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Creating Supplements to an anti-bullying program in a Harrisonburg City public school

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Creating Supplements to an Anti-Bullying Program in a Harrisonburg City Public School

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An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

by Jessica Gail Hunt
May 2015

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the Honors Thesis Symposium on April 24, 2015.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my younger sister, who has taught me to always stay positive and keep a smile on through whatever happens. It has been a privilege to grow up with you and I could not ask for a better example of compassion in my life.

I would also like to dedicate my work to my parents and grandparents. Thank you for your endless love and care and immense support throughout my education. You have instilled in me a drive to succeed and the ability to push myself towards greatness.

I can never thank you enough.
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Problem

Spotswood Elementary School is located in the Harrisonburg City Public School district in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. With a population of 429 students enrolled in kindergarten through fourth grade and a student teacher average of 15 to 1, it is on par in those aspects in regards to other Virginia public elementary schools (Spotswood Elementary School). When the other statistics are observed however, there are complex differences that make Spotswood a very interesting and diverse school. Given the high migrant and immigrant population in Harrisonburg City and Rockingham County, the minority enrollment at Spotswood makes up 75% of the student body. This is about twice as many as the state average of 47%.

The most shocking statistic however comes to light when the percentages of students on free and reduced lunch are observed. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), during the 2008 school year, 44.6% of students in the United States were eligible for free and reduced priced lunch. Virginia’s average is even lower than this, with 33.1% of its students eligible. Spotswood Elementary, however, has a staggering number of 94% of its students on free and reduced lunch (89% of those are free and 5% are reduced). It is not the average school and thus does not have average needs. This was especially noticeable when it came to the purchasing of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program for Harrisonburg Public Elementary Schools in the fall of 2013.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (abbreviated to Olweus in the remainder of the text), began in 1983 in Norway after extreme bullying caused several students to end their life. With primary goals of reducing the existing bullying problems while simultaneously stopping the development of new ones and improving relations between students, the program had a clear
mission and was widely accepted. After Olweus was identified in 1998 in the Blueprints for Violence Prevention (a publication by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence) as one of ten models for success, its popularity significantly increased in the United States. This caused the materials to become tailored to the educational practices of America and has been in active use to present day (Olweus & Susan, 2010.)

While the purchase was a great first step toward eradicating bullying in the school system, the demographics of Spotswood, as mentioned earlier, created limited in regards to its effectiveness. The main issues that needed to be addressed were the measurement of bullying pervasiveness, message presentation (in contexts other than written and spoken examples) and class engagement. This creative project, in collaboration with the administration at Spotswood Elementary, was a response to these stipulations.
Solution

As stated previously, there were some gaps in the Olweus program that significantly limited its effectiveness and appropriateness for the school. Because of this, the guidance counselor felt that it would be beneficial to create supplemental materials and create a more rounded program that would ultimately increase the effectiveness and understanding of the anti-bullying messages that were being presented to the students.

This solution began with the identification of the bullying problems itself. While Olweus provides a test for third and fourth grade students in order to create a report concerning bullying behaviors at the school, certain aspects of the testing made it very difficult to get an accurate representation at Spotswood. While the majority of the assessment contained very simple language, some questions were fairly confusing for the elementary school students (especially in a school with a significant number of students for whom English is their second language). The same pre-test is provided by Olweus for middle and high school programs, which limited the comprehension level of the younger students. To add to this problem, the instrument was long and the attention span of the students was pushed to its limits during its administration.

While the school administration worked to create a better tracking device for bullying behaviors and combat the first problem, the final two problems as mentioned earlier, were what the current project was designed to help. Olweus provides four rules for students to follow during the duration of the program.

- Rule 1: We will not bully others.
- Rule 2: We will try to help students who are bullied.
- Rule 3: We will try to include students who are left out.
- Rule 4: If we know that somebody is being bullied, we will tell an adult at school and an adult at home.

These provide clear guidelines for behavior and are simple enough to be understood by the average student. The visual presentation of the rules was not available through the Olweus program. To combat this, posters illustrating the rules were created by students in my SCOM 350 class in the Fall of 2013 to hang in the school as well as anti-bullying scenario videos, which could be shown in classrooms and at assemblies. These would provide a visual representation of the concepts that were being presented to the students and raise the comprehension level concerning the rules.

The issue of class engagement is one specifically addressed by Olweus and has shown to be an extremely effective element of the program. Because of this effectiveness, the school administration felt that additional materials in this area would be beneficial in regards to the issue of bullying behaviors.
Analysis of Materials

Posters

Perhaps the simplest of the three elements created, but also the most effective, was the creation of posters to be displayed in the hallways and other prominent areas of the school. These reflected and further emphasized the four rules for bullying established by the Olweus program.

By having these posters up and displaying these rules throughout the school year, the hope was that when combined with the additional anti-bullying efforts in the school, they would further reinforce and reiterate the goals of the program. While this was a basic solution and not as pervasive as other solutions, this constant reminder would create a universal and consistent visual representation of expectations for the students that they would consistently see as they went about their average school day.

Class Meetings

As a program, Olweus does provide a binder of “class meetings” to be used weekly (daily preferred) in the home classrooms of the students. This provides an opportunity for the classroom as a whole to meet in a non-formal setting and engage together in activities that help to illustrate the problems of bullying in the school and possible solutions available.

There are multiple desires associated with this addition, including but not limited to a positive classroom environment, a comfortable setting for students to engage deeper with these complex issues and a strong trusting relationship between the teacher and their students.
significant link between teacher support and student achievement and general engagement, this relationship is one that is crucial to cultivate and strengthen (Baker, 2006). These interpersonal relationships provide valuable support for the students and help to create the desired positive attitudes and values that the program illustrates. Especially for new students, this can have a positive impact on school adjustment and comfort (Klem & Connell, J, 2009).

However, the desired frequency of the meetings and the content made available by Olweus did not correlate well. As mentioned before, Olweus does provide a binder containing outlines for class meeting that the teachers can choose from. However, if teachers are expected to engage in these meetings daily or weekly, these outlines can quickly become used up and commonplace. With a limited number of resources appropriate for the age level of the students in a particular class and a large amount of days open to engage in these class meetings, there was a strong need for additional class meeting topics and activities. This would ensure that lessons did not have to be repeated, resulting in the maximum amount of attention and retention of the behaviors by the students.

This would also result in less pressure on and time required by the teachers themselves to prepare effectively to engage in positive class meetings with their students. By providing the materials for them, the hope was that the number of class meeting would increase as well as the quality of the discussions.

*Videos*

The final portion of my creative project was to create the scripts for and film several anti-bullying scenario videos to be shown at school assemblies and class meetings. These types of
videos were not provided to the school by the Olweus program, which means the program lacked a visual element for students to connect with. Rather than use generic clips found online, it was determined that actual students from the school would be starring in these clips. By seeing their classmates engaging in and reacting correctly to these scenarios, the hope is that other students will connect with follow their example.

While this is an element that has not yet been present for the students to be influenced by and has not been measured by the Olweus survey results (to be discussed later), there is a strong belief that it will be a crucial step towards solidifying these values and actions in the minds and behaviors of the students.
Learning Style Connection

While this was not a direct intention in the beginning of the campaign, I have discovered an interesting connection between the three learning styles (auditory, kinetic, and visual) to the three categories of materials (videos, class meetings, and posters).

Recent research has shown that not everybody processes and learns new information in the same way. In order to appeal to the various learning needs of students, teachers are encouraged to create variety when presenting information. While some students learn best through visual depictions, others connect more with speaking and listening and another portion desire a hands-on approach rather than a verbal explanation (Three learning styles, 2015).

The effort of Spotswood administrators to create these additional materials ultimately increased its comprehension for students who did not possess the auditory style to learning (hearing). Posters and videos provide a visual representation of the rules they were expected to follow. For students who need a different approach to learning the concepts, class meetings will provide that real-world and hands-on approach to engaging with anti-bullying behaviors.

This is an extremely important concept to recognize because of the vast differences in temperaments, cultures and experiences of the individual students. While it is not possible to tailor the program to every student specifically, these learning styles provide a higher level of connection to these students (Abbott, 2002). Versatility is also a key and crucial component to learning and improved self-concept within students (Reiff, 1992).
Evaluation of Progress and Successes

The Olweus program survey is given to every third and fourth grade student at the beginning of the year in order to observe their attitudes and behaviors concerning bullying and the presence of bullying behaviors in their school. In addition to seeing changes from year to year in overall attitudes, as third graders take the test again as fourth graders, these changes can be noted on a smaller scale. This testing has significantly shown a positive impact from the previous year and the first implementation of the Olweus program and my creation of additional anti-bullying materials to correlate with this.

As mentioned previously, the survey itself is lengthy in its attempt to generate a complex evaluation of the bullying issue in the school in which the program is being implemented in. I have pulled what I believe to be the most important questions from the assessment (with positive and negative results) to create an overview of the results in the areas of behavioral changes and attitudinal adjustments. The first graph in each pair represents the results from the 2013 assessment and the second graph shows the results from 2014.
Behavioral Changes
Overall, these graphs illustrate a significant decrease in the bullying of students at Spotswood Elementary (around a 16% decrease in one year’s time). When the national average is observed (the diamond on the graphs), this change is significant because it shows that as a result of the anti-bullying program, Spotswood is below the national average with regard to bullying in school.
Compared to the previous set of graphs, these are less positive. Despite a dramatic decrease in reports of bullying, the bullying behaviors themselves have only decreased 2% in students. However, children may also be less willing to disclose information regarding their actions involving bullying (fear of getting in trouble, not realizing their mistakes, etc.). Because of this, the realistic percentage could be significantly higher.
Graph 11c. Percentage of bullied girls and boys (according to Table 3b) who have told/not told anybody about the bullying.
One of the four rules of Olweus is to tell two adults (a teacher at school and an adult at home) if a student sees or experiences bullying behaviors. This rule is not clearly represented when this specific question is observed. Half of the students surveyed are still not telling their parents of these bullying problems (around the same from the previous year). Teacher engagement actually decreased significantly (over 30%), a direct contradiction to the lessons that are being taught with regards to reporting practices.

Attitudinal Changes

![Graph 13. Empathy with victims. Percentage of students who responded “feel a bit sorry” or “feel sorry and want to help” to Q23: When you see a student your age being bullied at school, what do you feel or think?](image)
This statistic is encouraging. While the positive response rates in regards to empathy were extremely high even while the program was new, they have increased even more (91% to 94%).
Graph 14: Feeling afraid of being bullied. Percentage of students who responded "sometimes," "fairly often," "often," or "very often" to Q38: How often are you afraid of being bullied by other students in your school?

- 3-4th (Girls): 49%
- 3-4th (Boys): 27%
- 3-4th (Girls & Boys): 32%

Graph 14: Feeling afraid of being bullied. Percentage of students who responded "sometimes," "fairly often," "often," or "very often" to Q38: How often are you afraid of being bullied by other students in your school?

- 3-4th (Girls): 41%
- 3-4th (Boys): 23%
- 3-4th (Girls & Boys): 36%
There is not a significant change in regards to levels of fear involving being bullied from 2013 to 2014. However, there has been a slight decrease and maintenance of just over one-quarter of students reporting that they are afraid of being bullied by other students.
The Olweus program works to eradicate bullying and create a better school environment. Students in 2014 reported higher levels of dislike for school than students in 2013. This can be attributed to many different factors (personality traits, value of education, etc.) that are completely unrelated to the program. However, it is still important to note that there was an increase (slight) in this attitude.
Future

The Olweus program will still continue in the local school system and focus on the behaviors and attitudes of the children with regard to bullying behaviors. It will be interesting to see the impact of the anti-bullying videos after they are released and shown to the students at the beginning of the following year (September 2015).

Currently, all teachers do not actively utilize class meetings. This can be attributed to the challenges mentioned earlier and the newness of the program in the school system. When class meetings become a part of the everyday agenda of the teachers, this problem should alleviate and the results should continue to be positive.

In order to maintain a fresh representation of the rules and expectations, the materials should be periodically changed and updated. A simple way to do this would be to change the appearance of the posters for the 2015 school year. The current posters have been up for over a year and have the potential to become commonplace to the students who see them every day. While the message would still be the same, they would be something new for the students to engage with and see in the hallways. Class meetings should also continually be updated so that students do not complete the same lessons when they move into another classroom in September. How to accomplish this has yet to be determined.
Back to school to do list!  
Remember these four rules!

1) We will not bully others.

2) We will try to help students who are bullied.

3) We will try to include students who are left out.

4) If we know somebody is being bullied, we will tell an adult at school and an adult at home.

Source: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
We will NOT bully others!
We will try to help students who are bullied.

Source: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
We will try to include students who are left out.

Source: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
If we know that somebody is being bullied, we will tell...

An adult at school, AND
An adult at home.

Source: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
Anti-Bullying Scenarios

Scenario #1

The students are at gym class and playing a game where they stand in a circle and throw the ball to each other.

However, one student keeps on getting left out, despite asking for them to pass the ball to her multiple times.

Samantha: Hey guys, I haven’t had a turn! Can you please pass it to me?

Travis: to the student next to him- Don’t pass it to her, it will be funny

The students keep playing and continue to leave Samantha out. Finally one of the students, Charlotte steps up and says something.

Charlotte: Guys, this is really mean, why aren’t we passing to Samantha? I’m starting to feel really bad.

Travis: Yea, I guess you’re right. Here Samantha, catch!

The video ends and Samantha and Travis explain the concept

Samantha: If you see a classmate being left out, try and include them!

Travis: Even though it seemed fun for me and my friends to leave Samantha out, she was really upset that we did not share the ball with her and include her in our game.
**Scenario #2**

Timmy leaves school in the middle of the day for an eye appointment. When he comes back, he is excited to show everybody his new glasses. Some of the students make fun of him for them though.

Timmy: Hey guys, look at my new glasses! They even had my favorite color and I can see a lot better now!

Sean: Wow those are cool! I really like them!

**Alex, Christina, and Scott are standing in a group next to Timmy and Sean.**

Christina: Hey Timmy, what are those things on your face?

Scott: Those look ridiculous!

Alex: I would rather be blind than have to wear those stupid things!

**Timmy looks really sad and Sean stands up for him**

Sean: That is not nice at all guys! Timmy needs them in order to see as well as the rest of us! And they are really cool if you look at them. Don’t make him feel insecure about them.

Scott: Yea, you’re right. I’m really sorry Timmy.

Christina: I want to see them! Come over here

**Timmy walks over to the other group.**

Christina: Sean was right, those are awesome!

Timmy: Thanks guys! I feel a lot better now!

**The video ends and Timmy and Sean explain the concept**

Timmy: It is important to know all of the details before you make fun of somebody!

Sean: Timmy needed the glasses in order to see the board in class and pay attention to the teacher. Scott, Christina and Alex did not pay attention to that and made Timmy feel bad about something that he could not help.
Scenario #3

Christina, Michael and Bobby sit at the same table in class. They are working on an assignment worksheet.

Michael continually takes the worksheet away from Bobby when he is trying to work on it and Christina erases his answers.

Bobby: Please stop taking my paper away! I’m working really hard on it and I don’t want to get in trouble if I don’t finish it in time.

Michael: Okay, we will stop.

Christina: Haha kidding!

She snatches his paper away and rips it in half before going to throw it away. Jennifer, a student at another table goes to tell the teacher.

Jennifer: Excuse me, Michael and Christina keep on taking Bobby’s paper away and I don’t know what to do! I’m afraid that they will rip up my assignment if I ask them to stop!

Teacher: Thank you for telling me Jennifer! I will go and talk to them now.

The video ends and Jennifer explains the concept.

Jennifer: If you see somebody being bullied, do not be afraid to tell a teacher or another adult. Even if you are afraid to talk to the bullies yourself, an adult will know how to handle the situation!
Scenario #4

Jeffrey, Samuel, Daniel and Charles are in gym class and are picking teams for kickball. Jeffrey, Samuel and Daniel all get picked for a team but nobody wants Charles.

Jeffrey: Charles maybe you can just help keep score!

Samuel: Yea, you’re not really that good at kickball and we really want to win this game.

Charles: Okay, I guess.

**Daniel notices that Charles is upset and goes to talk to Jeffrey and Samuel.**

Daniel: Hey guys, it’s just a game. Let him play!

Samuel: But why? He’s just going to make us lose and the teams will be uneven then.

Daniel: Hey Charles, you can have my spot! It will be nice to have a break and get to keep score.

Charles: But I’m no good at kickball, you guys will lose!

Jeffrey: It’s okay! Come on Charles, let’s play.

**The video ends and Daniel explains the concept.**

Daniel: It is important to include everybody during school! By working together, you can make better friends and learn teamwork.
Additions to Class Meetings

Kindergarten- 2nd Grade

• Have a discussion to make rules for a nice and friendly classroom
• Make a list of nice words (decorate and make posters)
• Look at a word and see if it is a nice word or not- put into categories
  The teacher will compile a list of simple words to put on flashcards or other pieces of paper and pass them out to the class. Giving the class a couple of minutes to look at, think about, and get any clarification they need about the word, the teacher will then start the next part of the activity.
• Say a high and low of their week (and how that made them feel)
  The students will go around the room and tell the class the best part of their week (high) and the worst part of their week (low). If they are comfortable, they can share how those made them feel and why. This is not only a good way to find out how the students are feeling, but can also help them connect their emotions to an event. This can also reveal if there are any bullying problems currently in the classroom that the teacher can then address appropriately.

3rd- 5th Grade

• “Quilt” of classroom qualities and characteristics
• Group of bullies, bullied, and bystanders (compare perspectives)
• Forehead card game (characteristics)
  Give every student a notecard to put on their heads with an action (“ignore me”, “be really nice to me”, etc.). These should vary in order to get the greatest effect. The students will not know what their personal card says but will be required to wear the card on their head as the students interact with a few minutes in the beginning of the exercise.
  Afterwards, the teacher will lead a brief discussion on how the students felt after they were treated that way and how treating people better will result in happier students and a better classroom environment.
• Give a phrase and emotion and have the class try to guess the emotion
  Sometimes, the most hurtful part of a statement is not what it says, but how it is said. By using the same phrase (the teacher can pick which one is appropriate/ would work best with the students) but with different emotions, the class will be able to pick up on the importance of not only the words they choose to say, but how they choose to say them.
  The teacher can ask for volunteers for students to come to the front and “act” out the phrase in the emotion that is assigned to them. After four or five examples of this, the class will talk about how the different tones and emotions made them feel (which one made them feel the best, which one made them feel the worst, etc.)
  If there is time allotted, the teacher can wrap up the exercise with a discussion on how this relates to bullying. Even if you think you are saying something nice, your tone can say something else.
  Example: “I really like your shirt.”
• Open discussion on recess (what people do and if all are included)
  This will provide a real-life example of the importance of inclusion in the school.
• Make a list of characteristics you look for in a friend
• Have the students close their eyes and raise their hands in response of a question (then discuss the results)

  This allows the students to not feel pressured to answer a question a specific way. The responses are all anonymous and allows there to be a level of safety and comfort. The students can answer the questions truthfully without being judged for their answers. After all the responses have been tallied the students will open their eyes and hear the responses. The identity of those who answered the questions will never be revealed, it is only a tally system of how many agreed with the statement.
• Make posters for the classroom/school with a slogan to stop bullying
• Make a list of bullying “rules” for the classroom
Appendix B: Journal of Progress

How the Project Unfolded over Time

This project began as a class project in SCOM 350: Introduction to Organizational Communications during the fall semester of my Junior year. Our class was assigned to work with Spotswood Elementary School for their anti-bullying kickoff assembly. We created a poster and brochure to send home to parents and provided some help at the assembly. The following semester was when I had to decide what I was going to do for my honors senior thesis. I remembered how much I had enjoyed working with the students and promoting positive behaviors. After contacting my professor, Dr. Ball, I was able to get into contact with Ms. Adamek, the guidance counselor, and begin constructing my creative project.

How Ideas Were Generated and Decisions Made

Upon first meeting with Ms. Adamek, we worked together to determine what was needed as additional materials as well as what I could do to help. The Olweus program is very extensive and the school administration was very busy with the logistics of implementation. This left the creative side of the program and its potential for updates out because of a lack of resources and time. It was determined that I would be able to help with creating these crucial additional materials. Through my year working with Angie and Spotswood Elementary staff, we added materials and worked together to create a well-rounded program that would ultimately cause positive change in the students. I was given a lot of control as to what I wanted to create. After completion of a portion, I would show it to Angie and the rest of the team for final approval before implementation occurred.
Actions/Meetings

I met with my advisor Dr. Ball about every other week in his office to go over updates in my project as well as set up deadlines to keep the timeline on track. Angie was also very open to meeting with me to discuss the progression of the materials. These meeting varied but ranged from once a week to once a month as the project neared its close. During my time at the school for my project, Spotswood also created a coalition of teachers to help implement materials and lead the rest of the teachers in their grade towards positive classroom change. I had the opportunity to sit in on those monthly meetings during the second half of my project and utilize their help as needed (especially when it came to the anti-bullying videos).

Significant Roadblocks and Progress

Because I was working with children, there were certain precautions that I needed to take. Even though these took a little extra time, the additional steps were important in order to establish my credibility and trust within the staff of Spotswood, the children, and their parents. After an extensive IRB approval, I came to the full-board to answer their questions on my project. At that point in time, it was revealed to me that I did not have to go through IRB at all. While this was somewhat frustrating, it was a good opportunity to learn about research ethics and the process of approval.

Snow days also significantly affected my project, especially during this final semester. Scheduling times to film the videos with the children became difficult with the snow pushing around significant meeting days and delaying the process.
Overall Themes

Overall, I felt a large sense of community throughout the project. Working together to eradicate this problem was stressed for the staff as well as the students. This was evident through the structure of the administration and the actions of all levels with participation. The students were not only encouraged to watch their own behaviors, but also the behaviors of others and to hold them accountable. This created a school environment of care and compassion in a short year, and that is only going to grow stronger as the program continues.

Plans and Outcomes

It is obvious through the survey results that the Olweus program and my supplements made a difference in the school. But what is immeasurable is the way that the students now treat each other. From talking with the counselor, the school has not only decreased the bullying behaviors, but the students have grown to truly understand the importance of caring for one another and realizing that they are not alone in whatever may be troubling them.

I was able to complete all of the materials that I had planned and look forward to the future of the program and its impact at Spotswood Elementary. This project was a wonderful experience and one that has greatly impacted my college experience. And to think…it all started with a communications elective.


References