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Implementing Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams; A Restorative Intervention Program to Address Bullying Relationships in Schools

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Implementing Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams; A Restorative Intervention Program to Address Bullying Relationships in Schools

Abstract

School bullying negatively impacts the lives of children, including the bullies, the victims and the bystanders. This project investigated the implementation process and perceived effectiveness of Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams. The "no blame" approach idea to healing bullying relationships originated by Bill Hubbard, was modified with a narrative perspective by Michael Williams, a counselor at a high school in Auckland, New Zealand. The purpose of this qualitative project was to gain insight from four practitioners, two in New Zealand and two in California, about their personal experiences with the implementation of this approach. The study found that Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams can foster a safer school environment for students to learn and can create positive change for students personally and in their classroom environment.

Keywords
Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams; bullying, bullying intervention program; restorative justice; school counseling; New Zealand; California.

Author Statement
I am currently a graduate student at California State University San Bernardino. I am working on a Ed.D. in Educational Leadership.

Cover Page Footnote
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Introduction

Numerous studies have attempted to find answers to the epidemic of bullying in schools. Although complete answers have not yet been found, there has been a significant increase in awareness about the dangers of bullying behaviors. Numerous schools around the world have implemented anti-bullying programs, which have impacted prevalence rates. Norwegian researcher, Dan Olweus, was the first to publish research on school bullying prevention efforts (Merrell, Guelner, Ross & Isava, 2008) during the 1970s, which have influenced the implementation of international anti-bullying intervention and prevention programs since. Olweus's influence is still evident in current research and continues to provide a foundation for most bullying intervention efforts.

International anti-bullying conferences, such as the Anti-Bully Institute, are now being held around the world to raise awareness about the dangers and effects of bullying. Consequences of bullying not only affect the victim, but also the entire climate of a school (Davis, 2011). Many students have taken their own lives after being bullied, and in some cases have also taken the lives of others, as in the Columbine school shooting in 1999 (Cassel, Bell & Springer, 2011). Other serious consequences include depression, low grades, poor attendance, isolation, self-mutilation, and drug and alcohol use. The psychological distress from peer victimization can be both short-term and long-term, depending on the severity and longevity of the abuse (Rueger & Jenkins, 2013).

School counselors are challenged by bullying on a regular basis, and need effective alternatives to punitive measures to combat bullying. Analysis of archival data in New Zealand schools has shown that Undercover Anti-Bullying Teams (UABTs) can be useful in combating bullying (Winslade et al., 2015). This study investigates the experiences of undercover anti-bullying teams and the effectiveness of the teams from practitioners' perspectives. The process has five phases; 1) meeting with the victim; 2) meeting with the team members; 3) meeting with the victim over the course of the first few weeks; 4) meeting with the team to monitor progress and make changes to the five-point plan; 5) celebration of success.

UABTs are a “unique approach” to combating bullying in schools, which draw from a narrative perspective (Winslade & Williams, 2012). The purpose of undercover teams is to heal and transform bullying relationships by rewriting the story between the bully and the victim. Actions of students are seen as played out storylines with a plot trajectory. The person with the problem is viewed as a participant in a problematic storyline, rather than as a problem person (Morgan, 2000). It involves a non-punitive, no blame approach that is utilized in the transformation of relationships, rather than isolating, pathologizing and punishing the bully (Winslade & Williams, 2012). In other words, it focuses on the behavior and on rebuilding relationships, rather than pointing to an individual. Traditional punitive measures leave the victim vulnerable for retribution and can create isolation, which increases the suffering (Winslade & Williams, 2012). The UABT process also involves an ongoing relationship with a trusted staff member. The teams provide an opportunity for friendship while supporting the victim through his/her struggle.

Conventional discourse about bullying assumes the bully to be the problem. Postmodern approaches, such as restorative practices, argue that punitive measures do not work effectively to transform bullying relationships (Winslade & Williams, 2012). In the UABT approach, this is achieved by including the two worst bullies in the undercover team, but they are outnumbered by four other students. They are all invited to form a plan to make the life of the victim happier at school. The way this is done makes it hard for the bullies not to participate.
Remarkably, bullying relationships are quickly transformed by this approach.

**Research question**
How are UABTs implemented by practitioners and what is their perceived effectiveness?

**Literature review summary**
No school is immune to bullying, and currently there are few comprehensive solutions. The good news is that the effects such as the emotional hurt caused by bullying can be diminished, and the climate of a school can be changed, which reduces bullying incidents and negative emotional impact (Juvonen, 2014). According to existing literature, bullying behavior involves an imbalance of power between a perpetrator and a victim and repetitive harm doing. Research further indicates that bullying usually begins and reaches its peak in middle school (Juvonen, 2014). Recent studies suggest that “There is more involved than solely a dyadic relationship between a bully and victim” (Birchmeier et al., 2009, p. 638). Poyhonen, Juvonen, and Salmivalli (2012) argue that bystanders are also responsible for encouraging or discouraging bullying behavior. Some current intervention efforts address bullying by educating bystanders about the effects of bullying and teaching them to make a stand on behalf of the victim by directly “stepping in,” “seeking help,” or “comforting the victim” (p. 723). UABTs include bystanders in the process, which encourages change and healing and creates space or the victim to rewrite the bullying story (Winslade & Williams, 2008).

Although literature is limited, UABTs have shown to be successful in helping students respond to bullying in a way that helps restore relationships. In addition, the bullying students are offered a new pro-social identity and anonymity to gain confidence with that identity, and assertive students, such as bystanders, are given a "framework in which to act" (Williams, 2011). Educating students about the role they choose, whether it involves defending, reinforcing, or not intervening at all, is key to making a difference in the growing epidemic of bullying in our schools (Juvonen, 2014). According to Winslade & Williams, (2012) the most common response to bullying is to identify the bully, isolate the individual offender and exercise punishment. This can send the wrong message that the power of school authorities is stronger than the power of the bully, which is not empowering for bullies or victims. It is the same message as that conveyed in the practice of bullying. Punishment can also create resentment, which can lead to retaliation. As a result, victims may be unwilling to come forward and tell anyone about the bullying behavior. Punishment may also result in "shaming the offender," which may increase the likelihood of "re-offending" (Winslade & Williams, 2012, p.127).

Restorative responses, such as anti-bullying undercover teams, influenced by Barbara Maines and George Robinson from the U.K. in the 1990s, are a “no blame” approach to school bullying, and were believed “the single answer to school bullying that everyone was looking for” (Stevenson, p.1). According to Stevenson, the undercover teams approach is in the family of restorative responses. The UABT approach is a ‘targeted’ approach, which focuses on changing the bullying relationship and on rebuilding relationships, rather than pointing to an individual. In addition, the UABT process involves an ongoing relationship with a trusted staff member. Moreover, undercover teams provide an opportunity for friendship, while supporting the victim through his/her struggle. Stevenson (2015) asserted that UABTs provide fun for students in the stressful world of school life, and turn a serious problem into a positive experience for students in school. Winslade and Williams (2012) argued the most common advice given to people who are being bullied is, "Just learn how to deal with it!" "It will go away!" The problem is that this does not seem to work.
Perpetrators enjoy the sense of power received from bullying, whether or not the victim responds. They may find it amusing to observe a victim attempting to hold back emotions. Other responses include fighting back, and even blaming the victim. Winslade and Williams also argued that a systemic approach in schools, such as more supervision on playground hotspots, is needed. Winslade & Williams assert that UABTs are a strategic effort to re-author relationships as viewed in narrative therapy. According to Winslade & Williams (2008), punitive measures, such as identifying the perpetrator and punishing them accordingly for their actions, have been the common response when dealing with bullying issues in schools. The UABT approach is claimed to decrease the chances of retaliation and is based on the narrative principle, "The person is not the problem the problem is the problem" (Winslade & Williams, 2008, p.3). This notion removes the deficit discourse and totalizing identities, which can have detrimental effects on both the victim and the perpetrator. Furthermore, "bystanders are utilized to give assistance for the victim and they are included in the story of the bullying relationship" (p.5). Literature has shown that bystanders play an important role in the bullying relationship.

**Research method**

This project was a qualitative investigation, based on semi-structured interviews about the experiences of four counselors, two in New Zealand and two in California who have facilitated UABTs. The data was collected from voice recordings of Skype interviews with the participants, that later was transcribed and analyzed. Follow-up questions for clarification and elaboration were also asked. The practitioners were preselected for the interviews and agreed to discuss their experiences with UABTs. The significant portions of the collected information were analyzed. A qualitative approach was used to gather formative data to understand better the issues with regard to implementation, rather than summative data on the effects of the process. The goal was to acquire information regarding working with UABTs in the practitioner's own words. The project was approved by the IRB at California State University San Bernardino.

**Summary of findings**

What emerged was that the participants perceived UABTs as more effective than other methods for combating bullying relationships, where relational type bullying is present in the classroom. The selection process of the undercover anti-bullying team method was stressed as the most important part of the process. Teacher involvement in the selection process seems to influence successful outcomes for the teams. Collaboration with classroom teachers also contributed to a successful outcome for the teams. All four participants reported one hundred percent success with UABTs interrupting and transforming bullying relationships from a total of 149 UABTs run among them. They further suggested that some UABTs may take longer than others, but the teams have so far always been successful. Participants stressed that the UABTs have not completed their work until the bullying stops, and the victim determines when this occurs, which places the victim in a position of power for the first time, without ever having to confront the bullies. When this happens the members of the undercover anti-bullying team are given a principal's certificate and a small food voucher.

Participants in this study reported one hundred percent success rate (across 149 teams). Here are a few of their statements; “I can honestly say that I have not had any teams that have not been successful.” “Every case has been successful for me.” “The bullying pretty much stops immediately.” “Some teams take longer than others, but there is always a successful outcome.” “I think they are the only method to claim one hundred percent success.” Every single time I have done an
undercover team, it has worked.” “I haven’t had any unsuccessful teams.”

Some participants reported that UABTs give the team members a sense of accomplishment. “It builds their self-esteem confidence, because they have told me that the undercover team experience is the first time they have ever been nice in their life.” “You invite them to thrive in a situation where they can use their leadership skills in a form of doing something good for others, rather than harming others, and this allows these particular students to thrive.” One participant stated that the bullies become the biggest defenders of the victim. “The bullies end up being the biggest defenders and protectors of the students who they are bullying.” “They are the ones that are the most proactive and active in the group.” “Toward the end, they are the ones that are coming up with the most suggestions on what can be done to help the student that has been bullied.” The participants also shared why they think UABTs are so effective. “I think one of the reasons why undercover teams are so effective, is they create a culture of bystander involvement.” “It is an intervention to change the culture.” “They have two functions (1) the teams stand in solidarity with the person being targeted and (2) the teams hold agents accountable.” “It is creating a culture that when bullying occurs, students have an obligation, responsibility and opportunity to do something about it.”

It appears that such intervention methods can help heal bullying relationships and create safer school environments. The findings suggest that victims, bystanders, and bullies, all benefit from UABTs. Self-esteem is also elevated for the victim. Participants also reported a positive impact for the bully and team members. The findings suggest that positive change occurs for everyone involved in the anti-bullying undercover teams process. There were some reports of the bullies saying they had learned to be kind for the first time. Participants also reported that students appreciated receiving recognition for making a helpful contribution to others’ lives.

It is also evident from the findings that UABTs are flexible, and can be utilized to help students with struggles that do not involve bullying. Participants also suggested that UABTs be utilized outside the classroom.

The practitioners’ voice about their personal experiences of UABTs has not been investigated previously. While previous literature addresses school-wide preventative measures to increase awareness and improve school climate, UABTs may also be an intervention that can influence school climate. Bystander awareness and intervention efforts have been emphasized in previous research. The findings in this project also emphasize bystander awareness and involvement, such as making a stand with the victim. From participants’ responses, this emphasis can make a significant difference in students’ lives.

References


