A Review of Interventions to Combat Bullying: From the Perspective of Bystander

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Abstract: School bullying is a widespread issue with significant consequences for all individuals involved, including bullies, victims, and bystanders. Bystanders, who witness bullying situations, play a crucial role in intervention programs aiming to address this problem effectively. This review examines three interventions that specifically target bystanders, aiming to empower and train students to become defenders against bullying. The interventions discussed are the STAC program, the KiVa anti-bullying program, and the NoTrap! anti-bullying program. By focusing on equipping bystanders with effective strategies, these interventions aim to prevent and combat bullying incidents. This review discusses the development and effectiveness of these programs, emphasizing the importance of bystander perspectives in bullying prevention. Overall, empowering bystanders represents a promising strategy to prevent and combat bullying, and further research and intervention development from the bystander perspective are encouraged.

Keywords: bullying, school, intervention, bystander

1. Introduction

1.1. Definition of Bullying

Bullying is a well-documented phenomenon that refers to the conscious and repeated exercise of power by a more powerful child over a weaker target in a peer relationship [1]. Negative actions associated with bullying include physical contact, verbal abuse, facial expressions, obscene gestures, and exclusion from a group [2]. Numerous studies have revealed the high prevalence of bullying in schools worldwide, with the United States being particularly affected by this issue [3].

1.2. Prevalence of Bullying

A national survey conducted in the United States with 15,865 students in grades 6 to 10 revealed that 13% of the respondents reported engaging in bullying behavior, 10.6% of respondents reported being victims of bullying, and 6.3% of respondents reported both experiences [4]. Additionally, 8.8% of the students admitted to frequent bullying (once a week or more), and 8.4% reported being bullied frequently, resulting in an estimated 1,681,030 youth engaging in bullying and 1,611,809 students being bullied frequently.

These findings underscore the alarming prevalence of bullying in American schools and highlight the urgent need for effective interventions to deal with this issue. Given the negative impacts of bullying on the physical and psychological well-being of both the perpetrators and victims, it is essential to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent and intervene bullying.

1.3.   Impact of Bullying

Bullying leads to negative impacts on students who are exposed to bullying situations. Both bullies and victims represent a higher risk of suffering various problems, both short-term and long-term. Bullying leads to negative impacts on students who are exposed to bullying situations. Both bullies and victims represent a higher risk to suffer various problems, both short-term and long-term. [5-8].

Bullies are found to have poorer psycho-social functioning than peers, characterizing aggressive, hostile, domineering behaviors and measures of externalizing behavior and hyperactivity [5]. Besides the poorer function, long-term consequences are documented for bullies. A study conducted by Berthold and Hoover involving a sample of 591 students from fourth- to sixth-grade found that bullies exhibit higher tendencies to cheat on tests, carry weapons to school, and engage in risky behaviors such as alcohol consumption, smoking, or chewing tobacco. These findings suggest that bullies are at a greater risk of failure both in school and in life.

Research has shown that victims of bullying also demonstrate poorer social functioning in comparison to their non-victimized peers. They tend to be more sensitive, fearful of change, and experience loneliness, lower self-esteem, as well as displaying more internalizing behavior and psychological symptoms [9]. These findings suggest that the negative impacts of bullying are not limited to the immediate aftermath of the bullying incidents, but can have long-lasting effects on the mental health and social functioning of the victims [9]. The detrimental effects of bullying on victims' mental health have been further highlighted in a study conducted by Kaltiala-Heino, in a research of 17,643 adolescents, Kaltiala-Heino reported that like bullies, victims suffer depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms and eating disorders [10]. With both mental and physical insecurity, victims escape bullying or protect themselves from school bullying by cutting school, dropping out, even attempting suicide in extreme cases [11].

Additionally, students who witness bullying are also negatively impacted. In a research of 2002 students aged 12 to 16, Rivers Ian reported that students who witnessed instances of bullying directed towards their peers were found to have a heightened susceptibility to mental health issues. Interestingly, this heightened risk remained significant even among individuals who did not engage in bullying behavior themselves or experience victimization. [12]. The increased wide range of mental health problems include somatic symptoms [13], depressive symptoms [12,14], academic difficulties [15]. In light of the negative impacts of school bullying on the well-being and development of students, prevention efforts are crucial.

2.   Bystanders in Bullying Situation

Bullying leads to negative impacts on students who are exposed to bullying situations. Both bullies and victims represent a higher risk of suffering various problems, both short-term and long-term. In a bullying situation, "bullies" who are generally aggressive for a specific purpose like gaining status [16], "victims" who are generally submissive or in low-status and "bully-victims" who transfer identity in specific bullying situation are directly involved [17]. However, according to statistics, students have a higher possibility to witness bullying than participate in [12]. Witnessing a bullying situation, students respond differently, such as helping the bully victimize, walking away and defending the victim from bullying.

Four types of bystander roles were identified, including assistant, reinforcer, outsider, and defender [18]. The assistant refers to students who directly engage in bullying by helping the bullies victimize the victims, while the reinforcer witness the process of bullying or provide feedback to the bullies. Students in these two roles can reinforce victimization and give an audience to the bully. The outsider refers to students who turn a deaf ear to or walk away from bullying cases, though he/she is aware of the bullying situation. Finally, the defender intervenes and consoles the victim. Studies have shown that defender is the only relevant role in reducing the occurrence of bullying. Because bullying occurs within a peer-audience context [19] and victim's effectiveness of defending may depend on the audience's attitude [20], students in these two roles give an audience to bullies and reinforce the victimization. Students in the third role, the "outsider", are identified as the silent advocates maintaining bullying [21].

The role of bystanders who witness bullying situations is significant in the context of intervention efforts aimed at preventing bullying. Research has found that students who intervene or defend the target have a positive impact on reducing bullying behavior, whereas those who reinforce the bully contribute to the problem. Defended victims also have better self-esteem and social status compared to undefended victims. For example, in a research with a sample of 4,742 students in from grade 3 to grade 12 across 3 school years respectively, Gage proposed that fostering supportive peer-relationships is a significant approach for intervention efforts [22]. To be more specific, it is reported by researchers that bullying increased in frequency when bystanders reinforce the bullies; in contrast, bullying occurs less frequently when bystanders intervene or protect the victims [23-25]. Furthermore, defended victims are reported to have better self-esteem and a better social status than undefended victims, even one bystander standing on the side of victims makes a difference [21].

In conclusion, research indicates the significant standard of in bullying intervention programs, which need to be better understood and further used. As a result, providing bystanders with strategies they can make use of to become defenders is a promising strategy to prevent and combat bullying.

3. Interventions from the Perspective of Bystanders

3.1. The STAC Program

Based on the limitations of many anti-bullying approaches, which requires a large amount of school resources and time, Midgett, a school counselor, and two graduate students first adapted the Bully-Proofing strategies [26] to the STAC program ("stealing the show" "turning it over" "accompanying others" and "coaching compassion") [27]. It is a brief, stand-alone bystander program that initially designed for elementary and middle school students. It aims at teaching students ways to behave as defenders, decreasing both the prevalence of bullying and negative impact of bullying. The name of the STAC program is an acronym of the four processes of the program. Firstly, "stealing the show", which refers to teaching students how to report bullying cases to adults. Secondly, "turning it over", which refers to training students to confront the bullies and inform them that this behavior is unacceptable in a gentle way. Thirdly, "accompanying others", which refers to teaching students to use their humor sense, so as to distract the attention of the audience away from the victims. Fourthly, "coaching compassion", which refers to training students how to protect victims from being bullied and ease the negative feelings of victims [27,28]

Doumas, Midgett, and Matt Peck conducted a study assessing the impact of the STAC program on students' knowledge about bullying, bystander intervention approaches, confidence of being a bystander when witness bullying [14]. The results revealed that students who took part in the STAC program reported more and better understanding of bullying-related concepts, bystander intervention strategies, and general self-assurance when intervening bullying situations as defenders. Moreover, these students reported the actual application of STAC methods after they encountered bullying cases,

and they verified a great decrease in the number of bullies and victims on campus. The impact of STAC covers students in elementary colleges and middle colleges. Besides, researchers also conduct study among students who are thought to be in danger, demonstrating internalizing and externalizing behaviors and students who have a history of bullying other students occasionally also reported the above effect. Later [29-30], the STAC program is modified for high school students, considering the more complex bullying situation and more types of bullying that happened in high school. Findings provide information for high school STAC program, to include these complex and more types of bullying by modifying role-plays and creating a video presentation in training [31].

STAC was developed not only to reduce bullying behavior, but also to reduce negative mental health impacts on students who witness bullying as a bystander. Findings supported that students participated in the STAC program in elementary school have an increase in self-esteem [31]. Additionally, as for high school students who report witnessing bullying, researchers have found that the STAC intervention improves their sense of school belonging, which in turn eases mental depression and internalizing symptoms [32,33]. Meanwhile, after a 30-day program in a high school, a decreased weekly drinking frequency and peak drinking quantity within 30 days are reported [34].

The STAC program is a valuable tool for school counselors to address bullying, as it is cost-effective and requires minimal school resources. Implementing the STAC program enables school counselors to address bullying issues on a broader scale, as it demands relatively less time and financial investment from schools [27]. Notably, researchers also found that school counselors can especially in some specific ways within the four strategies according to the age, gender or race of students, when starting to teach students ways of intervening as defenders according to the conditions of different populations [35,36]. Additionally, it reminds school counselors of the necessity to assess students' feelings of isolation, fear, and low vanity, no matter whether they are directly involved in bullying or not [37].

In the context of high school, the STAC program highlights the prevalence and detrimental consequences of cyberbullying and bullying associated with social media. It also raises the problem about the trivialization and normalization of bullying by teachers and students, as well as the lack of teacher support in addressing bullying problems. Consequently, the STAC program offers important insights for school counselors, enabling them to comprehend the multifaceted nature of bullying in high school settings and emphasizing their pivotal role in intervention efforts.

3.2. The KiVa Anti-bullying Program

In 2016, with funding from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, Christina Salmivalli, Antti Kärnä, and Elisa Poskiparta in the University of Turku developed a national anti-bullying program named KiVa, which refers to the acronym of Kiusaamista Vastaan ("against bullying" in Finnish), and also sounds similar to "nice" in Finnish. Based on the view of studying bullying as a group phenomenon and relative concepts about students who are neither victims nor bullies in bullying cases (the bystanders) [38], KiVa aims at preventing the incidence of bullying and intervening in bullying situations. It involves both universal and indicated actions.

The implementation of the KiVa program encompasses several universal actions. Firstly, in primary schools, student lessons involve engaging small groups in discussions, utilizing video films, and conducting exercises. Secondly, in secondary schools, thematic modules are employed, covering topics related to group dynamics, the adverse effects of bullying, strategies for students to counteract bullying, and support for victims. Thirdly, virtual learning environments are utilized to supplement and reinforce the lessons and themes. Fourthly, a parents' guide is provided to involve parents in supporting the program. Lastly, visual symbols such as posters and visible vests worn by teachers serve as reminders and cues for students regarding the presence and importance of KiVa. The

indicated actions include discussions with bullies and victims, also with students who are bystander or likely to serve as a defender of the victims [38].

In a study conducted with 5,651 students from fourth to sixth grades in 78 schools, Salmivalli reported the findings that students in control schools were 1.32 to 1.94 times as likely to be bullied as students who participated in KiVa program for nine months, which improves the positive effects of ViKa in reducing the occurrence of bullying [39]. Furthermore, an analysis conducted by Garandeau, Laninga-Wijnen, and Salmivalli using pretest and post-test data from 15,403 children and adolescents who participated in the KiVa program between 2007 and 2009 revealed that KiVa has the ability to increase students' affective empathy, regardless of gender, social status, or specific forms of bullying [40].

3.3. The NoTrap! Anti-bullying Program

The NoTrap! anti-bullying program has been designed as a solution to the increasing bullying incidence, notably within the context of migrant backgrounds taking ethnicity as a contributor to bullying behaviors. In order to prevent and combat bias-based bullying and cyberbullying, first launched in 2008, the NoTrap! (Let's not fall into the trap!) anti-bullying program is an evidence-based peer-led bullying intervention. It utilizes peer-led approaches, based on the conditions postulated in contact theory are all valid in bullying prevention and intervention. Since its initial launch in 2008, the program has undergone progressive revisions.

The first phase involves education from adults, where the program collaborates with a psychologist from the "postal police" (a specialized Italian police unit for online crimes) to present topics related to bullying and cyberbullying. The second phase involves education from peer educators, who are a selected and trained group of students from the school. These peer educators provide support in both virtual and face-to-face contexts [41]. In a survey with a sample of 1,570 students, Zambuto Valentina et al. prove the effectiveness of the NoTrap! and reports that training students from an immigrant background is a valid strategy in preventing and countering ethnic bullying [42]. In two independent trials conducted by Benedetta E. Palladino et al., the 3rd edition of NoTrap! Program is evaluated effectiveness that after 6 months intervention, the prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying in the experimental group decreased, but it didn't happen in the control group [41].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this review highlights the importance of bystander perspectives in addressing school bullying and emphasizes the significance of empowering bystanders through intervention programs. The STAC program, the KiVa anti-bullying program, and the NoTrap! anti-bullying program are discussed as interventions that specifically target bystanders and aim to equip them with effective strategies to prevent and combat bullying incidents. The effectiveness of the STAC program in increasing students' knowledge about bullying, bystander intervention techniques, and their confidence in intervening as defenders is supported by research. Furthermore, the STAC program has shown positive effects in reducing both perpetration and victimization of bullying. It is a cost-effective and accessible tool for school counselors to address bullying on a broader scale. Overall, empowering bystanders represents a promising strategy to prevent and combat bullying, and further research and intervention development from the bystander perspective are encouraged.

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