Potential anti-bullying breakthrough studied

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Your child comes home from school and tells you three classmates are teasing her constantly. One even put chewed gum in her hair as she was listening to the teacher. The other two smiled, laughed and whooped.

Hearing this, you understand your child is being bullied and their physical and mental well-being are under attack.

We know bullying is widespread: 30 per cent of adolescents experience bullying, and almost all see it happening. It can devastate victims and lead to depression, anxiety and self-harm.

We are educational psychologists researching how to prevent bullying. And how, in a different scenario, these children could even be friends.

Our new study, published in American Psychology, trialled a new way of tackling bullying among students in South Korea. Instead of trying to change individuals' behaviour, it puts the focus on how teachers can create an "anti-bullying climate" in their classes.

We believe this could be applied more broadly and provides a potential breakthrough in approaches to this crisis.

Previous bullying research

For 50 years, educators have tried and failed to develop successful bullying-reduction programs.

In a recent journal article, we reviewed existing school anti-bullying research. The results were disappointing. In particular, we found a focus on changing individual students' behaviour has been largely ineffective.

We know bystanders can play an important role in standing up to bullies. But this is a risky thing to do. If you stand up to a

bully, you put yourself at risk of retaliation and peer rejection. So bystanders are reluctant to support victims and discourage bullies. This is why individual approaches have not worked well.

This suggests we need to think more broadly about bullying and look at the social environment of the classroom to encourage more students to defend victims and defuse bullies.

Our research

To develop a new approach to tackle bullying, in a separate study we looked at 24 experienced, full-time physical education teachers in Seoul. The group included both male and female teachers, teaching adolescent students.

For each teacher, we looked at two different classes, so there were 48 classes in total and 1,178 students.

The teachers were randomly assigned into two groups over an 18-week semester. One group was given a new approach to bullying to try, called “autonomy-supportive teaching”, while the other had no intervention.

What is autonomy-supportive teaching?

The idea behind autonomy-supportive teaching is to prevent bullying by cultivating a caring, egalitarian classroom that minimises hierarchy, conflict and “me-vs-you” competition.

The teacher sets the tone in the classroom and they can foster an anti-bullying climate when they:

- Take the students’ perspective.
- Use an understanding tone when interacting with students.
- Provide an explanatory rationale for each request.
- Acknowledge and accept students’ negative feelings if they occur.

Research has shown when teachers do these things, students view teachers as “on their side”. This sense of being listened to and supported by the teacher then spills over to more supportive peer-to-peer relationships. Students then tend to support each other, and interpersonal conflict is low.

What happened in our study?

The teachers in our first group were asked to participate in an eight-hour autonomy-supportive teaching workshop at the start of semester. The teachers in the second group had no intervention from us, and approached their classes as they normally would.

Students in both groups were then surveyed at three points in the semester, asking them questions about the classroom climate.

Students were asked both how their teacher behaved and how they felt about their classmates. For example, they were asked to agree or disagree with statements including: “My teacher listens to how I would like to do things” and “My classmates try to understand how I see things”.

They were also asked about bystander behaviour and bullying, with questions such as: “I do something to help if I see a kid being called nasty names or threatened” and “In this class I was called names I didn’t like”.

Our findings

Using statistical analysis, we first tested whether teachers in group one followed the autonomy-supportive model as they were taught in the workshop. We found that they did.

We then tested whether students reported their classmates were supportive (as you would expect if the teacher was following the workshop’s advice), and also found they did.

We then tested whether students in this group were more likely to stand up for other students and less likely to experience bullying than those in group two (who did not follow the autonomy-supportive model).

Again, we found they were more likely to stand up to bullying and less likely to experience it.

Next steps

Our study showed how programs that change classroom climates can minimise bullying.

We are now hoping to extend our research in Australian school settings. We plan to scale up our program through online delivery.

This way, we can reach a larger, more diverse sample of schools, including those in remote locations.

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