTC9>.

Procedure

During the spring 2011, the school psychologist at AMS sought help from the university research team to assess the antibullying initiatives in place and to use research-based practices more effectively. This led to the first author speaking with the school's administration about a possible consultation and evaluation project. At first, the school's request was to evaluate the impact of the school's antibullying practices. Upon further discussion, however, it seemed that although the administrators and mental health personnel could list numerous school initiatives that had the aim of reducing bullying, there was not an overarching plan that tied these initiatives together nor a clear sense of how well known or understood these approaches were across the school. Therefore, the initial step was to interview key stakeholders, who were students and staff who had been involved in at least one substantive antibullying activity during that school year. A workgroup consisting of the school's two principals, two social workers, school psychologist, and the university partners was established and this team met monthly during the duration of this project.

A series of needs assessment questions (described in the next section) were developed by the project team to be asked of key stakeholders in individual interviews. Using IRB-approved protocols, educators

were recruited through e-mail, with an explanation of the goals of the study and that participation was purely voluntary and anonymous. Student participants were recruited through a parental consent form sent home.

The interviews were conducted over two separate days during a 3-week school period from December 2011 to January 2012. The interviews were audio recorded in accordance with the assent of participants (and the written consent of the students' parents). Using a grounded theory process described by Creswell (2012), these interviews were transcribed by members of the university research team. The university team members read over each transcript and each member created a list of possible coding themes. These coding themes were reviewed and refined by the team to determine if all major concepts from the interviews had been captured. Using this codebook, every team member coded two interviews chosen for the richness of data to determine what changes needed to be made to the codebook. Once agreement was reached, the remaining transcripts were coded independently, with two raters reviewing each transcript. Coding discrepancies were minimal, and at the last data analysis meeting these disagreements were discussed and resolved such that in the end 100% reliability in coding was achieved across all 16 transcripts. These codes were used as a starting point for discussions with the project team regarding plans for the following year.

Upon the analysis of interview findings, conversations between the university team and AMS determined that an end-of-the-year survey would provide valuable information as to how students perceive bullying at their school and the effectiveness of the antibullying initiatives in place at that time. In the absence of preexisting data—tracking systems for bullying incidents were not well-developed at AMS at this point—the idea was to use these data both in the short term to get a better sense of the prevalence rates and forms of different types of bullying and also for the long term to have baseline data from which progress in subsequent years might be measured.

A letter was sent home to parents describing the goals and contents of the survey. Parents were informed of their right to decline participation of their children. The survey was administered to all AMS students in May 2012 over the course of several days. School leadership determined the schedule of the survey administration, which was held in the school's computer lab and given to students during their advisory class at a preassigned time. Data were stored in the first author's Survey Monkey account, to which only research team members had access. As before, results were shared with project team members for planning purposes.

Results

The analysis of the key stakeholder interviews yielded the following six themes.

Priorities of stakeholders. All the stakeholders interviewed by the research team viewed bullying as a priority. As one school administrator stated, “it is a priority because it is a necessity.” Most students interviewed discussed bullying as though it were a constant presence in their school lives. Educators indicated that bullying had definitely come to the forefront of the school's efforts over the past year or so. However, sometimes the importance paled in comparison to other responsibilities. For example, one teacher when asked about the importance of bullying to her professional role stated, “I think it's very important for any teacher, any educator, any adult to make that a priority.” However, that same teacher, when asked about how much of a priority combating bullying was to the school as a whole, stated, “Unfortunately I think with all the other things that teachers have to deal with curriculum-wise, data ... everything. I think that kind of gets put on the back burner.”

Clarity on individual and group roles. The adults tended to have a clear view of their own role in the school's efforts. For example, when asked about the school's antibullying efforts the two social workers and school psychologists spoke about the groups and events that they led, the administrators spoke about initiatives they had spearheaded, and the teachers tended to speak of efforts in their own classroom. However, these adults did not outline others' roles in the school's antibullying efforts.

Although students and teachers acknowledged they had a role in the antibullying efforts, they were not able to describe their role with specificity. For instance, in a representative comment, one teacher indicated, “It is important for every educator to make this [bullying] a priority.” Students tended to define their role in individual, rather than systemic, terms. For instance, a few students mentioned that when you see bullying, you should stop it. Parents were mentioned peripherally regarding the antibullying efforts. Though several educators stated that they would like to see more parents engaged in this conversation, how this could be accomplished and the potential role that parents might play was not well defined.

Evaluation of current efforts. Students tended to provide very different answers than educators. From the student perspective, participants consistently indicated that the school approached bullying in a punitive way. Several indicated that although the adults in the building talked the talk of prevention, they did not see prevention in action. Many students, in their advice for adults at the school, mentioned educators should not just punish negative behavior but take the time to talk about it with a student and explain *why* something they are doing is bad. Students felt that reporting was an important part of antibullying efforts, though they said most students typically let bullying happen without telling anyone. In terms of specific initiatives, the students knew about the school’s bullying hotline but felt it was not used. There were mixed reviews regarding other efforts, such as assemblies and skits. Some of the students reported these to be effective and others felt these efforts were more effective for those students actually involved in the planning process than for the students as a whole.

From the educator perspective, the Peace Summit, a day-long, school-wide event focused on bringing positive community perspectives to the students, was widely regarded as a very positive and effective initiative. The Peace Summit was generally the most well-known initiative across all participants. Otherwise, educators typically mentioned those components of the antibullying initiatives that they have a direct role in (i.e., the bullying hotline, mediation, intervention, advisory) as being the most effective. Most educators felt parent participation in school efforts was lower than desired.

School conditions that have an impact on success of antibullying efforts. A few educators mentioned that low socioeconomic status of the families sending students to AMS may have an impact on the pervasiveness of bullying, though it was not fully specified how this was a barrier. Others indicated that a lack of communication between staff members and lack of communication between school and home also had a negative impact on antibullying efforts.

Information on measurement efforts (if any) and what these look like. Some educators had the general impression that things are improving but they stated that they were basing this impression on anecdotal evidence and observations. The dean in charge of school discipline indicated that some tracking of bullying referrals was being done, but it was unclear to the researchers if that information was being used. The school had included a few questions related to bullying in previous student and parent surveys. However, most of the stakeholders interviewed did not know if and how the survey data were being used toward programmatic decision making. Several stakeholders also mentioned that sharing these collected data with the school community was a difficult task that had not occurred.

Lessons learned and advice for others. The educators felt, overall, that combating bullying took a lot of time and teamwork. There were many comments that greater coordination of initiatives was needed. Students, on the other hand, typically viewed the antibullying initiatives from a more individual standpoint. They typically viewed adults as doling out punishments for negative behavior but felt that adults did not take the time to explain to students why certain behaviors were destructive.

Student Survey Results: Spring 2012

Since this survey was replicated the following year, for ease of interpretation these data were presented in combination with the 2013 survey results (see Tables 1–6).

Table 1. Percentage of Students in 2012 and 2013 Who Participated, Observed, and/or Experienced Behaviors Associated With Bullying at Least Once in the Past 30 Days

	Spring 2012 (%)	Spring 2013 (%)
I hit back when someone hit me first.	74.8	70.0
I was mean to someone when I was angry.	67.1	56.7
Other students called me names.	62.3	61.7
I threatened to hurt or hit another student.	54.8	52.8
In a group I teased other students.	50.3	43.9
I got hit and pushed by other students.	47.3	40.6
Other students picked on me.	42.2	60.6
I got into a physical fight because I was angry.	39.2	21.1
I teased other students.	36.5	48.9
I started (instigated) arguments or conflicts.	35.3	31.7
I excluded other students from my clique of friends.	34.1	34.4
I upset other students for the fun of it.	29.9	40.6
I got in a physical fight.	29.6	30.6
I encouraged people to fight.	29.0	31.7
I spread rumors about other students.	22.1	20.6
I helped harass other students.	18.9	28.3
I fought students I could easily beat.	11.7	10.0

Note. Minimum response rate for question items was 95.5%.

Table 2. Locations Where Bullying Behaviors Were Witnessed at Least Once in the Last 30 Days

	Spring 2012: Student Survey (%)	Spring 2013: Student Survey (%)	Fall 2013: Teacher Survey (%)
In my classroom	59.3	60.6	77.3
In the locker room	59.3	70.6	28.6
In the hallways	58.7	68.3	100
In the cafeteria/lunchroom	56.9	66.1	38.1
Outside on school property	53.6	63.9	28.6
In the gym	46.7	65.6	22.7
In the locker areas	46.4	60.6	59.1
On the way home from school	43.7	54.4	25.0
In the bathroom	38.9	32.2	23.8
Going to school	29.0	35.6	9.5
In the library	15.9	36.7	14.3

Note. Minimum response rate for question items was 95.5%.

Table 3. Student Reactions to Witnessing Bullying, 2012 and 2013 Data

	2012 Students (<i>n</i> = 308) (%)	2013 Students (<i>n</i> = 174) (%)
I have never seen anyone bullied at our school.	11.7	13.8
I join in with the bullying.	1.6	1.7
I watch but do not join in.	17.5	14.9
I try to stop the bullying by talking to those involved.	19.2	17.2
I tell a teacher or another adult.	12.7	10.3
I do nothing.	18.8	18.4
I would like to help but I do not know what to do.	18.5	23.6

Phase II: Initial Interventions

Six teachers participated in individual interviews in May 2013. Five interviewees were women. Five interviewees were Caucasian, with the sixth being African American. No additional demographic information was gathered in order to protect the identity of the respondents.

A total of 182 students completed a survey in June 2013. Ninety-three (51.4%) participants were male and 88 (48.6%) were female. In terms of grade level, 111 (61.7%) seventh graders and 69 (38.3%) eighth graders completed the survey. Additionally, 23 teachers completed the teacher survey in September 2013. Per request, no demographic teacher data were collected in order to protect the identity of respondents.

Measures

Two measures were used: interviews and surveys. Interview questions, created by the project team, were designed to gain an understanding of how teachers perceived their role and competency in bullying prevention and intervention efforts, as well as their perception of changes at AMS regarding antibullying programming and effects. See Appendix B for a copy of this protocol.

Table 4. Student Reasons for Not Getting Involved in Bullying Situations, 2012 and 2013 Data

	2012 Students (<i>n</i> = 334) (%)	2013 Students (<i>n</i> = 182) (%)
It wasn't my business to get involved.	63.2	63.2
I did not know what to do or whom to talk to.	14.7	16.5
If I told someone, they wouldn't do anything about it.	12.9	15.9
I didn't want to tell on other people.	13.2	14.8
I didn't think the bullying was that bad.	8.7	8.8
I didn't want to get in trouble for telling.	6.9	10.4
I didn't think it would make a difference if I got involved.	18.9	22.5
I thought I might be bullied myself if I did something.	14.4	21.4

Table 5. Knowledge About Antibullying Efforts Reported on Student Surveys Over 2 Years

Effort	2012 Student Mean (<i>SD</i>)	2013 Student Mean (<i>SD</i>)
Peer mediation	1.63 (.75)	1.58 (.72)
Student advisors	1.81 (.73)	1.70 (.72)
Bullying hotline	1.74 (.74)	1.82 (.80)
Assemblies and skits	1.90 (.78)	1.89 (.81)
Posters	2.01 (.78)	1.90 (.78)
Peace Summit	2.30 (.76)	2.14 (.80)
Intervention room	1.96 (.85)	2.15 (.79)

Note. Minimum response rate for question items was 96.7%. Scale: 1 = *nothing*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *a lot*.

The student survey was identical to the survey administered the previous year. The teacher survey contained the items from Varjas et al. (2008) regarding the location of bullying, as well as several items created by the researchers and school-based team related to teachers' self-perceived competence and confidence in handling bullying situations and their assessment of the effectiveness of various antibullying efforts in place at AMS. There were also five open-ended questions:

- How do you usually respond when you don't see bullying but are told about it by a student or students?
- How do other teachers at AMS typically respond when they don't see bullying but are told about it by a student or students?
- What usually happens (e.g., what are the consequences) to kids at AMS who bully?
- What is something that AMS as a school does well when it comes to preventing and responding to bullying?
- What is your main suggestion for how AMS can improve when it comes to preventing and responding to bullying?

Procedures

The main goal of the 2012–2013 academic year was to use the needs assessment data gathered in the 2011–2012 academic year to enhance the school's antibullying practices. As will be described in more

Table 6. Effectiveness of Antibullying Efforts Reported Across 2 Years

Effort	Spring 2012 Student Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Spring 2013 Student Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Fall 2013 Teacher Mean (<i>SD</i>)
Posters	1.54 (.68)	1.44 (.66)	1.87 (.55)
Peer mediation	1.60 (.70)	1.50 (.70)	2.10 (.64)
Bullying hotline	1.58 (.65)	1.52 (.69)	1.95 (.39)
Assemblies and skits	1.67 (.74)	1.51 (.67)	1.90 (.54)
Student advisors	1.64 (.73)	1.61 (.72)	1.65 (.59)
Peace Summit	1.97 (.76)	1.73 (.72)	2.16 (.50)
Intervention room	1.92 (.81)	1.87 (.80)	2.23 (.53)

Note. Scale: 1 = not effective, 2 = a little effective, 3 = very effective.

detail in the Results section, student survey findings from the previous year highlighted that the students were experiencing a high frequency of bullying and did not rate any of the school's antibullying efforts as being particularly effective. In addition, interview findings suggested that students and educators alike found the school's approach to bullying in need of improvement.

From these and other findings, ongoing topics and projects that resulted during the 2012–2013 school year included the development and implementation of a standard protocol and chain of command for responding to bullying. This protocol incorporated principles of restorative justice (the staff went through previously scheduled restorative justice training prior to the start of the school year), leveled consequences/responses for each type of negative behavior or “offense,” PowerPoint presentations for teachers and students containing explicit instruction on the new bullying policies and ways to respond to bullying constructively, specially designed parent pamphlets with information on the school's new policies and practices (these were distributed at parent-teacher conferences in early November 2012), and presentations for students and parents that were given at the school's Peace Summit in November 2012.

The project team worked through the year to develop this protocol and to monitor its implementation. Near the close of the school year, an educator interview protocol was designed in order to examine potential impact and to assess if progress had been made from the previous year. All staff was eligible to participate and a recruitment letter was sent by e-mail from the first author. As before, all interviews were conducted by university team members, and the procedures for securing assent, as well as recording, transcribing, and analyzing data were identical to the techniques employed the previous year. Additionally, a student interview protocol was created and a recruitment letter was sent home with all students. Unfortunately, efforts to recruit student participants were unsuccessful.

Finally, two surveys were conducted. The first was a replication of the student survey conducted the year prior, with identical recruitment and data analysis procedures. The second was a teacher survey. Teacher survey participants were recruited at a presentation made by the first author in fall 2013. The first author presented the results of the past two student surveys at a faculty meeting and provided a link to complete an anonymous teacher survey. Responses were stored on the first author's Survey Monkey account.

Results

What follows are the results of the student and teacher surveys and the teacher interviews.

Student surveys. Students were asked to describe how often a wide range of behaviors associated with bullying occurred over the past 30 days. Given answer options of *never*, *1 or 2 times*, *3 or 4 times*, *5 or 6 times*, *7 or more times*, and *at least once*. Table 1 presents the percentage of students for each item who did not select *never*. These results indicate that the most frequent behavior—in both spring 2012 and spring 2013—is “I hit back when someone hits me first.” The least commonly reported behavior from both the 2012 and 2013 surveys was “I fought students I could easily beat.”

The second question asked how often students had seen bullying occur in various locations over the past 30 days. Answer options were *never*, *1 or 2 times*, *3 or 4 times*, *5 or 6 times*, and *7 or more times*. Table 2 presents the percentage of students who saw bullying occur at least once for each location. This identical question was asked in the teacher survey. Therefore, teacher responses are also provided in Table 2 for comparison purposes. Teachers reported higher frequency of bullying behaviors in the classroom and in the hallways than students, but tended to report seeing bullying occur at least once less often in most other areas. Within the 2013 student surveys, the most frequently reported locations where bullying occurred included the locker room (70.6%), in the hallways (68.3%), and in the cafeteria/lunchroom (66.1%). Bullying was reported to occur least often in the bathroom (32.2%). In 2012, the most common locations for bullying to occur included the classroom (59.3%), in the locker room (59.3%), in the hallways (58.7%), and in the cafeteria/lunchroom (56.9%).

The third and fourth questions related to bystander behavior. The third question was “How do you usually react when you see someone being bullied at school?” The results are presented in Table 3. The fourth question was “If you did not do anything the last time you saw or heard about another student bullying, what was the reason?” A variety of options were presented and students were asked to check all options that apply. Results are presented in Table 4. For both questions, there were great similarities in responses between 2012 and 2013, with students endorsing a range of responses and very few (less than 2%) indicating that they join in when they witness bullying.

The next two questions had to do with the efforts currently in place at AMS. Students were asked, with answer options of *nothing*, *a little*, and *a lot*, how much they knew about the seven antibullying efforts that the work team identified as most crucial to their antibullying work. These efforts were assemblies and skits, bullying hotline, intervention room, Peace Summit, peer mediation, posters, and student advisors. These results are presented in Table 5, with both groups of students indicating the highest level of awareness of the Peace Summit. The next question asked, on a scale of *not effective*, *a little effective*, and *very effective*, how effective each of these efforts had been. This identical question was asked on the teacher survey. No one intervention was identified as being particularly effective. Table 6 presents the student and teacher results for this question.

Students were also asked what teachers typically do when they see bullying. Given choices of *nothing*, *they ignore it*; *do something that makes the problem better*; and *do something that makes the problem worse*, in 2012, 61.4% ($N = 316$) of students indicated that teachers typically did something that made the problem better, but this figure went down to 58.1% ($N = 179$) in 2013. A chi-square analysis [$\chi^2(2, N = 495) = .52, p = .47$] yielded no statistically significant difference. Relatedly, in 2012, 12.7% of students indicated that teachers typically ignore bullying and this figure rose to 19.6% in 2013. This is a statistically significant difference [$\chi^2(2, N = 495), = 4.22, p < .05$].

Finally, students were asked what do teachers typically do at school when they do not see bullying but are told about it by a student or students. In 2012, 52.4% ($N = 313$) of students indicated that teachers do something to make the problem better, as compared to 46.9% ($N = 177$) of students who said this in 2013. A chi-square comparison showed this not to be a statistically significant difference [$\chi^2(2, N = 490) = 1.37, p = .24$]. Similarly, in 2012, 31.6% of students indicated that teachers ignore reports of bullying when told of this by students and in 2013 this figure increased to 37.9%. This also was not a statistically significant difference [$\chi^2(2, N = 490) = 3.27, p = .07$].

Table 7. Teacher Report of Degree of Which Various Forms of Bullying is a Problem at AMS ($N = 23$)

Form of Bullying	Mean (<i>SD</i>)
Verbal bullying is a serious problem among students at our school.	3.30 (.63)
Social bullying is a serious problem among students at our school.	3.13 (.63)
Electronic bullying is a serious problem among students at our school.	2.87 (.76)
Physical bullying is a serious problem among students at our school.	2.65 (.65)
Gender-based bullying is a serious problem among students at our school.	2.43 (.51)
Sexual bullying is a serious problem among students at our school.	2.30 (.56)
Racial bullying is a serious problem among students at our school.	1.91 (.67)
Religion-based bullying is a serious problem among students at our school.	1.86 (.47)

Note. Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree.

Table 8. AMS Teacher Assessment of Bullying at Their School (*N* = 23)

	Mean (<i>SD</i>)
Our school is proactive when it comes to students treating each other with respect.	2.91 (.61)
There is a high degree of bullying at our school.	2.65 (.65)
Dedicating time and resources to addressing the problem of bullying is one of our highest priorities.	2.65 (.65)
Relative to other priorities, we commit a substantial amount of time and resources to addressing the problem of bullying.	2.65 (.49)
The amount of time and resources we commit to bullying prevention initiatives is sufficient to effectively deal with bullying at our school.	2.57 (.59)

Note. Scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree.

Teacher surveys. In fall 2013, AMS teachers completed a survey regarding their assessment of bullying at their school. Teachers were asked to what degree different forms of bullying were a problem at AMS. Table 7 displays the results, with verbal and social bullying obtaining the highest mean scores. Additionally, teachers were asked to evaluate the degree to which the AMS prioritizes bullying. These results are presented in Table 8, with teachers providing mean responses suggestive of tepid agreement in most cases.

Additionally, teachers were asked identical questions to the student survey relating to how often they have seen bullying at AMS at various locations and how effective AMS's antibullying efforts are. These results are shown in Tables 2 and 6, respectively.

In terms of procedures followed by the school, 78.3% (*N* = 23) of teachers indicated that the school has a report form for bullying incidents and an easy method for reporting suspected bullying. Additionally, 69.8% of teachers also reported a clear set of procedures, listed in the student handbook, that are taken in all bullying reports. On the other hand, 8.7% reported the school either does not have any such procedures for bullying behaviors or that they are not aware of any such procedures. Further, 90.0% of teachers reported feeling supported by school administration in the actions they take to resolve bullying situations. Additionally, 91.9% of teachers reported feeling confident about their ability to respond to bullying incidents.

This survey had five open-ended questions that were coded inductively. When asked how they usually respond when they see bullying, teachers reported they typically engage in a series of steps. Though there was some variability in number of steps and extent of involvement, a teacher responded, "Ask the student if [he or she is] interested in filing a bullying report. Refer students to the social worker for the purpose of mediation. Report situation to the school dean and administrator," and this captured the most common steps identified. Two teachers stated they attempt to get the parents involved. One of these teachers stated, "I address the students but without telling where I've heard about it. I let them know it's unacceptable and to let me know if it's happening either way. I also talk to parents to get them involved." Overall, teacher responses tended to be very action oriented and follow a similar path regarding attempted resolution, reporting of the situation, and contacting either administration or parents. Similarly, when asked how *other* teachers respond to bullying incidents, teachers reported similar behaviors.

Regarding actual consequences for students who bully at AMS, teacher responses varied greatly. Some named typical consequences, such as detention, in-school suspension (intervention room), out-of-school

suspension, and referrals, whereas others mentioned teaching-oriented approaches. For instance, one teacher reported:

Principals have sent students home with a required parent meeting in order to come back. Principals have made special arrangements for students who have been bullied and still aren't ready to come back to school due to the trauma, [and they] make the time and effort to form relationships with the students who are victims.

Another teacher stated, "Not much" happens to students who bully, and found peer mediations to be "ineffective" in addressing bullying because "on numerous occasions, the kids fight right after those meetings."

When asked what AMS does well in their response to bullying, multiple teachers cited that problems are handled promptly and with a clear idea of consequences. Others reported initiatives, such as the Peace Summit, individual intervention, and peer mediations, as well as other preventative efforts such as "education" and "discuss bullying during PBIS time." In terms of how AMS could improve its prevention of and response to bullying, a majority of teachers called for more stringent consequences implemented with greater consistency. A few teachers suggested more drastic measures such as "two strikes and you're out policy," or having parents "pay harassment fines" that are refundable if the student stops the bullying behaviors. One teacher proposed talking with the "major players" who bully most frequently, and "doing something about them." Other teachers encouraged greater awareness on the part of teachers as to what constitutes bullying and what the students are saying to one another. In terms of prevention, several teachers recommended more videos regarding bullying, discussion in class, uniforms, and a problem-solving class for students who struggle to make good decisions.

Teacher interviews. Data from teacher interviews (see Appendix B) conducted in spring 2013 resulted in the following seven themes.

Feelings of training and preparedness: Regarding previous bullying response training at AMS, participants articulated a range of responses from a generalized sense of inadequacy to feelings of preparedness when faced with a bullying incident. Teachers consistently indicated that no formal response training was delivered other than training to one specific initiative, restorative justice (which was not being used). Teachers believed they would be more prepared to handle a situation if they received outside training.

Causes of bullying: The majority of teachers interviewed believed culture is the main factor contributing to the prevalence of bullying at AMS. They stated that students tend to bring in outside problems, such as violence observed throughout society and on television, and communication on social media sites, into the school. One teacher also explained the difficulty of staff and students determining the difference between joking and bullying and deciding when joking "crosses the line."

Change in school's antibullying policy: Almost all teachers thought antibullying efforts at AMS have become a priority and believed bullying incidents were dealt with more effectively this year than during previous school years. One teacher was happy with a particular school initiative, known as the intervention room, specific to the idea of getting "problem students" out of the classroom so teachers do not have to deal with those students. Therefore, teachers could place more attention on the remainder of students in their classrooms.

Typical response to bullying incidences: Although the teachers interviewed believe the school staff as a whole is better able to respond to bullying situations involving their students than during the previous school year, these participants indicated that there continues to be much variation from classroom to classroom. Participants indicated that, typically, teachers tend to pull students aside, especially students known to be involved in bullying or other negative behavior, to discuss the situation. For bullying cases

they deem to be more severe, teachers refer involved students to the school social workers and administrators.

Evaluation of current efforts: Participants indicated that although there was greater awareness of bullying among both teachers and students, the actual prevalence of bullying has not changed. A common explanation for why this is the case was changes in the school structure itself, with fewer teachers and staff overall as compared to the previous year. Indeed, one teacher commented that if it was the case that there was no increase in bullying from the year prior this should be considered progress since the staffing levels had been reduced so dramatically. That said, participants indicated that there was much room for improvement when it comes to teacher training and the consistency of teacher responses to bullying.

Communication between stakeholders: In general, the teachers thought the school social workers and school psychologist at AMS do a good job of informing teachers and providing follow up regarding referred students. Participants indicated that greater communication regarding bullying was needed between the school and the AMS families.

Recommendations for the next steps: The majority of teachers interviewed believe more consistency is needed in antibullying efforts. Said one teacher, “I think we need to go ahead with restorative justice and implement it with a formal program that we put in place.” Other recommendations include staff training regarding what is and what is not bullying, promoting positive behaviors, and defining teacher responsibilities. One participant in a representative comment regarding the role of students in reducing bullying said, “I think we have to get the kids to care again.”

DISCUSSION

This study was a multiyear, multiphase middle school/university collaboration. The process and findings provide a glimpse of a school that has sought to reduce bullying and took several steps to achieve this vision. Unfortunately, the frequency of bullying did not decrease. Although this is not surprising given the common finding that positive systemic change takes years, not months, to occur (Castillo & Curtis, 2014), this was disappointing for all involved nevertheless. However, much can be gained from analyzing this study, both in terms of positive changes and lessons learned.

On the positive side, during a period of under 2 years the school moved from a position of having no usable data as relates to bullying to having 2 years’ worth of student surveys, 2 years’ worth of teacher interviews, a teacher survey, a clear process for responding to bullying that was put to writing and shared with teachers and families, and a streamlined tracking process that both principals and teachers felt was much more effective. Additionally, AMS refined and expanded their Peace Summit as a primary prevention tool. An integrated antibullying model has been formed and data-based decision making around bullying has become the norm at AMS. This type of embedded effort with multiple interrelated components is critical, particularly for a challenge as vexing and multifaceted as bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

Additionally, this study did not collect data from just one source, but through a PAR framework the team specifically sought to include and privilege the ideas of stakeholders representing different groups (students, teachers, social workers, school psychologist, and school administration). Many participants noted that they appreciated and valued the opportunity in the interviews to reflect on their practice and on what was going on in their school. As noted by Espelage, Low, and Jimerson (2014), when seeking to influence school climate, as in a bullying prevention project, obtaining the perspective of both students and staff is critical. In this case, by first collecting data from major stakeholders involved in the antibullying initiatives, the university/middle school team was able to better understand the landscape of bullying initiatives at AMS, as well as overlap between stakeholders’ definitions of bullying and

perspectives on program efficacy. Using these data, the team was able to work with the AMS workgroup to develop a more streamlined antibullying process.

The student survey data obtained were consistent with previous research regarding both the frequency and location of bullying in middle school (Hughes et al., 2009; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005), indicating that AMS is a fairly representative school. The teachers at AMS reported higher levels of bullying than students in the spaces that teachers occupy most frequently (e.g., the classroom and in the hallways), whereas students reported higher levels of bullying than teachers in areas where adult supervision is less likely (e.g., locker room, cafeteria, going to and from school). This indicates that teachers at AMS are aware of bullying but are underestimating the full scope of the student experience when it comes to bullying, which is consistent with the findings from Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan's (2007) large-scale study, among others. Additionally, whereas educators reported a commitment to bullying prevention, student feedback indicated that these efforts were largely unseen, which calls into question whether this commitment translated into effective action. In a study of sixth graders across 36 middle schools, Espelage, Polanin, and Low (2014) found that when teachers report high levels of bullying but do not have a significant commitment to change, the climate will not improve. Therefore, the lack of change in 1 year is not surprising.

Application to School Psychology Practice

This project began when a school psychologist, placed in a position of responsibility for her school's antibullying efforts, reached out to faculty and students from her graduate program for support. Whereas not all school psychologists have access to a local university faculty member and graduate students who are willing to volunteer their time and energies over 2 years, very often school psychologists do have the opportunity to be involved in bullying prevention efforts (Brooks, Jenkins, Montes de Oca, & Immen, 2014). Essentially, this project used the problem-solving method endorsed in the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2010) Practice Model with an empowerment framework. Therefore, the pattern of this study—assembling a project team, defining goals and priorities, conducting a needs assessment, testing out a new approach based on that needs assessment, and then analyzing the potential impact of the intervention—is quite familiar in modern school psychology practice.

This study's findings speak to the difference between technical and adaptive challenges. Technical changes can be solved through the knowledge of experts or senior authorities (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004). For example, if your computer freezes as you are reading this article and you do not know how to fix this, a friend with greater expertise or an IT professional likely can solve this problem. Adaptive challenges, by contrast, cannot be solved by logic, but rather the solutions come from changing people's values and/or behaviors (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004). From this framework, bullying is a textbook adaptive challenge. Bullying cannot be solved through logic or administrative fiat. Rather, as Heifetz and Linsky (2004) state, "The solutions to adaptive challenges lie not in technical answers, but rather in people themselves" (p. 35). Thinking about this study from this perspective, although many successful technical changes occurred—most notably in obtaining clarity in defining bullying and in the streamlining of responses to bullying—where this study fell short was in adaptive change.

Moving forward, now that the rates of bullying have been documented and increased attention has been provided to the topic, recommended future steps involve regular dialogue between different stakeholders as to the causes of bullying at AMS and what adaptive changes might be required for long-term change. At its root bullying is about power and power dynamics and will not change without recognition, humility, and coordinated effort. Although many people at all levels of AMS clearly cared about bullying and when asked they often stated that bullying was a big problem at the school that required more attention, there was not a call for systemic changes involving all parties. Rather, students tended to suggest that teachers and other students needed to change, and educators tended to point the finger at students and their families. Although there is no doubt that all parties—including the university

research team—have room for growth, in the end only technical changes were applied for a challenge that requires both technical and adaptive change.

Although technical changes were needed and represent a logical starting point, moving forward the plan is to introduce and push for practices and measures associated with adaptive change. For example, now that emphasis has been placed on streamlining administrative practices in response to bullying, a logical next step would be the creation of measures aimed at empowering students to bring their ideas forward in a coordinated and supportive manner. Similarly, steps to create time, space, and support for interested teachers to meet and share ideas, perhaps with support from the university research team, is recommended. The school principals indicated that they desired to lead but often lacked the time for follow through, as evidenced by the rollout of the restorative justice training without accompanying next steps. Therefore, steps to create space for others—students, teachers, families, other community members—to develop their ideas with the support of school administrators to innovate and experiment are recommended.

Study Limitations

The strength of PAR is the ability to use multiple methods with different stakeholder groups to form a comprehensive picture representing divergent views. In this case, a picture of both the frequency and types of bullying at AMS and of stakeholders' perceptions on what is underlying these data were formed. However, a limitation of this approach is that the knowledge generated can be site-specific. That is, as with much mixed methods research, the extent to which this information can be generalized beyond AMS is unknown.

The fact that this study contains data from students and educators across multiple data points and in different formats is a strength of this study, though a limitation is that the voices of parents and families are not represented. At the start of the project, bringing families into the mix was often discussed and families were a target audience for the new bullying protocol adopted in the second year of this project. Additionally, the first author made a presentation to families at the AMS's Peace Summit sharing the study's findings and seeking family input. However, a repeated refrain from teachers and the school administrators was that parent involvement was low in this school. There was also an undercurrent among some educators that parents were more related to the cause of bullying than the solution. The university researchers likely gave up on this topic too easily, holding the initial idea that once the project gained momentum it would be easier to make the case for including families. However, this did not come to pass.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a glimpse into a multifaceted antibullying needs assessment and initial intervention, featuring quantitative and qualitative data collected from multiple stakeholders over 2 years. Although gains were made in the use of data-based decision making and the formation of an ongoing work team focused on bullying prevention, and whereas teachers felt confident in their abilities and in the abilities of school administrators, ultimately there was not a reduction in bullying. Whereas top-down technical changes were made by the school administration in terms of how it tracked and responded to bullying and in terms of modifying policies and communicating these changes to teachers and families, moving forward it is recommended that more bottom-up adaptive change measures are adopted in this school, such as the formation of student, teacher, and/or family/community groups that provide feedback and intervention ideas to school personnel. Additionally, given the promise of action research as a framework for collaborative action led by school psychologists (Song et al., 2014), we recommend future antibullying research efforts in which participant priorities and feedback drive the process.

As for resources, the NASP website offers an abundance related to bullying prevention. For a comprehensive listing of these resources see <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/bullying/index.aspx>. Also, <http://www.stopbullying.gov> provides extensive information on how bullying is defined, tips for preventing and responding to bullying, and links to an overview of state laws for each state.

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APPENDIX A. KEY STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. As a (insert interviewee's role here), do you feel that combating bullying is a part of your professional (in the case of students, insert "student" for "professional") role. If so, why, and, if no, why not?
2. Do you think antibullying efforts have become a priority at AMS? Why or why not? (Probe: Specific incident?)
3. Can you explain the major components of your bullying efforts (Probe: Past efforts no longer being implemented as well as present efforts?) Who plays major roles in each of the major components?
4. What type of information regarding the school's bullying efforts is disseminated to the larger school community (students, teachers, parents)? How is this information disseminated to the larger school community?
5. Which components of the antibullying efforts do you think are working best? (Probe: Why?)
6. Which components of the antibullying efforts do you think have been less effective? (Probe: Why?)
7. Are there unique factors related to AMS that you feel facilitate or hinder bullying efforts?
8. Have you monitored the effectiveness of the antibullying efforts at AMS? If so, how?
9. What do you envision as the next steps for the antibullying efforts?
10. If you had a magic wand and could change one thing related to combating bullying at AMS, what would you change?
11. Where would you like to see AMS in 1 year when it comes to combating bullying?
12. (Probe: In terms of program components, school environments, staff roles, outcomes, etc.)
13. What advice would you offer to other educators within a middle school trying to implement antibullying efforts at their own school?
14. What advice would you offer to others within your profession (or, in the case of students, "other students" in place of "others within your profession") who are trying to implement antibullying efforts at their school?

APPENDIX B. TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. As a (insert interviewee's role here), to what extent, if at all, do you feel that combating bullying is part of your professional role? (Probe: Ask to elaborate if needed.)
2. To what extent, if at all, do you think antibullying efforts have become a priority at AMS? (Probe: Specific incident or examples?)
3. Do you feel that the priorities of AMS's antibullying efforts have shifted since the previous school year? If so, how?
4. Have you observed changes in the school's policy on bullying (consequences, bullying reporting, etc.)? If so, what types of changes have you seen?
5. Please describe the type of training, if any, you have received regarding the school's policy on bullying, as well as intervention? Has this training been effective?
6. As a (insert interviewee's role here), do you feel you are appropriately prepared to respond to and handle a bullying situation? Please elaborate.
7. Within this school year, have you been involved in a bullying situation? If so, how do you typically respond to a bullying incident? (Probe: Specific incident or examples.)
8. Please evaluate how effective you feel AMS is in combating bullying.
9. Please comment on how bullying compares now to the same time last year. Further, how does bullying compare to earlier in this school year? (Probe: Better or worse.)
10. Is information regarding the school's antibullying efforts disseminated to the larger school community (students, teachers, parents)? If so, how is this information and how would you rate the effectiveness of communication efforts so far?
11. When a bullying situation arises, please describe your communication with teachers and/or administrators.
12. Based on your experiences so far, what antibullying suggestions do you recommend AMS implement? (Probe for program components, school environment, staff roles, outcomes, etc.)