Interrupting the Cycle Of Bullying and Victimization In the Elementary Classroom

When a group of elementary school teachers decided to pay more attention to bullying in their school, it clearly had an impact on the problem. But beyond that, as Ms. Siris and Ms. Osterman report, the teachers' increased awareness of their students' needs translated into a better learning environment overall.

BY KAREN SIRIS AND KAREN OSTERMAN

BULLYING may be viewed as an inevitable part of growing up, but it is hurtful and debilitating for the victims. Many eventually escape with only painful memories; for some, however, the repeated slights, harassment, rejection, and sense of isolation lead to violence — against themselves or others. Here's how one fourth-grader expressed the feeling of frustration:

> I feel I always get picked on at school. I don't get included at all. People tell me I am going to hell. I get called carrot top, loser, mentally retarded. I get so mad. I tell, and no one believes me. I cry, and still no one believes me. Sometimes I really want to kill myself.

While educators may hold the key to preventing and controlling bullying in the school, too often the daily incidents are ignored and overlooked.[1] The teachers at W. F. Boardman Elementary School in Oceanside, New York, however, decided to see if they could make a difference.

Following a districtwide workshop alerting teachers to the problem of bullying, a small group of Boardman teachers volunteered to participate in an action research project led by their principal.[2] As the first step, each teacher identified one student in his or her class who was a target of bullying by other students. The goal for the subsequent 10 weeks was to develop and implement an action plan designed to reduce the incidence of bullying and victimization.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

The victims of bullying, while equally likely to be boys or girls, differ from their peers in noticeable ways. Whether because of differences in their clothing, ethnic origin, appearance, or behavior, some students stand out and become vulnerable to bullying. These students are lonely and often insecure. When attacked, some withdraw, while

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others — "provocative" victims — react in kind. Such victims may tease and annoy their persecutors and not know when to stop. Their reactions to the initial bullying further alienate the victims from their peers and from their teachers.

The students who were selected for this study — first- through sixth-grade boys and girls representing the full spectrum of academic ability — shared many of the characteristics just noted. Some stood out because of their clothes; some were newly arrived immigrants with limited English skills; some kept to themselves and were easily upset; and some were bossy and would "egg" others on, tattle, and otherwise annoy their classmates.

While these kinds of behavioral problems are often attributed to deficits in the student or the family, this study focused on the effect that the classroom environment has on such students. The study examined whether changes in the classroom environment could address the students' unmet psychological needs. Children, like adults, have three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and a sense of belonging. When these needs are met in the classroom, students are more likely to be engaged socially and academically.[3]

Students in classrooms that provide for these needs have positive and supportive relationships with teachers and peers, and they enjoy school. In contrast, when these psychological needs are not met — when students are not successful, feel powerless, or feel they are not cared for — they disengage. School is no longer a positive experience, and they react by becoming withdrawn or aggressive.

Feeling rejected, in particular, has important social and academic consequences.[4] Students who feel like outcasts become more detached from adults and peers. Such students have poor attitudes about themselves and others, their relationships with others are unsuccessful, and they begin to reject classroom norms. This type of disengaged student looks remarkably similar to the victims of bullying observed in this study. If the behavior of students is influenced by their experience in the classroom, changes in the classroom should lead to changes in behavior. By adjusting their practice in the classroom to better address the psychological needs of the victims of bullying, the teachers in the study hoped to improve the quality of the students' experience and reduce the incidence of victimization.

GATHERING DATA

Before developing their plan, the teachers spent three weeks observing their classes. Specifically, they sought to identify situations in which the students selected for study experienced competence, autonomy, and a sense of belonging. What the teachers found surprised them.

Competence. When the teachers shared their observations, all had identified situations in their classes in which the students who had been victims of bullying had experienced success. The teachers realized that the victims had enjoyed fewer occasions in the limelight than their peers, but they had also seen firsthand how important these experiences were to the students.

> During a very challenging math lesson, students worked in pairs. Whoever solved the problem first would get a prize. Several children fought over having Michael as a partner. This made him feel wonderful.
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> Today, I pointed out several students who had followed my directions. James improved his posture immediately after. He maintained eye contact during instruction and raised his hand to participate. He seemed to feel great about himself.

Autonomy. Before they consciously observed their classes as part of the study, the teachers felt that they were providing students with ample opportunities for choice and self-expression. But when they examined their practice more closely, they found few instances in which students could act autonomously, other than in learning centers. One example of a situation that allowed students to make independent choices occurred during an outing to the zoo. James was excited about having the freedom to visit any animal he wished, and his teacher noticed how happy this made him. Here, too, the teachers recognized the importance of creating more opportunities for their students to experience self-direction.

Belonging. The teachers saw clearly how important positive personal relationships were to the students in their classes who had been bullied. For example, Sally was so pleased to be helping another student, and John glowed at having the chance to assist first-graders with their reading. The teachers were nonetheless surprised to realize that opportunities for students to develop relationships with one another within the classroom were few and far between. The teachers also realized that they themselves had few personal interactions with the students in the study. As one teacher poignantly commented, "We are struggling to find examples of how we are taking a personal interest in these students."

THE ACTION PLAN

As the teachers observed their classes, they developed

a deeper appreciation of how important it is to provide for students' psychological needs in the classroom, and they developed strategies to meet these needs. The teachers were particularly concerned about the need for the students who had been bullied to feel that they belonged. As one teacher explained, "I feel it is now my responsibility to expand Dina's circle of friends and help her learn to play with others."

Nurturing relationships and preventing exclusion. To increase the students' sense of belonging in the classroom, the teachers began spending more time with their students and creating more opportunities for students to get to know their classmates better. The teachers began to listen to what the students said about what was happening in their lives. The teachers took time to ask personal questions such as "What did you have for dinner last night?" or "What do you do for fun at home?"

Through these conversations, the teachers learned more about their students and developed a genuine fondness for them. In turn, their students were opening up, allowing the teachers to become even more aware of and sensitive to the students' needs and strengths. As David talked about how lonely he felt in school, his teacher better understood how important it was for students to feel safe in the classroom: "When you get to know a child better, when you listen deeply to what he has to share, you start to understand his life. You can't help but feel for him. It took a while to get to know him because he was so closed off. When he opened up, it was wonderful."

The teachers structured more shared learning activities and encouraged students to get to know one another. To ensure that no one would be left out when students chose partners for activities, the teachers developed rules stating that "anyone has to be welcome in a group" and that no one could be turned away. The teachers explained these rules to the class and established consequences for students who were not welcoming.

The teachers used mediation strategies to help students resolve conflicts. When Brittany called Dina names, their teacher called both students to her desk. In a nonjudgmental fashion, she asked the girls to explain their understanding of the situation. Dina had given another student a pencil, which hurt Brittany's feelings. Brittany then called Dina "nasty," which made Dina feel bad. Talking through the situation helped both students to understand the consequences of their behavior and to consider alternatives.

Addressing needs for competence and autonomy. The teachers showcased the work of the students in the study, identified ways for these students to show their strengths, provided them with recognition, and encouraged them to act independently. For example, Gary thrived in leadership roles, so his teacher assigned him a key position in a class project. "He did a phenomenal job." Ricky became a peer teacher, sharing his special expertise. "It was amazing to watch the way the students all wanted to be in his group. He was very excited." James read a poem about his family to the class, and "there was spontaneous applause." Although some kids get to make choices only on certain days, Michael's teacher set up choices for him every day. "He thrives on making his own decisions. This works for him, so I incorporate it as much as I can."

ASSESSMENT

While the changes in the teachers' instructional practice and the improved quality of their relationships with these victimized students directly affected the students' emotional well-being and behavior, the teachers also observed that their support and recognition of the victims of bullying affected the overall climate in the classroom. The more positive the teachers were, the more supportive and accepting were the other students. As one teacher explained:

> Our feelings and our attitudes affect the whole room. Even if we don't realize what we are doing or how we're behaving, I think we send out some signals subconsciously and the children pick them up. As soon as I focused on Farah's positive characteristics and spotlighted her in the classroom, everyone else looked at her that way, too.

In this climate of support, teachers observed changes in the social, academic, and emotional behavior of the once-victimized students. Initially, teachers reported that these students showed a lack of confidence. Even the very bright students among the victims were reluctant to participate in class, seldom raised their hands, spoke in very quiet voices, and exhibited little skill in social relationships. As the experience of these students in the classroom changed, however, so did their attitudes and behaviors. Socially, the students were more comfortable, more outgoing, and more socially adept.

> Farah is now branching out to other children. If the girls she seeks out aren't very receptive, she joins another group. The other girls seem happy to have her. Things really changed for Farah. There is no question.
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> Where Dina used to resort to name-calling when kids were mean to her, now the kids are not as mean.

> She has stopped the name-calling somewhat and is becoming friendly with the other girls in the class.

James stopped reading at snack time and eventually started playing with others:

> Good news! James is playing "Sorry" with Leslie and Sean. It really looks good. They're using good sportsmanship and playing fairly.

For Ricky, originally a loner with no friends, the opportunity to teach his peers had dramatic effects:

> It's changing him into a different person. He's getting a personality, a sense of humor. Life in school is better for him, and you can see it in his face.

The teachers now saw their students becoming more confident and more engaged academically. The students were listening, paying attention, and taking a more active part in what was happening in class. After receiving positive recognition from the teacher and having opportunities to demonstrate her abilities in front of her classmates, Dina's "self-esteem shot through the roof. She began to more readily answer questions, go first, and speak louder when responding in a group." David was more cooperative, smiled more, and participated more in class discussions. Ricky stopped his principal in the hall to tell her about his language project: "This is making me feel really good about myself. I really love school now."

There was no question that these students were happier. The teachers noticed it, the students signaled it in their words and actions, and even their parents were aware of changes taking place. At the end of the year, several parents sent notes to the teachers praising the terrific job they had done and thanking the teachers for the "special interest, care, and patience" given to their children. One father offered repeated thanks, commenting that "his son felt happier coming to school this year, happier than ever before."

REFLECTIONS

At the conclusion of the action research project, the teachers felt that important changes had taken place. By examining and modifying their classroom practice, the teachers had come to realize that they could make a difference. As they changed the way they worked with their students, they also reexamined and reaffirmed some of their basic beliefs about teaching and learning. In their final session, they shared some of these beliefs.

- Caring is important. Getting to know a student better, listening to his or her feelings, and taking a personal interest in his or her life helps create understanding and trust. Caring also helps the student to be more comfortable.
- Showcasing students' competencies and respecting their right to make decisions about their learning are essential. Even small changes have a powerful influence on students' self-confidence, engagement, and social interaction.
- It's okay to differentiate. Students' needs and strengths differ, and teachers need to structure the classroom environment accordingly.
- Teachers influence their students' peer relationships. By modeling positive and supportive interaction, by providing opportunities for students to work together in the classroom, and by developing class rules that value kindness and preclude exclusion, teachers support the development of positive peer relationships and minimize harassment.
- Academic success and social success go hand in hand. When students feel competent and able to express their individuality, their social relationships improve. At the same time, feeling comfortable in social relationships with teachers and peers encourages students to become more involved in classroom activities.

While differentiation of instruction and sensitivity to individual student needs are part of the credo of nearly every elementary school teacher, the teachers in this study renewed their appreciation of how important it is for students to feel successful, to exercise choice, and to feel cared for. While the affective needs of students too often get pushed to the background as teachers struggle to develop cognitive skills, the teachers recognized that students' emotional well-being is not only important but may be the basis for any effective learning.

The teachers also expressed a new sense of confidence that they could, in fact, reduce the incidence of peer harassment, both by structuring a climate in which students would not be excluded and by addressing the very different psychological needs of their students. Through the efforts of these teachers, their classrooms were no longer sites for bullying or victimization.

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3. James P. Connell and J. G. Wellbom, "Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness: A Motivational Analysis of Self-System Processes," in Megan R. Gunnar and L. Alan Stroufe, eds., *Self-Processes and Development*, vol. 23 (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), pp. 43-77.
4. Karen Osterman, "Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community," *Review of Educational Research*, Fall 2000, pp. 323-67; and idem, "Schools as Communities for Students," in Gail Furman, ed., *School as Community: From Promise to Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp.167-95.