

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Whole-School Approach

Full Reference

Smith, J. D., Schneider, B. H., Smith, P. K., & Ananiadou, K. (2004). The effectiveness of whole-school anti-bullying programs: A synthesis of evaluation research. *School Psychology Review, 33*, 547-560.

Keywords

Antibullying programs, whole-school approach, program evaluation, bullying, schools

Main Questions

What evidence is there for the efficacy of whole-school anti-bullying programs? In other words, does the whole-school approach lead to a reduction in bullying and victimization? As well, does effectiveness depend on the age of the students, the characteristics of the intervention, or the characteristics of the research design?

Background

Bullying stems from multiple sources including the individual temperaments of the children involved in the bullying, the home environments of the children, and the school environments of the children. Bullying is a group process that involves many players including the children bullying and being victimized, the children standing by, and the adults in the vicinity. Each member of the group has the ability to intervene in the situation to stop, support, or ignore the bullying. The multiple causes and processes of bullying suggest multiple avenues for intervention. One of these avenues is known as the whole-school approach. The whole-school approach assumes that bullying is a systemic problem, requiring a systemic solution (i.e., one aimed at the entire school context rather than just at the individuals directly involved in the bullying). The positive aspect of the whole-school approach is that it avoids the stigmatization that can occur when individuals are singled out. It also avoids the negative effects that have been shown when aggressive children are brought together in a group for treatment (aggressive children teach each other new forms of aggression and encourage the behaviours).

Within the whole-school approach it is essential that all members of the school community, including staff, students, and parents, be taught basic information about bullying and how to respond to it.

Who Was Involved

Fourteen studies that evaluated a whole-school anti-bullying intervention were included in this study. Each study was coded on relevant features including components of the intervention (e.g., school policy, teacher workshops), the design of the studies (if they were controlled or not, whether there was random group assignment), the type of outcomes collected (e.g., observations, self-reports), ages and grades of students, and the time intervals involved in the intervention. Self-report was used in 13 of the 14 studies.

What We Found

Looking only at changes in the intervention groups from pre-test to post-test, 93% of programs yielded negligible or negative effects in reducing victimization. Similarly, 92% of programs yielded negligible or negative effects for reducing bullying of other children. Half of the studies (i.e., 7 of 14) provided enough information to compare the intervention to a control group (i.e., groups receiving no intervention). Under these more discerning evaluation conditions, 86% of victimization outcomes were negligible or negative and the remaining 14% of the effects were positive, but small. For self-reported bullying, 100% of the effects were negligible or negative.

Regarding program fidelity, seven of the 14 studies included verification that the program was delivered as intended. The programs that monitored program fidelity yielded more positive outcomes than programs without any formal monitoring procedures.

Only programs in primary and middle schools yielded any positive outcomes compared to programs in secondary schools, however this difference was not statistically significant.

Findings from this study raise concerns about the effectiveness of whole-school intervention programs

Implications

The results of evaluation studies of whole-school antibullying programs are too inconsistent to justify adopting a whole-school approach over other anti-bullying programs. There are a few instances of significant improvement following whole-school program implementation, but there are many more non-significant findings and even some findings opposite to the desired results. Strong and positive findings for the whole-school approach from countries such as Scandinavia, Finland, and Italy may be related to the quality of schools in those countries. If this is the case, more attention might be devoted to interventions that address the broader aspects of school climate.

This study has implications for research and practice alike. Researchers should include rigorous monitoring of program implementation to ensure that schools receive the intended programs. As for practice, despite the limited empirical support for the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs, there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that these programs should be abandoned. However, there also is no evidence for psychologists and educators to advocate for whole-school approaches to the exclusion of any other modality. The over-arching message is that intervention can succeed, but not enough is known to indicate exactly how and when. Psychologists should advocate carefully evaluated interventions in which the whole-school approach is implemented with precision and compared with other potentially useful interventions.