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Engaging Youth in Bullying Prevention Through Community-Based Participatory Research

Jennifer E. Gibson, PhD; Paul D. Flaspobler, PhD; Vanessa Watts, MA

Few studies that engage youth in community-based participatory research (CBPR) focus on issues of safety/violence, include elementary school-aged youth, or quantitatively assess outcomes of the CBPR process. This article expands understanding of CBPR with youth by describing and evaluating the outcomes of a project that engaged fifth-grade students at 3 schools in bullying-focused CBPR. Results suggest that the project was associated with decreases in fear of bullying and increases in peer and teacher intervention to stop bullying. We conclude with implications for the engagement of elementary school-aged youth in CBPR to address bullying and other youth issues. **Key words:** *bullying, community-based participatory research, elementary schools, prevention*

BULLYING is a serious problem with detrimental effects on health and safety. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) with youth may provide a means of addressing bullying in schools. Community-based participatory research with youth is understudied; few published youth CBPR studies focus on elementary school-aged youth or on safety/violence prevention projects.¹ Quantitative assessment of the outcomes of CBPR is also rare. This article advances understanding of CBPR with youth by

describing a bullying-focused CBPR project at 3 elementary schools and exploring the outcomes of the project for the school communities.

BULLYING

Bullying occurs when a more powerful individual or group repeatedly engages in behaviors intending to harm or agitate a less powerful individual or group. This definition recognizes 3 characteristics—repetition, intentional harm, and unequal power—that differentiate bullying from other forms of aggression.² The high prevalence and association with negative outcomes make bullying a public health concern.^{3,4} Students who bully are more likely than their peers to exhibit violent delinquency and use alcohol and cigarettes.^{5,6} As adults, they are more likely to be convicted of criminal offenses.⁷ Victims of bullying are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and other negative outcomes.⁸⁻¹⁰ In rare instances, extreme violence may result; in two-thirds of the school shootings that occurred between

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1974 and 2000, the shooter felt bullied or otherwise attacked at school.¹¹ Thus, bullying compromises the health and safety of entire communities.

Beliefs about the acceptability of ostracism, humiliation, and violence may fuel social norms that reinforce bullying.¹²⁻¹⁴ Students who witness bullying are more likely to walk away, support the bullying, or join in bullying than to stand up for the victim.^{15,16} Adults may unintentionally reinforce bullying when they fail to intervene because they feel that bullying is a normal part of childhood, that it does no real harm, or that children should learn to resolve their problems on their own.¹⁷ As a result, bullying cannot be addressed by intervening with individual children but must involve the entire school community.

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Community-based participatory research is a “partnership approach to research that equitably involves, for example, community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process.”^{18(p48)} In CBPR, the partners use their unique strengths to increase understanding of a problem, identify sociocultural dynamics associated with the problem, and integrate the knowledge gained with action to improve community conditions.^{19,20} Action research and participatory action research are variants of this idea.

Israel and colleagues¹⁸ identified principles to consider when conducting CBPR. These include building on strengths and resources within the community, facilitating equitable partnership in all research phases, promoting capacity building among partners, and focusing on systems development through an iterative process. Researchers and community partners must be flexible in deciding which principles are relevant for their particular project.¹⁸

Community-based participatory research has become a valued approach for address-

ing public health issues. The Institute of Medicine identified CBPR as a critical element of public health training.²¹ The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has promoted the use of CBPR in program development. A review of CBPR by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality suggests that it is effective in improving research quality, building community capacity, and improving health outcomes, particularly when there is high community involvement in the CBPR process.²²

CBPR WITH YOUTH TO PREVENT BULLYING

For several reasons, CBPR with youth may be a good approach to bullying prevention. First, youth may understand their problems better than adults and may identify more creative solutions.²³ Second, research suggests that interventions that incorporate consumer perspectives during the design process may be more relevant, leading to greater sustainability and effectiveness.^{24,25} Harper and Carver²⁶ suggest that interventions designed and implemented by youth increase the appeal and acceptance of the intervention for other youth. In addition, students may be viewed as an untapped resource whose time is more affordable than adults’ and who may have more energy and enthusiasm for youth issues.^{12,23} Despite these benefits, including children as CBPR partners is rare.²⁷

Existing research on CBPR with youth tends to involve older youth and examine issues related to general health and wellness. Jacquez et al¹ reviewed 399 articles described as “CBPR with youth” and found that only 56 actually met criteria for CBPR with youth. Within those 56 articles, only 18% engaged youth in all phases of the CBPR process. Most studies focused on general health and wellness topics (eg, obesity, sexual health, substance use); only 7 studies focused on changing the school environment, and only 4 studies focused on safety/violence prevention. Six studies included elementary school-aged youth.

Few studies examine the benefits of engaging youth in research and action projects, and fewer use quantitative methodology to analyze such benefits.^{28,29} Noting the lack of studies examining changes in schools from youth participation in action research, Ozer and Wright²⁹ conducted a qualitative study that suggested positive changes in adult-child relationships at 2 urban high schools as a result of youth engagement in CBPR. While this study provides a research foundation, quantitative research is needed to expand understanding of the benefits of youth CBPR for school communities.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This article advances understanding of the process and outcomes of CBPR with youth by providing an illustration and evaluation of a youth CBPR project. The project engaged students from 3 elementary schools in bullying-focused CBPR. We begin the “Methods” section by describing the schools and participants in the evaluation. Then we describe the evaluation measures, which were used to assess changes in reports of being bullied, fear of bullying, peer intervention to stop bullying, and adult intervention to stop bullying over the course of the CBPR project. Next, we provide a detailed account of the CBPR process. Finally, in the “Results” section, we use evaluation findings to explore benefits of the CBPR project for the school communities.

METHODS

Participants and procedures

Participants in this study were from 3 elementary schools. The schools were similar in size (413-495 preschool through fifth-grade students), geographic location (rural Midwest), and racial composition (96.4%-97.1% white), with some variability in the percentage of students categorized as disadvantaged (17.7%-38.9%). A total of 659 third- through fifth-grade students (52.13%

girls) completed the measure at pretest, and 693 (50.29% girls) completed the measure at posttest. All students who provided consent and assent and were in school on pre- and posttest days completed the measure. The number of participants differs between pre- and posttest because of absences and shifts in school enrollment across the school year. At pretest, 34.91% of the sample was third-grade students, 34.30% of the sample was fourth-grade students, and 30.79% of the sample was fifth-grade students. Race and income data were not collected for individual participants.

Teachers and other school staff members administered the measure to whole classrooms; directions and items were read aloud and repeated upon student request. Administration was completed in approximately 30 minutes. The school districts and university institutional review board approved this project.

Measures

To determine whether the CBPR process led to changes at participating schools, participants completed the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ)³⁰ at the beginning (pretest) and end (posttest) of the CBPR process. To assess the frequency of bullying, students responded to a prompt asking how often they had been bullied at school in the past couple of months and selected 1 of 5 responses ranging from *I haven't been bullied at school in the past couple of months to several times a week*. To assess how often students feared being bullied, students responded to a prompt asking how often they were afraid of being bullied by other students at their school and selected 1 of 5 responses ranging from *never to very often*. In addition, 2 questions asked how often other students and school staff members try to put a stop to it when a student is being bullied, with 5 responses ranging from almost *never to almost always*. The BVQ has strong evidence for construct validity and moderate to high correlations with peer reports of victimization.^{31,32}

The CBPR project

In this section, we describe the CBPR process as it occurred at the 3 participating schools. The process was derived from a 6-stage EIPARS model, which was created in collaboration with youth to guide the engagement of youth in health and social issues.³³ The EIPARS model describes 6 stages of a CBPR cycle: *engage* youth into the project and allow them to *identify* issues of importance, create a *plan* for addressing the issue and *act* to address it, and continually *assess/reflect on* successes and find ways to *sustain* the group and/or the project. The EIPARS model overlaps and complements the core components/phases in conducting CBPR (Table 1).³⁴

Engage

In the first stage, academic partners seek out community partners and work with them to build trusting relationships, define roles that ensure equity and power sharing, and create the infrastructure for carrying out research. In this project, university researchers approached 3 schools with an identified

need to address bullying. The process of partnership formation benefitted from existing relationships between the university and schools. Administrators at all 3 schools were supportive and expressed excitement about the CBPR project. At each school, a school-employed mental health care professional agreed to cofacilitate the CBPR process with a university-based partner.

Fifth-grade students were targeted for participation in the CBPR project. Most existing CBPR research has involved middle and high school-aged youth, although a handful of studies demonstrate that younger children can be effective CBPR participants.^{1,35,36} Teachers nominated influential students from salient peer groups or “cliques” identified in previous research (eg, athletic students, academically gifted students, and students who tend to get in trouble) for participation.³⁷ This recruitment strategy was based on findings that suggest key opinion leaders improve the diffusion of innovation.³⁸ Every fifth-grade teacher nominated 4 to 8 students, resulting in 38 nominations. These students attended a brief information session at their school and received consent forms to take

Table 1. Comparison of Core Components/Phases in Conducting CBPR and the EIPARS Model

Core Components/Phases in Conducting CBPR ³³	EIPARS Model ³⁴
1. Form a CBPR partnership	1. Engage youth in the project
2. Assess community strengths and dynamics	2. Identify issues of importance
3. Identify priority health concerns and research questions	3. Plan to address concerns
4. Design and conduct etiologic, intervention, and/or policy research	4. Take action to address concerns
5. Feed back and interpret research findings	5. Assess and reflect on outcomes
6. Disseminate and translate research findings	6. Sustain the partnership
7. Maintain, sustain, and evaluate the CBPR partnership	

Abbreviation: CBPR, community-based participatory research.

home for parents. Parents of students who returned forms were contacted to provide additional information. Thirty-six of the nominated students obtained parental consent and agreed to participate. Of these, 32 completed the project. Four dropped out, with attrition roughly equal across schools. Each school had approximately equal numbers of male and female CBPR group members, with demographics matching those of the school.

The project was carried out through 23 to 30 weekly meetings among the adult partners and the youth researchers during the school day. The goals of the first meetings were to build trust, establish operating norms, and create research capacity. This phase lasted 4 to 6 meetings. Each group established rules and governance strategies and engaged in activities to promote group cohesion. For example, at each school, the youth identified a name for their group. At one school, students designed a logo. The youth also learned about research on bullying and examples of bullying prevention efforts. By the end of this phase, the youth were engaged, cooperative, and energized to begin conducting research.

Identify

The next phase involves identification of a problem. This includes assessing needs and resources and prioritizing concerns. The phase lasted 5 to 7 meetings. Each group examined its school's pretest bullying data with the aim of identifying priorities. Youth at 2 schools decided to collect additional data, using time before school and during recess to conduct interviews with peers. Adult partners provided guidance including how to select participants, obtain consent, ensure confidentiality, use existing data to generate meaningful interview questions, and conduct structured interviews.

Informed by their data, youth at each school prioritized problems. Verbal bullying and social bullying were identified as the most frequent problems. Lack of awareness of the impact of bullying and uncertainty about how to intervene were identified as priorities for intervention at all 3 schools.

Plan

The next step involves planning an intervention or designing an approach to a research question. Each group worked to identify appropriate intervention strategies, assess the fit between the strategies and the setting, and plan for implementation and evaluation of the strategies. Adult partners led the youth through the process of brainstorming and using an action plan worksheet to develop goals and strategies for action projects, specify the time and resources needed, and identify methods for evaluating success. Several students had difficulty focusing and did not enjoy completing the action plan worksheet. The structured nature of this activity (less creative and active than the previous stages) may have felt like traditional schoolwork. All 3 schools created plans that focused on the same goal—raising awareness of the impact of bullying and providing ways to intervene when bullying occurs—but the methods chosen to achieve this goal varied.

Take action

In the next phase, the plan is put into action. Each school focused on raising awareness through communication with the school community. At one school, youth wrote a series of antibullying announcements and delivered them over the intercom several times a week for a month. They also wrote antibullying skits and performed them at a school-wide assembly. At another school, the youth developed an antibullying poster contest and filled a bulletin board with information about treating others with kindness. The third group wrote antibullying skits and performed them during a school-wide assembly. At the request of the principal, they taught their peers a peer mediation technique at another assembly. The line between planning and action can be arbitrary. Some activities commence immediately, whereas others take longer to plan. Together, the planning and action stages took 8 to 13 meetings and frequently involved youth working on their projects outside of CBPR meeting times.

Assess and reflect

The aim of this phase was to evaluate the intervention and engage partners in understanding and using results. Four to 5 group meetings focused on assessment and reflection. At one school, adult partners helped students design and conduct interviews with teachers about the impact of their interventions. The interview results were mixed. Many teachers reported improvements (eg, increases in reporting peer problems and including others in play, and decreases in rumors and discipline referrals for bullying). Other teachers reported no changes in student behavior, but no teachers reported an increase in bullying. At another school, the youth decided to collect informal feedback on their interventions from teachers and peers. Although the feedback was generally positive, lack of specificity led to a less productive and rewarding conversation. At these 2 schools, the youth stated that they were upset that the program was ending and wanted to return to help with the program the following year.

In contrast, students in the third school appeared to become disengaged after completing their action projects and decided that they did not want to solicit feedback from teachers or peers. This may have been related to the end of the school year approaching and the school-based adult partner's disengagement due to increasing demands for her time. The university-based facilitator guided a discussion regarding the students' impressions of the effectiveness of their projects, in which students expressed satisfaction with their efforts and the impression that it would make a difference at the school.

Sustain

Efforts to sustain the partnership often include evaluating the partnership process as well as promoting the partnership through sharing the results with the community. Sustainability efforts included an early presentation of the project at a school board meeting and the creation of an article about the project for a school district newsletter.

Toward the end, the 2 groups that remained engaged were inspired to share their experience and outcomes with the wider school community. At one school, the youth wrote a letter to the school community describing their work and feedback from teachers. At the other, the youth wrote a letter to the principal requesting that the CBPR project continue the following year. At both schools, the letters were discussed with the principal.

At the end of the school year, the primary university-based partner moved away and the participating students moved on to middle school, leading to an organic and planned end of the CBPR project at 2 schools. At the school where students requested the program continue, the principal worked with the university to identify a new university-based partner to lead the CBPR group and the project continued into the following year.

RESULTS

In this section, we explore potential outcomes of the project for the school communities. We used 2-proportion z tests to examine pre- and post-CBPR differences in the proportion of third- through fifth-grade students who reported (*a*) being bullied, (*b*) fear of being bullied, (*c*) believing their peers intervene to stop bullying, and (*d*) believing school staff intervene to stop bullying. To facilitate 2-proportion z test analyses, responses to each BVQ question were dichotomized using a cutoff score endorsed in previous literature.^{8,39} Students who reported being bullied *2 to 3 times a month* or more were categorized as having experienced bullying. Those students who reported being bullied fewer than *2 to 3 times a month* were categorized as not bullied. For the questions regarding fear of bullying and student and school staff intervention to stop bullying, students who responded *sometimes* or more were categorized as endorsing the item and those who responded less than *sometimes* were categorized as not endorsing the item.

Prior to analysis, the data were screened for missing values and it was determined that

the missing values were missing at random. The Little's MCAR test was significant at $P = .48$; however, separate variance t tests revealed no significant correlations between the missing cases. Maximum likelihood estimation was used to impute missing values.

Results indicate that for the complete study sample, the proportions of students who reported being bullied and fear of being bullied did not change over the course of the CBPR project. However, a significantly greater proportion of participants reported that they believe peers and adults at school intervene to stop bullying after the CBPR project than before (Table 2).

Differences across schools emerged when examined separately. At one school, there were no changes in fear of bullying or peer intervention to stop bullying, but a significantly greater proportion of students reported be-

ing bullied after the project. This school also reported more adult intervention to stop bullying after the project. At the second school, results were similar to the overall sample, with no significant changes in reports of being bullied or fear of bullying but higher endorsement of peer and adult intervention to stop bullying at posttest. At the third school, students reported significantly lower fear of being bullied at posttest. This school also reported more peer intervention to stop bullying after the project but showed no change in the percentage of students being bullied or adult intervention to stop bullying.

DISCUSSION

This study provides an example of a CBPR project that engaged elementary school youth

Table 2. Contrast of Pre- and Posttest Bullying Variables

	Pre, %	Post, %	z	P
Bullied				
Schools combined	17.60	20.49	-1.35	.09
School A	14.95	22.36	-2.01	.02 ^a
School B	13.41	18.08	-1.48	.07
School C	26.63	21.62	1.13	.13
Afraid of bullying				
Schools combined	33.99	31.75	0.88	.19
School A	29.91	33.33	-0.78	.22
School B	36.78	35.06	0.42	.34
School C	34.78	24.86	2.08	.02 ^a
Believe peers intervene				
Schools combined	51.44	59.45	-2.93	.002 ^b
School A	45.79	47.68	-0.40	.34
School B	54.02	66.42	-2.92	.002 ^b
School C	54.35	64.32	-1.95	.03 ^a
Believe adults intervene				
Schools combined	71.32	80.38	-3.90	<.001 ^c
School A	61.68	75.11	-3.07	.001 ^c
School B	72.41	82.29	-2.72	.003 ^b
School C	80.98	84.32	-0.85	.20

^a $P < .05$.

^b $P < .01$.

^c $P \leq .001$.

in bullying research and prevention activities at their schools. The research and action projects that youth completed were impressive in scope, suggesting that older elementary school-aged youth can engage effectively in efforts to improve their schools. The youth seemed excited to participate in CBPR, particularly during partnership formation, assessment of the problem, and implementation of their interventions. Students appeared less engaged during structured planning of interventions. Enthusiasm about collecting and interpreting feedback varied across schools. This suggests that the components of CBPR that are structured and analytic, such as creating action plans and evaluating the success of previous efforts, may be less appealing to elementary school-aged youth than those components that are more creative. Additional flexibility and support in implementing the more analytic phases of CBPR may increase student engagement.

This study also explored outcomes of the CBPR project for the school communities. Overall, the study provides mixed results. One school experienced a decrease in self-reported fear of bullying, 2 schools saw an increase in perceived peer intervention to stop bullying, and 2 schools saw an increase in perceived school staff intervention to stop bullying. There was no discernible decrease in self-reported bullying, and in one school, self-reported bullying increased. These findings suggest that CBPR with youth can have a positive impact on an identified problem but that proximal outcomes (eg, intervention to stop bullying) are more likely to be observed over the course of the project than distal outcomes (eg, decrease in bullying behavior).

The CBPR project occurred over an academic year, and significant changes in bullying over a short time frame are difficult to achieve. Many programs have failed to produce changes in bullying in this time frame.⁴⁰ Over a longer period, the changes in fear of bullying and student and staff intervention may have led to improvements on direct measures of bullying.

While the cause for the increase in bullying reported by students at one school cannot be examined with data from this study, there are several possible explanations. First, it may be that students perceived an increase in bullying due to heightened knowledge and awareness of bullying but that bullying did not actually increase.⁴⁰ This explanation fits with feedback from teachers that youth at this school gathered during the *assess* and *reflect* phase. An alternative hypothesis is that watching students act out bullying in skits inadvertently glamorized bullying. This possibility is consistent with research suggesting that youth participation in bullying prevention through peer mediation or peer mentoring strategies may be counterproductive.⁴¹ Furthermore, research on deviancy training suggests interventions that lead high-risk youth to discuss negative behaviors may lead to the youth reinforcing negative behavior, which may then increase the negative behaviors.⁴² Other forces within the school, such as changes in student supervision or discipline, may also have contributed to an increase in bullying. Further examination of youth engagement in bullying prevention efforts is needed to clarify this finding.

Comparing interventions selected by the CBPR groups, it is interesting that 2 of the groups passively engaged the school community as the audience for their antibullying announcements, skits, and demonstrations whereas one school more actively engaged its peers as participants in an antibullying poster contest. Teachers were also engaged because they either allowed students to use class time to complete the posters or had students create the posters together as a classroom activity. This school was the only one to demonstrate significant increases in student and staff intervention to stop bullying. Taking part in the antibullying poster contest may have led to feeling more responsible for intervening when they witnessed bullying. Community-based participatory research with youth engages a small group of youth in the research and action process, yet helping

youth to actively engage the larger community may be an essential element in creating community-level change.

In efforts to promote desired outcomes, adult partners may consider important questions about the nature of CBPR with youth. To what extent should adult partners guide youth decision making? When the adults believe that students are making poor but not harmful decisions, should they attempt to steer the youth in the “right” direction? These questions highlight an inherent tension between allowing youth to take the lead and providing adequate support.⁴³ While there is no definitive answer to these questions, adult partners should always be aware of this tension and step forward or back to assist youth flexibly.

Study limitations and future directions

There are several limitations to this study that should be addressed by future research. The results pertaining to changes in bullying must be interpreted with caution due to the lack of a control group. In addition, the applied longitudinal nature of this study makes it impossible to control for the school context. One of the schools in this study had previously implemented an evidence-based bullying prevention program, but few elements of the program were still in place. During the course of this study, another school began implementing a social and emotional learning program with kindergarten through second-grade students; however, this likely had little impact on the study, as the data collected for this study were from third- through fifth-grade students. The third school was in its first year of implementing an evidence-based program aimed at improving school climate. Many elements of the program were not yet executed and CBPR students helped implement others, such as when they taught their peers a conflict resolution strategy. Like many applied intervention studies, lack of control over other services and student supports impairs our ability to isolate intervention effects.

There were also measurement issues in this study. Proportional analyses were used to ex-

plore the impact of the CBPR on the school community because identifying information was not collected, resulting in unequal sample sizes at pre- and posttest and prohibiting repeated-measures analyses. Due to lack of independence of the pre and post proportions, these analyses should be interpreted with caution. Future studies should use repeated-measures analyses.

Finally, there is a general need for more studies of CBPR with youth. Additional studies with elementary school-aged youth and on CBPR to address bullying and other forms of violence should build on the findings of this study. To increase generalizability, future studies should examine benefits of CBPR across a diversity of schools and student populations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides valuable information about the process and outcomes of CBPR with elementary school-aged youth. Our description of the CBPR process demonstrates that older elementary school students are capable of engaging in research and action to improve their school communities. Youth in this study effectively conducted and analyzed research on bullying at their schools and completed action projects that required substantial creativity, teamwork, and dedication.

When engaging youth in CBPR, adults should keep in mind the flexible nature of the adult role and adapt their level of support to meet the shifting needs of student participants. Adults should allow youth to maintain decision-making power and engage in projects that appeal to their desires to be creative and have fun. Additional flexibility and support may be needed during analytic portions of the CBPR process and in helping youth select interventions that actively engage the wider community when community-level change is desired.

The results of our study suggest that CBPR with youth may have a meaningful impact on a targeted school or community problem—some of the schools in this study

demonstrated decreases in fear of bullying and increases in student and school staff intervention to stop bullying. These are important findings, given that CBPR with youth is still a burgeoning field, with 94% of articles on this topic published since 2000, only a very small percentage of those focusing on youth as

partners, and an even smaller percentage measuring benefits of CBPR for the community in which it occurs.¹ Further research should expand on the current findings by continuing to examine programs that engage elementary school-aged youth in CBPR to prevent bullying or address other issues important to them.

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