Journal of School Psychology 53 (2015) 179–194

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of School Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jschpsyc

A qualitative analysis of factors influencing middle school students' use of skills taught by a violence prevention curriculum☆,☆☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 August 2014
Received in revised form 2 February 2015
Accepted 1 March 2015
Available online 21 March 2015

Keywords:
Violence prevention
Qualitative analysis
Adolescence
Social–emotional learning
Aggression
Bullying prevention

ABSTRACT

This study examined factors that influenced the use of skills taught in a school-based universal violence prevention program. Interviews were conducted with 91 students from two urban schools (83% were African American and 12% multiracial) and 50 students from a nearby county school (52% were White, 32% African American, and 12% multiracial). About half the sample (54%) was male. All had been in sixth grade classrooms where the Second Step (Committee for Children, 1997b) violence prevention curriculum had been implemented earlier in the school year or in the preceding school year. Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts suggested that participants' use of intervention skills was influenced by their beliefs and values, perceived relevance and effectiveness of the skill, issues related to enacting the behavior, and contextual factors. These findings highlight the need for a more intensive and comprehensive effort to address barriers and supports that influence the relevance and impact of school-based violence prevention programs.

1. Introduction

Schools are a frequent venue for prevention efforts that focus on reducing youth involvement in problem behaviors such as aggression (Farrell & Camou, 2006; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). Several factors make schools a natural setting for such efforts. Schools provide a primary setting in which peer groups form and conflicts can develop. This is especially true during middle school, when students may first encounter and be particularly susceptible to the influence of delinquent peers (Moffitt, 1993). Factors within the school climate may also increase adolescents' risk for aggression. Within some schools, informal norms may support aggression as

☆ This study was funded by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC Cooperative Agreements 5U49CE000730 and 5U01CE001956. The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

☆☆ The authors appreciate the contributions of Amie Bettencourt, Anh-Thuy Le, Denicia Titchner, and Kelly Zbojovsky who contributed to the study through coding transcripts, and refining the theme definitions and framework.

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Action Editor: Michelle K. Demaray

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2015.03.001
0022-4405/

a means of achieving social status and correcting perceived wrongs (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Henry, Farrell, Schoeny, Tolan, & Dymnicki, 2011). Conversely, schools can provide positive experiences for youth. Teachers and other staff members can implement programs designed to develop students' social and emotional skills, model these skills, and support their use (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). Schools can also institute policies and practices to discourage aggression and encourage prosocial behavior. Finally, at a practical level, schools provide access to the majority of school-aged youth.

Although universal school-based violence prevention programs have produced some promising results, further work is needed to improve their effectiveness (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2007). Meta-analyses have concluded that the majority of youth violence prevention programs have limited benefits. A recent meta-review indicated that about half of meta-analyses have found only moderate intervention effects, one-quarter reported weak effects, and only one-tenth found strong effects (Matjasko et al., 2012). A meta-analysis that focused specifically on universal school-based programs indicated that their overall effect was a 15% reduction in violent behaviors (CDC, 2007). Compared with programs targeting other age groups, effects for middle school students were more modest (i.e., a 7% reduction). Other reviewers have concluded that even when initial intervention effects have been found, they have typically not been sustained over time (Mytton, DiGuiseppi, Gough, Taylor, & Logan, 2002; Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). This variability in intervention effects may partially reflect the influence of individual-, school-, and community-level moderators (Farrell, Henry, & Bettencourt, 2013). Thus, although school-based prevention programs clearly have promise, further work is needed to improve their relevance and impact for specific groups of adolescents.

The majority of school-based violence prevention programs are based on social–emotional learning (SEL) principles; that is, they are designed to improve adolescents' cognitive, social, and emotional skills such as empathy, problem-solving, and anger management (Boxer & Dubow, 2002). This approach is based on a social information-processing model that views aggressive behavior as a function of deficits in these skills along with beliefs and values that support aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Huesmann, 1998). The assumption is that addressing skill deficits and altering the database that influences decisions about how to respond in a specific situation will reduce youth involvement in aggression. Ladd and Mize (1983) identified three training objectives for SEL programs: enhancing skill concepts, promoting skill performance, and fostering skill maintenance and generalization. The third goal, maintenance and generalization, identifies the need for children to transition successfully from practicing the skill during lessons to using the skill in real life. It is difficult to measure actual generalization of SEL skills directly. Instead, investigators tend to measure distal outcomes such as aggression or prosocial behavior, and simply assume that the mechanism of change was the use of social and emotional skills in daily interactions (e.g., Bierman et al., 2010). A clearer understanding of the extent to which participants in SEL interventions acquire the targeted skills and generalize them to situations they encounter in their everyday lives could guide efforts to improve their impact.

This social–emotional focus is reflected in Second Step, a universal school-based violence prevention program with curricula for elementary (Committee for Children, 1997a) and middle school students (Committee for Children, 1997b). The middle school foundational curriculum consists of 15 lessons that address skills related to empathy and perspective-taking, social problem solving, and anger management, and the application of these skills to dealing with bullying, diffusing a fight, addressing peer and gang pressure, and using assertiveness to make a complaint (Committee for Children, 1997b). The U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Communities that Care have each designated Second Step as a "best practice" or "model" program, and it has been widely implemented in schools across the U.S. (Cooke et al., 2007).

Support for the efficacy of the Second Step middle school curriculum has been somewhat mixed. Some studies have not found reductions in problem behaviors among participants (e.g., McMahon & Washburn, 2003; Orpinas et al., 2000), suggesting problems with skill mastery or generalization. Others have found initial positive outcomes that were not maintained over time, suggesting problems with skill maintenance (e.g., Orpinas, Parcel, McAlister, & Frankowski, 1995). One of the more rigorous evaluations of the Second Step Middle School curriculum was conducted by Espelage, Low, Polanin, and Brown (2013), who randomized 18 matched pairs of middle schools to intervention and control conditions. Although they found significant intervention effects at an initial posttest on self-reported measures of physical aggression, they did not find effects on other key outcomes including verbal and relational aggression, peer victimization, homophobic teasing, and sexual violence. Effects have also been found to vary across subgroups of students. Sullivan, Sutherland, Farrell, and Taylor (in press) evaluated the impact of Second Step in a study that randomized 28 classrooms in two urban middle schools and a school in a neighboring county to intervention and control conditions. Although analyses of pretest-to-posttest changes did not indicate any main effects for the intervention, some effects were found for subgroups defined by disability status and gender.

A major goal of Second Step and similar school-based interventions is for participants to not only master the skills taught, but generalize them by using them in relevant, real-life situations. Surprisingly little research has tested this assumption. Edwards, Hunt, Meyers, Grogg, and Jarrett (2005) interviewed 113 fourth and fifth grade students in an urban school district who participated in Second Step. Nearly all of the students (96%) provided an example of when they used one of the specific skills taught by the intervention. The majority of these examples (66%) involved the use of anger management skills. Fewer students described situations in which they used other targeted skills such as empathy (14%) and problem solving (6%). Grumm, Hein, and Fingerle (2012) examined the social validity of a German adaptation of Second Step through interviews with 117 fourth grade students. Students were asked how they liked the intervention, how useful they found it, the extent to which they used the skills addressed by the intervention, and which aspects of the intervention they liked and disliked. Half the participants found the intervention useful and identified situations in which they used what they learned, 30% found it useful but were not able to provide specific examples, and 20% did not find it useful.

Farrell, Mehari, Mays, Sullivan, and Le (in press) investigated participants' perceptions of the Second Step middle school curriculum in a mixed-methods study in which they interviewed 141 students from three middle schools who had participated in Second Step as part of a randomized trial. Interviewers asked participants about their overall evaluation of the intervention, the extent to