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Does the *PeaceBuilders* Intervention Reduce Violence in Schools?

Flannery, D.J., Vazsonyi, A.T., Liau, A.K., Guo, S., Powell, K.E., Atha, H., Vesterdal, W., & Embry, D. (2003). Initial behavior outcomes for the *PeaceBuilders* Universal School-Based Violence Prevention Program. *Developmental Psychology*, 39(2), 292-308.

As issues of violence and safety have come to the forefront of societal concerns, much attention has been focused on school-level interventions. Research has shown that early interventions reduce the risk of future delinquent, violent and antisocial behavior, and therefore provide significant gains for students at the individual level and for schools at the community level. Flannery et al. (2003) assess one such intervention, the *PeaceBuilders* Universal School-Based Violence Prevention Program, which seeks to improve child social competence, reduce child aggressive behavior, and improve overall school climate.

Flannery et al. (2003) hypothesize that children's aggressive behavior would be reduced by the *PeaceBuilders* intervention, thus increasing child resilience and social competence. Specifically, the authors hypothesize: 1) that students exposed to the intervention would report greater improvements in social competence and greater reductions in aggressive behavior than students not receiving the intervention, and 2) that students would exhibit increases in competence and prosocial behavior and decreases in aggressive behavior after exposure to the intervention as compared to baseline measures.

Method

Research Design: Using a quasi-experimental design, Flannery et al. (2003) matched four pairs of schools based on geographic factors and student demographics including ethnicity, free or reduced lunch eligibility, and English as a Second Language (ESL) status. One school from each pair received the *PeaceBuilders* intervention (PBI) immediately after baseline, while the other school received the intervention after a one year delay (PBD). Quantitative comparisons between PBI and PBD schools were conducted by administering the survey instruments (described below) on the following four occasions: prior to intervention (Time 1), spring of year one (Time 2), fall of year two (Time 3), and spring of year four (Time 4). Differences between the intervention group (PBI) and control (PBD) were assessed, and comparisons were made between baseline and the effects of the intervention over time.

Participants: Eight elementary schools in Pima County, Arizona were selected to participate on the basis of high juvenile arrest, suspension and expulsion rates. All schools were K-5, with one school combining K-2 and 3-5 programs to meet this criterion. The schools varied from urban to rural communities and the participant population was ethnically diverse (51% Hispanic, 28% Caucasian, 13% Native American, 6% African American and 1.5% Asian American). Participants varied in terms of living situation, with 63% living in a two parent home and the other 37% living with either one parent, a stepparent or another adult. Additionally, 55% of parents completed high school or less education while 45% completed some college or more. Family yearly income ranged from \$7,000 or less (22%) to \$40,000 or more (12%).

Instruments: To insure that the intervention was carried out effectively and consistently across schools, teachers completed *PeaceBuilders* training and demonstrated competence, based on their performance on a survey, prior to implementing the program. Teachers completed an additional

survey which assessed their own integration of the program and materials into the classroom after having participated in the program for one year or more. Teachers were not only responsible for assessing their own use and knowledge of the *PeaceBuilders* program, but for assessing students' knowledge and behavior as well. Teachers completed the Aggressive Behavior subscale of Achenbach's (1991) Teacher Report Form for all K-5 students, as well as the short elementary school version of the Walker-McConnell (W-M) Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment. The latter test rated teacher-preferred behaviors such as empathy and cooperation as well as peer-preferred behaviors such as learned rules of play and friendship. These ratings were combined with a number of participant self-report measures to address aggression, prosocial behavior and peace-building behavior. K-2 surveys were usually conducted orally via interview while 3-5 surveys were written.

Intervention: The various surveys were meant to address the core teachings of *PeaceBuilders* and the expected behavioral outcomes of its teachings. *PeaceBuilders*' philosophy asks that all students and staff follow these five rules: (1) praise people, (2) avoid put-downs, (3) seek wise people as advisors and friends, (4) notice and correct hurts we cause, and (5) right wrongs. These rules are learned through daily rituals that instill these concepts and create a sense of community based on adherence, application of relevant cues, symbols and prompts, which serve as reminders of the rules. Additionally, supplemental teachings or materials are introduced to aid students in confronting challenging situations.

Results

All teachers from the participating schools attended training, with 93% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the *PeaceBuilders*' philosophy. Of the 98% of teachers who completed the follow-up survey at Time 4, 80% claimed to use the curriculum daily or weekly, with 53% perceiving school implementation of the program as "extensive" and 43% as "moderate." Ninety-four percent of the teachers surveyed perceived the program to have decreased the level of school violence; similarly, 94% reported increased prosocial interactions among the children.

At baseline, PBI and PBD schools were similar in all aspects with the exception of teachers rating K-2 students, on average, lower in aggressive behavior for PBI than PBD schools. Gender differences emerged with teachers rating boys higher in aggressive behavior and lower in social competence than girls K-5 at baseline. Student self-reports also indicated gender differences between boys and girls in aggressive behavior, social competence and peace-building skills.

At Time 2, teachers rated K-2 students in PBI schools significantly higher in social competence ($p < .001$), and students in grades 3-5 rated themselves significantly higher in peace-building behavior ($p < .001$) than children in PBD schools. At Time 3, teachers rated PBI students in grades K-2 and 3-5 significantly higher in social competence ($p < .001$) and grade 3-5 students lower in aggression ($p < .001$). PBI students 3-5 also rated themselves significantly higher in peace-building skills ($p < .01$). At Time 4, teachers again rated PBI students in grade K-2 and 3-5 significantly higher in social competence ($p < .001$) and grade 3-5 students lower in aggression ($p < .01$).

Implications

PeaceBuilders created significant change in teachers' perceptions of school climate and individual student behavior, as more time with *PeaceBuilders* led to more positive outcomes (i.e. the more time spent implementing the intervention, the better the results were). The *PeaceBuilders* intervention led

to higher teacher ratings of student social competence in grades K-5 and lower teacher ratings of aggression in grades 3-5. Self-reporting by students, however, failed to indicate significantly different behaviors between PBI and PBD students with the exception of peace-building skills for students in grades 3-5. Thus, while clearly yielding positive results, this study does not provide unequivocal evidence for the effectiveness of this intervention or for its benefit to schools.

Critical Perspective

Flannery et al. (2003) follow an experimental design as closely as possible, using matching techniques, accounting for changes over time, controlling for outside variables when possible and using multiple measures (including self-report) to increase validity. The authors account for attrition rates and floor effects and clearly identify what constitutes a significant effect.

Unfortunately, there are a number of factors which inhibit all educational research, and the current study is no exception. For instance, Flannery et al. (2003) mention the impossibility of controlling for student exposure to outside resources, programs or events which may have impacted student behavior similarly to the *PeaceBuilders* program. Additionally, it is difficult to know the validity of the results from self-report measures conducted by students in grades K-5, as well as the validity of teacher reports, given possible bias related to program buy-in and pressure from administrators. Follow-up replication studies with controls for expectancy should be conducted.

Despite these uncertainties, the research design and the level of statistical analysis conducted are on par with evidence-based practice efforts. These findings may lead to the development of further studies on the effectiveness of the *PeaceBuilders* program or serve as a model for conducting research on other school-wide initiatives. It is clear that *PeaceBuilders* creates a strong teacher and staff support system, which holds the possibility of affecting student behavior and school climate. Despite its less certain effects on aggression and prosocial behavior, *PeaceBuilders* seems to teach students peace-building skills effectively.

Additional follow-up studies that document actual behavior change in addition to self and teacher reported data are needed to help establish the outcome research base that undergirds effective school counseling practice.

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