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Integrating Bullying Prevention and Restorative Practices in Schools:

Considerations for Practitioners and Policymakers

**Integrating Bullying Prevention and Restorative
Practices in Schools:
Considerations for Practitioners and Policymakers**

October 2014

Stacie Molnar-Main, Ed.D., Center for Safe Schools

Kenzi Bisbing, L.S.W.
Oakland Mediation Center, a Michigan Community Dispute
Resolution Center

Susan Blackburn
Center for Juvenile Justice Training and Research, Pennsylvania
Juvenile Court Judges' Commission

Leah Galkowski
Center for Safe Schools

Robert Garrity, M.A.
Garrity Mediation Consulting

Cynthia Morris, Ph.D.
School District of Lancaster

Jane Riese, L.S.W.
Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, Clemson University

Lee Rush, M.Ed.
International Institute for Restorative Practices, justCommunity, Inc.

Jon Singer
Center for Community Peacemaking

Introduction

The social climate of a school matters. Schools where children feel safe, connected and valued demonstrate higher rates of student achievement than schools with negative social climates^{1,2} Relatedly, students who feel connected to school are less likely to experience emotional distress, engage in violence or participate in risky behavior than students who feel disconnected from the school.^{3,4}

This white paper addresses the integration of two common approaches to improving school climate and school connectedness: bullying prevention (BP) and restorative practices (RP). Specifically, the paper focuses on the compatibility of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) and common approaches to RP in schools. OBPP was selected as the focus of this paper because it is one of the most researched and widely implemented BP programs in the United States. In addition, the principles and key components of the OBPP are reflected

in many federal guidance documents on bullying prevention in schools.⁵

OBPP is an evidence-based school program that is most effective when all program components are implemented with fidelity. RP, in contrast, is an approach to community life and problem solving that aims to develop good relationships and promote a sense of community among all people in a school. While OBPP has been associated with reductions in bullying and improved bystander action, RP is recognized as a promising approach for addressing the disproportionate involvement of racial and ethnic minorities in the juvenile justice system and school disciplinary tracts.

This white paper was written to provide guidance to educators and policymakers who are interested in linking evidence-based bullying prevention strategies and restorative practices in schools.

Workgroup Method

From May 2012 to May 2014, the Center for Safe Schools convened the Bullying Prevention and Restorative Practices Workgroup, which included educators, mental health practitioners, experts in BP and experts in RP. The group sought to address questions posed by educators and other youth workers about the compatibility of RP and BP programs in schools. The purpose of this brief is to describe the outcomes of the workgroup by reporting the group's consensus findings related to:

- The need for enhancing adults' responses to bullying issues in schools
- Components of effective BP and RP in schools
- Compatibilities between RP and the OBPP
- Concerns associated with the potential misuse of face-to-face meetings in bullying situations
- Elements of effective and ineffective BP and RP integration
- Opportunities for advancing integrated practice through well-designed pilot initiatives

Participants met a total of seven times, including five in-person meetings and two online meetings. Meetings initially focused on learning about the fields of BP and RP, with an emphasis on identifying areas of compatibility and divergence in practice. After a few meetings, the group began considering the conditions that may support successful integration of BP and RP programs. Detailed meeting notes were maintained to document workgroup learning and relevant themes. This report was written with input from all workgroup members.



The Problem of Bullying

Bullying is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.”⁶

According to the CDC, bullying is associated with distress and can cause “physical, psychological, social or educational harm.” While commonly believed to be a problem between two individuals, research on bullying suggests that it is a group phenomenon.⁷ Bystanders typically play a role in encouraging or discouraging bullying through their response to bullying incidents.^{8,9}

In recent years, school bullying has received increased attention within the media and from researchers and policy makers. As a result, almost all U.S. states now have laws that address school bullying and most require schools to adopt policies and programs to combat these behaviors.^{10,11} Attention has focused on schools because bullying is a problem that primarily affects youth, occurs frequently in schools and can have serious impacts, for both the bullied child and the child who bullies. Research suggests that students who bully and students who are bullied are at greater risk of experiencing anxiety, depression and suicidal ideology and the effects of bullying, for both groups, can persist into adulthood.¹²⁻¹⁸ In addition, exposure to violence in schools, including bullying, has been associated with absenteeism and poor school performance.^{19,20,21}

Intervening in school bullying presents numerous challenges. Some educators do not understand the importance of addressing bullying and may incorrectly assume it is a normal part of childhood. Others may not know how to recognize bullying or may misidentify a bullying situation as conflict and respond inappropriately.²² Finally, when adults respond to bullying situations, their actions may not improve the situation for students. One study of bullied students found that, after reporting bullying to an adult, 35 percent of students experienced “no change” in bullying and 27 percent reported that bullying “got worse.”²³ These findings suggest that there is a need for improved awareness of bullying and its effects, as well as a need for more effective strategies for supporting youth who are affected by bullying.²⁴



Best Practices in Bullying Prevention

There are numerous research studies and publications that attempt to identify best practices in bullying prevention in schools. In general, research suggests that the problem of school bullying is best addressed by instituting norms, systems and practices in schools and classrooms that actively discourage bullying, improve adult responsiveness and promote peer support.^{25,26,27} According to Ttofi and Farrington (2011), who conducted a meta-analysis of over 40 studies of school-based BP programs, the most effective BP programs are those based upon the work of Dan Olweus.^{28,29}

OBPP is an ecological program that gives emphasis to restructuring the whole school environment in order to deter bullying behavior. Olweus' approach to BP is notable in its use of targeted strategies at the school, classroom, individual and community levels, including in-depth and ongoing training of students, staff, parents and school leaders. Olweus' framework and guiding principles are reflected in a recent guidance document about best practices in BP in schools published by the U.S. Department of Education.³⁰

Specifically, the Department of Education recommends that schools:

- Use a multi-tiered framework to organize BP efforts
- Teach students appropriate behaviors and how to respond to bullying
- Provide active adult supervision
- Train and provide ongoing support for staff and students
- Develop and implement clear policies to address bullying
- Monitor and track bullying behaviors
- Notify parents when bullying occurs
- Address ongoing concerns related to school climate and peer relations
- Sustain BP efforts over time



Restorative Practices

Restorative practices are a set of diverse ideas and approaches used to build healthy communities, increase social capital, repair harm and restore relationships.³¹ These practices – which range from whole school strategies to specific intervention techniques – seek to move from a retributive model of group accountability to a restorative model of accountability. In other words, RP places emphasis on addressing harm and building community and relationships, rather than simply administering punishment.³²

While there are many fields that use RP, there is not an accepted definition of RP or agreed upon set of best practices that are used across contexts.³³ The International Institute for Restorative Practices defines RP as a continuum of prevention and intervention activities, ranging from informal practices like using

“I statements” and “affective questions” to more formal practices like classroom circles and face-to-face meetings to address harm.^{34,35} Approaches to implementing RP in organizations are similarly diverse and tend to include five common elements:

- A set of principles or values that define the role that RP serves in the organization/community
- Training of key personnel in RP and its uses
- Communication strategies that emphasize affective experiences
- Group circle discussions and activities that provide a forum for building community and discussing concerns
- Conferences or meetings that voluntarily bring involved parties together, often-times with members of their family or community, to provide input into outcomes and address issues and harm

Proponents of RP note that communities and schools that incorporate these activities can experience a variety of benefits. Specifically, case study research suggests that RP can lead to reductions in suspensions and expulsions in schools, fewer serious violent acts committed by students and improved relationships among members of the school community.^{36,37} One study documented reduced rates of bullying in schools with discipline practices that balanced structure and support for students.³⁸ These principles are associated with whole school RP models.



Opportunities and Cautions in Linking RP and BP

The OBPP and RP adhere to principles of inclusiveness and prevention. Therefore, RP strategies that seek to build community, prevent harm and avoid labeling students are compatible with Olweus' model.

Olweus trainers tend to discourage the use of face-to-face meetings between students who are bullied and the student who bullied him/her. This principle stems from the recognition that bullying is a form of abuse, not a conflict between equals. Face-to-face meetings, *if improperly facilitated*, have the potential to exacerbate bullying concerns or reinforce power imbalances between students. These outcomes can further isolate or harm the student who is bullied.



According to some experts, restorative conferences can be useful in certain cases of suspected school bullying.³⁹ Amstutz and Mullet note that face-to-face meetings "are sometimes held to engage all persons affected by the bullying. This is an occasion for all to hear the harm and plan steps to accountability and reintegration. However, persons harmed by bullying or harassment may not wish to face the person who harmed them...fearing further victimization. In these situations, a face-to-face meeting may not be advisable."⁴⁰

Rather, one-on-one restorative meetings between trained adult facilitators and students who bully may be beneficial in helping students take responsibility for their actions. Similarly, meetings between adult facilitators and students who are bullied may help students recognize that adults care about them and their safety.

RP experts note that face-to-face meetings involving those harmed and those who caused harm must only be considered if specific conditions are met:

- 1) the receiver of the harmful act wishes to be involved in a face-to-face meeting;
- 2) the person who commits the harmful act wishes to be involved in a face-to-face meeting and admits behaving in ways that may have negatively impacted the other person;
- 3) the system (i.e., school) operates from a restorative philosophy;
- 4) each party is encouraged to invite support persons to attend the meeting with them;
- 5) all parties and support persons have participated in separate preparatory meetings before participating in the face-to-face meeting; and
- 6) the persons overseeing and facilitating the intervention have specific training in restorative practices.

Opportunities and Cautions in Linking RP and BP (cont.)

While there is little research documenting the effectiveness of face-to-face meetings between students who bully and those who are bullied, this workgroup concluded that there may be circumstances when such a meeting could be beneficial – if

conducted with great care and preparation. In these cases, emphasis should be placed on ensuring the safety of the child who is bullied, ensuring intervening staff is prepared to apply principles, skills and methods of effective RP and BP

and significant care is taken to ensure the requirements of a formal conference are met. Specifically, the workgroup identified clear markers of schools that appropriately and inappropriately integrate BP and RP. These indicators are listed below.

Appropriate

ways of integrating RP/BP in schools

- The school staff work collaboratively with professionals with training in a specific, structured RP and BP.
- When RP is implemented with an evidence-based program like CIBI, multiple levels of implementation are used to address the needs of the organization and individuals.
- The school staff emphasize restorative activities systematically by linking RP and BP throughout the culture of the school.
- All school staff are trained in both RP and BP as essential strategies to their job to day work.
- District staff emphasize the needs of the individual student at the individual level, group, community and school. The needs of the organization, school, community and state are also prioritized.
- RP and BP and staff adhere to the guidelines that state that participation in restorative programs is voluntary for all involved or affected.
- School leaders ensure that face-to-face meetings between students are conducted by adults who are trained and experienced in conducting restorative practices.
- The school staff are trained to develop strategies for providing RP to all and improve relationships related to RP and BP.

Inappropriate

ways of integrating RP/BP in schools

- All school staff members are trained in RP and BP and practice.
- The school staff implement evidence-based programs like CIBI and use RP and BP throughout.
- The school uses RP to address only with the most engaged or RP on other levels.
- Educators do not use RP to address conflicts and neglect preventive practices, such as circles, affective communication, etc.
- School staff do not ensure (or fail to provide) the time, staff and resources that are required to do RP and BP well.
- District staff coerce students to participate in face-to-face meetings by offering RP conferences as an alternative to other consequences or by mandating participation during recessive meetings.
- Parents are not encouraged to discuss and address bullying situations.
- Peers, rather than well-trained adults, conduct face-to-face meetings between students who are bullied and students who bully.

Looking Ahead

There is limited available research on the integration of RP and BP in schools. Nonetheless, many educators and prevention advocates believe RP is a promising approach to improving outcomes for minority youth and addressing school violence, including bullying issues. Consistent with this perspective, the Bullying Prevention and Restorative Practices Workgroup concludes that there are potential benefits associated with linking BP programs and RP; however, face-to-face meetings between bullying offenders and targets should be approached with caution, sensitivity and care.

The workgroup found many similarities between RP and BP programs that could support alignment of efforts to improve school climate. Both approaches tend to focus on prevention, attend to students' social and emotional experiences, and promote the use of circle discussions/class meetings to build relationships and

solve problems. While bullying prevention programs, like OBPP, provide specific guidance on how to address bullying through policies, procedures and new practices, RP provides a unique and valuable perspective on how to work with students and families to promote school connectedness and support behavior change. Schools that are interested in using RP and BP programs together should attend to the recommendations in this report concerning appropriate and inappropriate approaches to integration.

Although we conclude that RP and BP programs may be compatible, there is a need for research on the integration of BP and RP in schools. This could be accomplished through research of existing efforts, as well as through carefully designed and evaluated pilot initiatives. Given the emphasis by policymakers on the use of evidence-based practices, it may be beneficial to focus investments on efforts that involve the



integration of evidence-based BP programs, including OBPP, and RP strategies that are supported by research. Such studies should be designed to differentiate between the effects of preventive RP on bullying-associated outcomes (including effects on bystanders) and the effects of RP-informed interventions on students directly involved in bullying.

Acknowledgements

This white paper was produced through the generous support of the Highmark Foundation, which underwrote workgroup meetings and the publication of this document. Since 2006, the Highmark Foundation has invested over ten million dollars in bullying prevention in Pennsylvania. The Foundation continues to support bullying prevention as a thought leader

and through efforts to advance best-practices and evidence-based programming in schools and communities.

The ideas in this document represent the work of many. As such, the author would like to thank workgroup participants for their careful deliberation about the issue. The conclusions reported herein would

not have been possible without the thoughtful engagement of each person. In addition, Lorraine Amstutz, John Bailie, Susan Limber, and Marlene Snyder reviewed drafts of this document and/or provided feedback that contributed to the refinement of the final publication. I am thankful for the generous and thoughtful contributions of each of these individuals.

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