Theory Into Practice

The Role of Social-Emotional Learning In Bullying Prevention Efforts

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This article examines how social emotional learning contributes to bullying prevention efforts in schools. Bullying behavior is impacted by multiple levels of the social-ecology of schools. Social emotional learning (SEL) is a structured way to improve a wide range of students' social and emotional competencies and impact bullying at the individual and peer levels of the school social-ecology. SEL has been shown to be an effective component in comprehensive bullying prevention interventions and other interventions targeting problems such as substance abuse. SEL programs have also been shown to improve student skills, reduce problem behaviors, and increase academic achievement. This article discusses how skills taught in SEL programs contribute to bullying prevention and shows the research links between SEL skills and bullying. Specific suggestions are provided for teachers of ways to support student skill acquisition and strengthen the gains provided by SEL programs.

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THE SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK is arguably the most validated heuristic model for understanding and preventing bullying perpetration and victimization. The model highlights the importance of reciprocal, dynamic influences on bullying behaviors from individuals, families, schools, peer groups, communities, and the larger society (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Garbarino & deLara, 2002). It has been proposed that the optimal approach to bullying prevention includes intervention components to address multiple levels of the social-ecology, ideally including the

individual, peer, school, and broader community and societal contexts (Guerra & Huesmann, 2004).

Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning (SEL) involves "the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children more effectively handle life challenges and thrive in both their learning and their social environments" (Ragozzino & Utne O'Brien, 2009, p. 3). SEL programs can provide schools with a research-based approach to building skills and promoting positive individual and peer attitudes that can contribute to the prevention of bullying.

SEL interventions have been shown to result in positive outcomes for children and youth, including reduced disciplinary referrals, time in special education, arrests, school absences, and aggressive behavior and increased high school graduation rates, academic achievement, self-efficacy, and prosocial skills (Linacres et al., 2005; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Twemlow et al., 2001). A recent meta-analysis of over 200 evaluations found that students who received SEL programming in school showed improved social–emotional skills and attitudes about school, self and others, more connection to school, positive social behavior, reduced conduct problems and emotional distress, and an 11 percentage point improvement in academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

SEL has also been shown to contribute to a range of positive youth outcomes when integrated into multicomponent interventions. Interventions that included an SEL component have been found to have positive impacts on students' sense of school community and commitment to school (Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001), violent behavior and school suspensions (Flay & Allred, 2003), and school truancy and dropout, delinquency, alcohol and drug use, and conduct problems (Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001). Social and emotional competency instruction is considered a critical component for effective school-based substance abuse and violence prevention programs (Dusenbury, Falco, Lake, Brannigan, & Bosworth, 1997).

SEL: A Key Ingredient in Bullying Prevention

Meta-analyses suggest that SEL programming is not, by itself, a best practice for bullying prevention, but should be seen as a key component in whole-school interventions that target multiple levels of the school social-ecology (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009). Vreeman and Carroll (2007), in their systematic review of school-based interventions designed to prevent bullying, concluded that the most effective interventions use a whole-school approach consisting of a combination of schoolwide policies, teacher training, and classroom SEL curricula. Components of effective school-based bullying prevention that complement SEL include clear bullying-related school rules and policies and improved supervision of students (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009), as well as staff training to increase staff intervention in bullying incidents through improved staff awareness and skill (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, Gulemetova, & Henderson, 2011).

The most rigorous evaluation to find positive outcomes for a bullying prevention program in the United States demonstrated the effectiveness of a multilevel intervention. The *Steps to Respect* program (Committee for Children, 2001) is based on a social-ecological framework, and combines a focus on rules, policies, and supervision; staff training on how to effectively intervene in bullying situations; and classroom SEL lessons for students. The lessons help students identify the various forms of bullying and encourage positive norms while training students in empathy, emotion regulation, assertiveness, and friendship skills (see Frey et al., 2005). The 33-school randomized evaluation showed that the program improved student social competence, positive student and staff responses to bullying, and overall school climate while ultimately reducing physical bullying among students (Brown, Low, Smith, & Haggerty, 2011).

The following sections focus on the research links between social and emotional skills commonly taught in SEL programs and the prevention of bullying. SEL is typically delivered through structured lessons in the classroom. Teachers can also play a critical role in ensuring that students learn and use social and emotional skills by cueing students about opportunities to use their skills and reinforcing them when they do. Examples are given in each section.

Empathy

Being able to identify, understand, and respond to how someone is feeling provides a foundation for helpful and socially responsible behavior, friendships, cooperation, coping, and conflict resolution. In general, children with higher levels of empathy tend to be less aggressive, better liked, more socially skilled, and more academically successful (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Denham, 2006; Izard, 2002). Empathy may play a direct role in reducing perpetration of bullying by increasing acceptance of and tolerance for children who deviate from the social ideal or social norm (Mayberry & Espelage, 2007). Empathy may also play a crucial indirect role through affecting bystander behavior. Empathic concern and positive feelings and attitudes toward peers make students more likely to intervene to stop bullying (Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008; Rigby & Johnson, 2006/7), and bullying behavior is much less likely to occur if not supported by peers (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011).

An important aspect of empathy taught in many SEL programs is perspective taking. The term *empathy* typically refers to a student being able to understand what another student is feeling because seeing their peer's discomfort causes them to experience the same emotion. Perspective taking, on the other hand, is a more cognitive process of understanding what another student is experiencing without necessarily having to feel the same emotion. SEL programs can improve student's perspective-taking skills by teaching about the fact that different people

may have different feelings in the same situation and by having them practice putting themselves in someone else's shoes and think about how others might feel in various scenarios. Students with perspective-taking skills are less likely to be physically, verbally, and indirectly aggressive to peers (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). Perspective-taking skills also make students more likely to offer emotional support to others (Litvack-Miller, McDougall, & Romney, 1997).

Teachers can help students increase their empathy skills throughout the day. Simply talking about and labeling feelings whenever possible can help cement students' awareness of their own and others' emotions. Reading or having students read stories that help them gain insight into a character's emotions, especially one who is different from them, can also be useful. Younger children need to learn that students can have different feelings in the same situation and teachers can look for opportunities to point that out. There is a broad range of children's books available with sensitive and thoughtful depictions of bullying that can help increase empathy for bullied students. Teachers can also work with students to help them think about what another student is feeling during conflicts or disagreements.

Emotion Management

Students are more likely to bully others if they lack self-control or have poor emotion-regulation skills (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). Nearly half of children respond to bullying with highly emotional reactions that tend to increase the likelihood of victimization by peers (Analitis et al., 2009; Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2006). Improved skill at managing strong emotions such as anger, embarrassment, anxiety, fear, and jealousy can improve students' ability to utilize self-talk and other coping strategies to avoid crying, retaliating, or responding in other ways likely to mark them as easy or appealing targets for continued victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). Finally, emotion management skills help children behave in socially skilled ways (Eisenberg et. al., 1997),

which increases their ability to gain friends and social support and makes them more likely to use social problem-solving skills in challenging situations with peers (Donohew et al., 2000; Simons, Carey, & Gaher, 2004).

Students need specific instruction in useful emotion management skills such as deep breathing, self-talk, and others. One key to skill acquisition is practice. Teachers can cue students to be ready to use their skills ahead of time when they anticipate emotionally challenging situations, such as anxiety about a test, excitement during an assembly or walking through the halls, or peer conflicts during recess. Students can also be cued to use emotion management skills to calm down when teachers see that they are upset. Practicing the skills when they are needed will help students master this important aspect of self-control.

Social Problem Solving

Poor social problem-solving skills are a predictor of involvement in bullying for students who bully others, students who are bullied, and those involved in both roles, often referred to as bully-victims (Cook et al., 2010). To effectively manage peer challenges, students need to be able to accurately assess social situations and respond in thoughtful ways. Children who are aggressive and bully others often misread social cues and tend to jump to conclusions, see others as more hostile or aggressive than they really are, and come up with fewer and more aggressive ideas about how to handle peer conflicts (Cook et al., 2010; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Pellegrini, 2002).

Students who are bullied also typically lack effective social problem-solving skills (Biggam & Power, 1999), a deficit that can impair their ability to respond effectively when bullied. Students who react passively (Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993) or aggressively (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997) to bullying are victimized more often, longer, and more seriously. But research shows that if students can learn to use problem-solving strategies when bullied, it deescalates conflicts 13 times more effectively than the aggressive, retaliatory, or emotionally reactive responses students typically use (Mahady-Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000).

Social problem-solving skills are not just important for serious peer conflicts. Teachers may find it easier to scaffold acquisition of these skills by helping students apply them to easier challenges, such as cooperating with each other on a project or working out a simple disagreement. Many SEL programs that teach these skills provide posters for the classroom that teachers can use to help students remember and use the steps involved in problem solving.

Social Competence

The skills taught in SEL programs overlap and interact with each other. Often the divisions used by researchers are sharper than what teachers will see playing out in complex social behavior among students. Social competence encompasses a particularly broad range of skills. For example, empathy, emotion management, and problem-solving skills all contribute to a student's ability to get along with and make friends with peers. In addition, communication skills, friendship skills (such as how to join groups, start conversations, and include others), and assertiveness also all fall under the broad category of social competence or social skills.

Both students who bully others and students victimized by bullying typically lack adequate social skills (Cook et al., 2010). Social status and peer relationships have powerful influences on bullying, in particular influencing which students are more likely to be bullied (Salmivalli, 2010). Being disliked, socially marginalized, or rejected by peers significantly increases a student's risk of being bullied (Cook et al., 2010; Putallaz et al., 2007). Victimized children tend to have fewer friends, and those they do have are often also victimized by peers, reducing their ability to provide social protection from bullying (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). Having lower peer status and less social support makes children easy targets and more vulnerable to emotional harm from bullying because other children are less likely to defend them (Slaby, 2005).

On the other hand, friendships and social support directly protect students from peer victimization (Hanish, Ryan, Martin, & Fabes, 2005). Helping vulnerable children gain friends and get along better with peers by increasing their social competence and friendship skills can be a valuable component in bullying prevention interventions. Students who have at least one friend are less likely to be victimized by peers, and bullied students with a good friend experience less subsequent bullying and fewer emotional and behavioral problems when bullied (Goldbaum et al., 2006; Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007). Learning social skills can help rejected children become more accepted by peers, less likely to be bullied, and more likely to be defended by other students (Pelligrini, 2002).

Assertiveness is a social skill commonly taught in SEL programs that can reduce the likelihood bullied students will blame themselves for their victimization (Graham, Bellmore, & Juvonen, 2006). Assertiveness training can help victimized students learn to respond more effectively to bullying, such as by talking with others to find a solution or asking others for help (Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000). Universal SEL that teaches assertiveness skills may also reduce bullying through changing bystander behavior. Bystanders can usually end bullying quickly by using assertiveness to make it clear they do not approve of the behavior (Salmivalli, 1999).

Students can benefit from assertiveness in a wide variety of situations, such as asking a teacher for help, assertively responding to bullying, or using assertiveness to intervene in a bullying incident. Structured lessons can teach the difference between passive, aggressive, and assertive behavior. Once students understand how to be assertive, teachers can look for opportunities to encourage assertive behavior. If students can practice the skill in low-stress situations first, such as working with a partner or group on a class project or asking for help from a teacher, then they will be better prepared to use assertiveness for bigger challenges such as responding to bullying or serious peer conflicts.

SEL programs typically teach communication skills such as how to start conversations or join groups, and friendship skills such as how to play fairly (sharing, taking turns, following rules), invite others to join a group, and treat peers respectfully. Having lessons on these topics provides teachers with specific language to use to remind students of the skills and how to use them throughout the day. Although SEL programs teach specific skills, talking about how students should treat each other is also a way to establish positive norms that students can be reminded of and cued to follow. Most teachers develop positively stated class rules for behavior that are strengthened by explicitly linking them to the skills taught in SEL. Rules set the expectations; SEL gives students the skills they can draw on to behave appropriately and meet those expectations.

Conclusion

Growing social concern and legislative pressure have led to an increased interest in effective school-based bullying prevention. Research suggests that the most promising approaches target multiple levels of the school social-ecology that interactively affect prevalence, maintenance, and growth in bullying behavior. This article has outlined the utility of social and emotional learning programs for targeting individual and peer influences on bullying. The skills taught in SEL can help orient youth toward more prosocial peer interaction and interpersonal problem solving, and provide students with strategies for coping effectively with peer challenges. Increased social competence may reduce students' vulnerability to bullying by helping them gain the friends and social support that both reduce bullying and buffer its negative effects. Assertiveness and emotion management skills fit well into a bullying prevention initiative by empowering students who are bullied to respond more effectively and by helping bystanders to act to discourage bullying by reporting to adults, supporting victims, or intervening directly in bullying incidents.

SEL by itself is clearly no panacea for bullying and should not be represented as a stand-alone solution to the problem. SEL skills are

most likely to help reduce bullying when they are integrated into comprehensive multicomponent programs. In addition to classroom-based SEL instruction, intervention at the staff and whole-school level are also important to improving school climate and adult responsiveness to peer victimization. Skill training in the classroom is likely to be more effective if prosocial behavior is encouraged, modeled, and rewarded throughout the school environment. Teachers can help make their classroom and school a safer environment with less bullying by teaching social and emotional skills to their students. Multiple evidence-based SEL curricula are available to schools. Teachers can empower their students to create a healthier school climate by starting with a strong skills-focused SEL program and reinforcing student skill use throughout the school day.

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