



## **The Stand Up to Bullying (SU2B) Project: Participatory Action Research with Middle School Youth**

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**Author Biographies:** *Michele Schlehofer*, earned her PhD in Applied Social Psychology in 2007 from Claremont Graduate University, located in Claremont, California, United States of America. Trained in the Lewinian tradition of action-research, much of her work consists of community-based research designed to directly address social and community problems. As an applied psychologist, she is a vocal proponent of not only intervention and prevention work, but also evidence-based decision-making and research-backed public policy. Over the course of her career, she has worked on projects addressing a myriad of social and community issues, including adolescent pregnancy prevention; community-building processes for people living with HIV and AIDS; and community breast health initiatives for women. She received a 2017 Board of Regents Award in Public Service for several initiatives conducted in Wicomico County and the Lower Shore area. This included conducting a pro-bono community-based needs assessment of county-wide resources for families and children for the Wicomico Partnership for Families and Children. Since 2012, Dr. Schlehofer have been involved in advocacy efforts by, with, and for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) people. She serves on the Steering Committee of the Lower Shore LGBTQ Coalition, as President of Salisbury's PFLAG Chapter, and co-chairs the public policy committee for Division 44: The Division for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity of the American Psychological Association. *Diana R. Panell*, began her career as a bilingual advocate for women at a domestic violence shelter, bridging the language barrier for those who needed to be heard. Later she served as director for a state organization that was a local liaison for child and family programs. Realizing the need for a coordinated effort to identify and integrate services, she successfully developed new programs and built a powerful network of community-based "Out of School Time Programs" that effectively served the needs of both the child and the family. *Ardealia Ross*, is the Program Coordinator for the WISE After-school Program; a comprehensive out-of-school time program serving the students of Wicomico Middle

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### Abstract

The Stand Up to Bullying (SU2B) participatory action research project is presented as an approach to collaborative community action. The SU2B project, conducted in the United States, represents an interdisciplinary collaboration with two county agencies in the state of Maryland: the Local Management Board and the Board of Education. Over the course of six weeks, 78 middle school students participating in the SU2B project were trained to serve as anti-bullying ambassadors for their schools. Middle school students collaborated with undergraduate students enrolled in a community and applied social psychology course to conduct a photovoice component. Photovoice is a community empowerment and advocacy tool and qualitative research methodology in which people express their experiences with a social or community problem through photography. The middle school students took digital photographs in and around their school that they felt exemplified bullying. From the resultant photos, they selected two and wrote accompanying titles and descriptions, for display in a public art exhibit. Select photographs were subsequently converted into anti-bullying educational posters for display in county public schools. Additionally, photographs were augmented with interviewers with participants and project staff to create anti-bullying educational training videos for use in county public schools. Findings of bullying experiences with middle school students are discussed.

Bullying is a significant concern in United States public schools, with an estimated 20% to 30% of youth involved as bullies or victims (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). About 50% of youth who bully peers report also being victims of bullying (bully/victims) themselves (Haynie et al., 2001). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines bullying as any intentional, unwanted aggressive behavior between youths that are not siblings or dating partners that is repeated, or is likely to be repeated, and involves a perceived or real power imbalance (CDC, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Bullying is unique among and differentiated from other aggressive behaviors and interpersonal conflicts as it contains three core components: intention, a power imbalance, and the potential for repeated action (Felix, Sharkey, Green, Furlong, & Tanigawa, 2011). Bullying is often cyclical, with youth

participating in the perpetuation of bullying as bullies, victims, or as bystanders at various points in time (e.g., Jenkins & Nickerson, 2017).

Bullying can take a multitude of forms, but can be delineated as either verbal or emotional (e.g., teasing, name-calling, or rumor spreading) or physical (e.g., physical violence, destruction of property). Bullying can occur either in-person or through technology; when occurring through technology (including email, a website, text messages, social media, etc.) is it referred to as “cyberbullying” (CDC, 2017). Verbal or emotional bullying is more common than physical bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O’Brennan, 2007; Demaray & Malecki, 2003). However, this may be due to the fact that physical bullying is under-reported (Demaray & Malecki, 2003). Much of the existing

research has examined bullying behaviors via teacher's perceptions; there is a need for more qualitative research on the direct lived experiences of youth.

Bullying has significant negative consequences for youth populations. Victims experience a variety of negative internalizing responses such as increased anxiety (Nickerson & Slater, 2009), depression, suicide ideation, suicide attempts (Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005); often report feeling unhappy, lonely (Boulton & Underwood, 1992), and unsafe at school (Varjas, Henrich & Meyers, 2009). Further, being bullied places middle school youth at greater risk of engaging in a myriad of risky behaviors, such as substance use, self-harm, and bringing weapons to school (Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2010; Kim, Catalano, Haggerty, & Abbott, 2011; Smalley, Warren, & Barefoot, 2017). Victims also experience poorer academic performance and lower rates of student engagement (Lacey, Cornell, & Konold, 2017). Bully/victims tend to be less cooperative than other youth (Rigby, Cox, & Black, 1997), and experience greater rates of depression, suicide attempts, and ideation, as well as exhibiting behavioral problems, such as drinking, smoking, and property theft (e.g., Espelage & Holt, 2013; Haynie et al., 2001).

Up to 80% of youth participate in bullying behavior as a bystander (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Bystander responses can vary from reinforcing the bully, assisting the bully, intervening to assist the victim, or ignoring the bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Given the number of bystanders, it is important to address bullying via interventions to increase helpful bystander intervention behavior. Effective bystander intervention responses can be both significantly and practically increased with targeted interventions, and should be a focus of programming to address bullying (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Bystanders who assist the victims either indirectly (by reporting the bullying) or

directly (by intervening to stop the behavior) help reduce bullying behaviors (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011) and increase student perceptions of safety (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008).

Interventions to increase bystander response can take many forms. Most interventions to increase effective bystander response and reduce bullying have focused on developing or strengthening individual-level factors such as student character, morality, and the adoption of anti-bullying attitudes (e.g., Thornrberg, Pozzoli, Gini, & Hong, 2017; see Nickerson, 2017 for an overview). Yet, these methods are largely ineffective at reducing bullying behavior (Nickerson, 2017).

Bullying behaviors can persist among youth despite personal negative attitudes towards the behavior, provided the greater school climate supports bullying, views it as socially normative, and is discouraging of students speaking out about bullying (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012). Therefore, to increase effective bystander responses, it might be advantageous to conceptualize bullying ecologically; that is, as a problem of school climate (Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003) versus individuals. Indeed, schools experience less bullying when they work to foster a supportive, caring environment in which students and teachers have meaningful, trusting relationships with one another (Konold et al., 2014; Thornberg, Wänström, & Pozzoli, 2017).

A myriad of ecological approaches to addressing bullying in schools exist (see Nickerson, 2017, for an overview of various approaches, including ecological approaches). For example, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 1999), one of the longest-standing bullying prevention programs, includes school-wide components, such as anti-bullying events, in addition to targeted interventions for bullies and victims. The Olweus program has been effective at reducing bullying and victimization among middle school students (e.g., Bauer, Lozano, &

Rivara, 2007). Another popular program found to reduce school-wide bullying behavior, KiVa (KiVa International, n.d.), includes training to increase bullying prevention skills and to develop self-efficacy of allies (Garandeau, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2014; Juvonen, Schacter, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2016; Williford et al., 2012). In an innovative approach, Paluck and Shepherd (2012) worked with identified social referents—students at a high school who were highly socially connected—to develop social norms against bullying. Although overall rates of bullying did not decrease throughout the school year, students with greater connections to the social referents were more likely to report bullying behavior (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012), suggesting that social norms facilitative of effective bystander response can be developed.

Although many bullying intervention and prevention programming initiatives occur at the high school level, interventions geared towards older adolescents are not always effective (Nickerson, 2017). Addressing bullying at the middle school level, therefore, may be advantageous. Bullying behaviors peak during the middle school years (Dicks & Kowalski, 2016; McKenna, Hawk, Mullen & Hertz, 2009; Nansel et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004), yet middle school youth are less likely than youth of other ages to defend victims of bullying and engage in other helpful bystander behaviors (Endresen & Olweus, 2001). Middle school may be a developmentally appropriate time point at which to address bullying via building social norms, particularly those that support effective bystander intervention strategies.

### Current Study

We present an overview of the Stand Up to Bullying (SU2B) participatory action research project as an ecological approach to address bullying in a middle school youth population. Over a six-week period, youth participated in

a series of community and skill-building exercises (Weeks 1 – 3), and in a photovoice project (Weeks 4 – 6). A class of undergraduate students ( $n = 20$ ) enrolled in a Community and Applied Social Psychology course facilitated the photovoice project as part of their coursework. The goals of the paper are to: (1) introduce readers to the Stand Up to Bullying (SU2B) project; and (2) provide preliminary insight into how middle school youth perceive bullying.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 78 middle school students enrolled in a county-funded after-school program which serves predominately low-income FARM-eligible (free and reduced meals) youth.<sup>2</sup> All participants attended the same middle school, and the after-school program was held in the cafeteria of the school. With a total school population of 657, this sample size represented 11.8% of total students enrolled in the middle school. Students were approximately evenly split between 6<sup>th</sup> ( $n = 28$ ; 36%), 7<sup>th</sup> ( $n = 29$ ; 37%), and 8<sup>th</sup> grades ( $n = 21$ ; 27%). Students ranged in age from 11 to 14, with an average age of 12 years, 2 months old.<sup>3</sup> There were slightly more females ( $n = 44$ , 56%) than males ( $n = 34$ ; 44%). Students were predominately Black:  $n = 56$  (72%) identified as African American;  $n = 10$  (13%) as Haitian;  $n = 5$  (6%) as Latinx; and  $n = 3$  (4%) as Caucasian or White;  $n = 4$  (5%) students were Multi-racial.

### Procedures

**Structure of SU2B.** This project had Institutional Review Board approval. The after-school program in which the SU2B project was conducted included a blanket consent process by which parents or guardians of youth consented to student participation in all activities conducted under the auspices of the after-school program,

including the SU2B project. The county school district utilizes an opt-out consent process for photography and videography of students enrolled in the after-school program. The project started with a three-week skill building phase, followed by a three-week photovoice phase. Finally, the project concluded with three post-project productions: a public art show, development of educational posters, and creation of educational videos.

**Phase 1: Skill building.** The program started with a three-week skill-building phase. During this phase, all participants were trained to serve as anti-bullying *ambassadors* for their school. Students were provided with the definition of an “ambassador” as a student leader which emphasized being a representative of the school and setting a positive example for others. The term “ambassador” was specifically selected to facilitate student perceptions that participation in SU2B was a privilege, and to discourage perceptions that students in the after-school program were targeted for being lower-income or otherwise “at-risk.” Students were led through a series of exercises to strengthen group cohesiveness and community, and to guide students through peer discussions on bullying.

First, as not all students enrolled in the after-school program regularly interacted with or personally knew one another, students participated in a “yarn web” icebreaker exercise. Due to the size of the group, students were split into smaller groups of about 20 to 30. While standing in a circle, the moderator announced their name, something unique about them, and then passed the yarn ball to another person in the circle, while holding on to the end. This was repeated until everyone held a piece of the yarn. Once the web was completed, students were asked to reflect on the shape of the yarn by asking them, “what does our yarn look like?” and guided to see the shape as a web. This icebreaker activity was selected for several

reasons. Aside from allowing students to get to know each other, it provided the opportunity to learn student names. Second, the yarn web the group created was used as an analogy for the interconnectedness among people. Students were selectively identified and asked to loosen the slack or “drop” their piece of yarn, upon which the web lost its structure and collapsed. All students were then asked to hold their yarn tight, thereby strengthening the yarn web. This analogy was well-received by the youth, and while in their yarn web circle, they engaged in a discussion on the importance of supporting each other: when all members of the group are supported, the group is stronger (and the web functions better).

After the yarn web icebreaker activity, participants were asked to anonymously provide their own (1) definition and (2) example of bullying. Students wrote their definitions and examples on post-it notes provided by the authors. In order to make it a comfortable environment in which students could share, students were specifically instructed not to list their names or any other identifying information on their post-it notes. Then, definitions and examples were shared by collecting the post-it notes and placing them on the cafeteria wall. Select definitions and examples were read to the group out loud by the authors, and students were guided towards defining bullying as a particular type of student-to-student harassment that consisted of two components: (A) an unequal power differential (or attempt at gaining power over another); and (B) consisting of long-term teasing, harassment, or physical abuse. This definition was chosen as it is both consistent with that used by the CDC (2017), and with the definition of bullying adopted by the county public school district. Students discussed situations in which the person who is bullying may or may not realize the extent to which others are hurt by their choices. Students also discussed the distinction between bullying and occasional teasing and

between bullying and other types of interpersonal conflict (for instance, a one-time argument with a friend).

Students were provided with a description and example of five different methods of effective bystander response: (1) reporting (including detail of the reporting procedures for their school); (2) non-violent, direct intervention (e.g., telling the bully to “stop,” telling a teacher); (3) setting a good example by not giving bullies an audience (not reinforcing bullying); (4) being a friend to a victim of bullying; and (5) indirectly diffusing the situation by creating a diversion or method of escape for the victim (for instance, telling the victim that a teacher wants them in another room). Effective bystander response methods of handling bullying were adapted from two existing anti-bullying initiatives: the Pacer Organization’s National Bullying Prevention Center and the U.S. Health and Human Service’s Stop Bullying website. According to Salmivalli et al., (1996) these are considered to be effective methods of bystander engagement. The last method, which states, “indirectly diffusing the situation by creating a diversion”, was particularly well-received by students. Informal feedback from participating youth indicated that this method was perceived to be effective at curbing bullying, while also protecting the student from retaliation for directly intervening or “tattling” or “snitching” (“snitches get stitches” was a concerning phrase consistently repeated by youth).

At this point, students were broken up into teams of no more than 10 students. Project staff developed scenarios depicting incidents of bullying from the examples generated by students. Incidents in the scenarios included a variety of bullying experiences, including both verbal (e.g., spreading unflattering rumors about a student) and physical (e.g., knocking books out of another student’s hands) acts of bullying, as well as

cyberbullying (e.g., harassing text messages sent in group chat). Working in small groups, students were randomly provided with one of the scenarios, and asked to develop a 10-minute skit which demonstrated how they would effectively intervene. The purpose of this activity was to allow students the opportunity to think through an appropriate and effective bystander response to bullying, and to practice these responses via role-playing. Dramatization and role-playing has been previously incorporated into bullying prevention and intervention programming among elementary and middle school youth populations, and shows some promise as an effective and engaging method of bullying prevention (Fredland, 2010; Hicks, Le Clair, & Berry, 2016; Joronen, Konu, Rankin, & Astedt-Kurki, 2012; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). Each group was given 30 minutes to write and practice their skit. After, they acted out their skit in front of the larger group of student ambassadors and project staff. Each team was provided with feedback from the larger group of students and project staff, a strategy which increases the effectiveness of role-play (Reid, Patterson, & Snyder, 2002).

**Phase 2: Photovoice.** The last three weeks of the project were spent directing youth through a photovoice project. Photovoice is a qualitative tool in which people express their experiences with a social or community problem through photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). It can provide rich qualitative data from which to identify themes, theories, or issues that are most important to community populations (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchinson, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004). Photovoice was selected for this project because it has the potential to serve not only as a qualitative research methodology, but also a method of community and individual empowerment, as well as an advocacy tool. Photovoice is an effective, practical methodology for youth populations (Bashore, Alexander, Jackson, & Mauch, 2017). It is perceived as both more interesting than

traditional research (e.g., Drew, Duncan, & Sawyer, 2010; Guillemin & Drew, 2010) and as empowering to youth (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004). Power, Norman, and Dupre (2014) found that photovoice results in a contextually different, more positive understanding of youth experiences than other, more traditional qualitative methodologies, such as focus groups and interviews.

The photovoice component was directed by 20 undergraduate college students enrolled in a Community Psychology and Applied Social Psychology course. Each team of 10 middle school students worked directly with two college student leads assigned to their group. College students received a total of 2 hours and 30 minutes of targeted training, as part of their classroom instruction, in preparation for their role: 50 minutes consisted of training in qualitative methodology, particularly photovoice, conducted by the first author; a 50-minute introduction to the middle school student population, coupled with suggestions for effectively working with this population, provided by the third author; and 50 minutes of instruction on school climate research and bullying. Students also read Elliott Aronson's book "Nobody Left to Hate," which provides a social psychological analysis of the Columbine shootings and presented suggestions for improving school climate.

Each middle school student was provided with a Vivitar VF-128 14.1 MP digital camera with USB port for purposes of the project. Students could choose between a black, purple, blue, or pink camera. College student leads worked with their assigned teams of student ambassadors to develop a team name, teach them the photovoice procedure, and provide technical support on working the cameras. All 10 groups of youth were trained in separate areas of the same cafeteria, allowing the authors to circulate among the groups and provide feedback, correction,

support, and clarification where needed. Youth were instructed to take as many photos as they liked which they felt exemplified bullying. Photos could be figurative or literal interpretations of bullying. Students were encouraged to think creatively. Students were instructed not to take photos of recognizable people (no faces of any people in their photos), and any photos featuring recognizable people were deleted by project staff directly from the digital camera. Students were, however, allowed to take photos of people, provided they were not immediately identifiable. This requirement was put in place for two reasons: (1) to encourage the students to think of more creative ways to express bullying (and, consequently, to avoid having multiple photos depicting staged scenes of one person physically hurting another), and (2) to encourage those students who felt shy or uncomfortable being on camera to fully participate in the photovoice process. The only exception to this rule was a "selfie" that all students were instructed to take prior to taking photos for the project, to assist with identification of camera ownership. After students were provided with these instructions, they toured the school grounds in their teams (accompanied by their college student leads) to take their photos. Per county regulations, all student teams were accompanied by an employee of the county school system, whose purpose was to ensure that students abided by county public school rules and regulations while touring school grounds. Photos were completed within one week.

Each student generated between five and 30 photos; as a cohort, youth generated over 1,000 photos. Photos were printed as 4" x 6" prints and provided back to the student who originally took the image in a sealed envelope labeled with their name. From these prints, each student worked alongside their college student leads to select up to two images that they felt were the most personally meaningful



(see Figure 1). Students were allowed to choose up to two photos from among any of the images they took. Most students selected two photos; a small number of students selected just one photo for display. Each student named each of the two photos they selected, and typed a paragraph describing what was happening in the photo and how it related to bullying (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. *Middle school students work alongside college student leaders to select photos for inclusion in the art show.*



Figure 2. *Students type titles and descriptors of their selected photographs.*

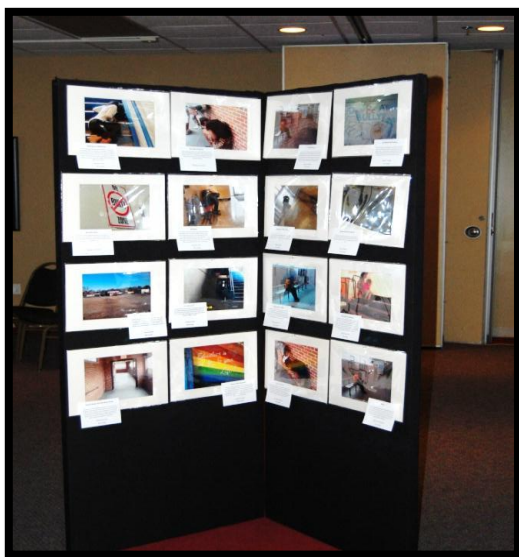


The one to two photos selected by the students were reprinted in 8" x 10" size, again returned to the youth, and youth matted their

two photos for public display. This resulted in 124 photos selected for display. The photograph and selection process, and writing the photo description and matting, took two weeks to complete. At the end of the project, youth and college student team leaders celebrated with a pizza party, and all youth were provided with their digital camera to keep and a certificate of completion.

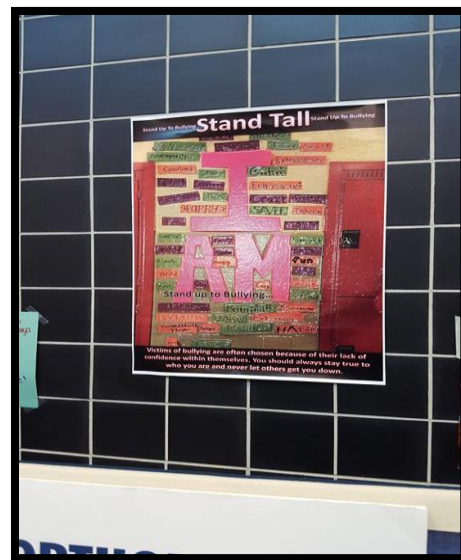
**Post-project productions.** The benefit of the photovoice approach is that it provides lasting images which can be used in a variety of ways, including a springboard for critical dialogue and as a tool to influence public policy (Wang & Burris, 1997). The project concluded with three post-project productions, using images generated during the photovoice process: a public art show, development of educational posters, and creation of educational videos.

**Public art show.** After completion of the project, matted photos were displayed in a public art show held at the local civic center. The public art show was advertised to the community, and open to the general public. The art show was a catered event. Middle school youth participating in the SU2B project were in attendance; the County Board of Education provided bus transportation from their school to the civic center, and parents, guardians, and their families and friends were instructed to meet participating children at the event. Additional attendees included the authors of this paper, the college student team leaders, and representatives from the University (the college Dean), the County Board of Education, and the State of Maryland Governor's Office for Children. Altogether, all 124 selected photographs were on display, and over 150 people attended the event. Photos of the art show are provided in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3. *Public art show.*Figure 4. *Panel of photographs at the student art show.*

**Educational posters.** Upon conclusion of the public art show, select photos were used to develop anti-bullying posters for the county school system. Staff and interns at the Local Management Board, guided by the second author, edited photos for enlargement and printing, and inserted text over the photos describing bullying and the importance of intervention. Photos were chosen based on aesthetics, as well as for their ability to be easily adapted to posters with overlaying text.

Text was taken from student descriptions of their photos, or materials from pacer.org and stopbullying.gov. Printed posters were distributed to the county's three public middle and three public high schools (six schools in total). A sample poster on display in a county high school is provided in Figure 5.

Figure 5. *Anti-bullying poster on display in a County high school*

**Educational videos.** Finally, post-project completion, a series of anti-bullying educational videos were developed. Videos displayed select photos and accompanying descriptions, supplemented with interviews from participating middle school youth and county public school staff. All videos were filmed on location at the middle school during the after-school program. Three videos were developed. The first was a music video on the importance of “being true to yourself” and not being a bully (PAC 14 Keeping Kids Connected, 2015a, October 30). Student ambassadors sang and rapped in the video. The second video described the SU2B project—specifically, the photovoice component—and the impact of the project on students and school staff (video available

online at: PAC 14 Keeping Kids Connected, 2015b, October 30). The third video was a short video describing what bullying is, what the effects of bullying are, and how to “stand up to bullying.” (PAC 14 Keeping Kids Connected, 2015c). The local public access channel provided filming and post-production time pro-bono. These videos were aired on the local public access channel and were displayed during county professional development days.

### Measures

Photos on display in the public art show were content coded using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for themes pertaining to bullying. Four themes were assessed: *common locations of bullying*, *types of bullying*, *victim's feelings*, and *bystander intervention*. To develop the coding scheme, two researchers (the first author and an undergraduate student research assistant) separately reviewed all photographs and descriptions and noted emerging themes. Notes were then compared and a coding scheme was developed. Next, the researchers independently coded 25 (20%) of the photographs and descriptions and compared codes; this resulted in refining of the coding scheme. Finally, the researchers independently coded all 124 photographs and descriptions. Codes were reviewed across researchers, and any discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

### Results

From the 124 photos displayed in the public art show, several themes emerged. First, common locations of bullying were identified, with the most common locations being (1) areas outside of school on school grounds ( $n = 22$ ; 17.7%); (2) in hallways ( $n = 16$ ; 12.9%); (3) on the stairs ( $n = 14$ ; 11.3%); and (4) in locker rooms ( $n = 12$ ; 9.7%). This is consistent with prior work, in which students reported experiencing bullying primarily in

the hallways and outside areas of schools (Bradshaw et al., 2007). School staff were able to identify from these photos common locations of bullying in their school that they were previously unaware of.

Second, types of bullying were identified. Most ( $n = 37$ ; 30%) photos and descriptions mentioned physical abuse (e.g., tripping, pushing, physical fighting), and 24 (19.4%) mentioned emotional abuse (e.g., name calling, spreading rumors, teasing).

The third theme identified represented victim's feelings. Photos focused heavily on feelings of depression or related emotions, such as sadness or unhappiness ( $n = 31$ ; 25%); an additional seven (5.6%) explicitly mentioned that bullying can lead to suicide or suicide ideation. Only seven (5.6%) mentioned other negative internalizing mental health outcomes, such as feelings of anxiety, worry, or fear.

Finally, the last theme entailed bystander intervention. Student photos expressed that bystanders were largely ineffective at addressing bullying, despite being surrounded by posters which promoted effective bystander intervention. Thirty-two (25.8%) photos contained imagery of inspirational or anti-bullying posters in the school; 63 photos (51%) addressed how important it is to stop bullying and be an effective intervening bystander. Despite this presence, however, photos indicated that students perceived a lack of effective bystander response. Fifteen photos (12.1%) explicitly mentioned that bystander intervention was lacking, either because students do not get involved ( $n = 7$ ; 5.6%) or because teachers are not present or turn a blind eye to bullying ( $n = 8$ ; 6.5%). One photo specifically described “packing,” a situation in which a student is harassed while sitting at their desk by neighboring classmates. Teachers and school staff expressed surprise, as they had never heard of “packing” behavior

and had not previously noticed it occurring in the classroom. Subsequent informal discussion with students suggested that packing was a commonly occurring behavior.

This feedback was given back to school staff, and staff reported making several changes as a result of viewing the photos. Changes largely centered on placing extra staff at those locations identified by students as frequent sites of bullying behavior. Teachers also rearranged desks in their classrooms and reported more closely monitoring student interactions after learning of bullying behavior occurring in specific classes. Teachers and staff informally reported that relationships with the youth improved after their participation in the project; teachers and school staff felt that youth were more likely to talk to them about personal issues and problems or difficulties they were experiencing, including but not limited to bullying. Additional responses from school staff are provided in the previously-mentioned videos, available online

### Discussion

A sizeable proportion of youth experience bullying (Hynie et al., 2001; Salmivalli et al., 2017). Bullying has significant negative consequences for youth (e.g., Espelage & Holt, 2013; Haynie et al., 2001; Nicerkson & Slater, 2009; Smalley, Warren, & Barefoot, 2017). With up to 80% of youth serving as bystanders to bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996), bystander intervention training is an important component of anti-bullying prevention (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). As bullying peaks in middle school (e.g., Dicks & Kowalski, 2016; Nansel et al., 2001), providing bystander intervention training to middle school youth populations is warranted

The Stand Up to Bullying (SU2B) program is a participatory action research project completed in collaboration with university

faculty and students, and two county organizations: the Local Management Board (a state-funded agency that allocates funds at the County level) and the county school system. During the course of the six-week project, almost 80 middle school students engaged in a series of community-building exercises, learned a myriad of ways to appropriately respond to bullying, and were trained as anti-bullying ambassadors. The students also engaged in a photovoice project, which was used to develop educational materials for the school system. Overall, the project represents an engaging, collaborative approach to addressing the problem of bullying in public schools.

The content analysis of photos proved useful for a variety of reasons. First, the findings are relatively consistent with prior work on bullying. As such, the findings suggest that qualitative methodologies can supplement, and might even be more effective than, quantitative approaches. One interesting finding was that student photos depicted physical bullying more than emotional bullying. This finding may at first seem inconsistent with prior work which finds emotional bullying is most prevalent (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). However, physical abuse might have been depicted more frequently among student photos as it may be under-reported in prior research (Demaray & Malecki, 2003). If this is indeed the case, then this finding speaks to the validity of qualitative research as a tool to better understand youth experiences with bullying.

The content analysis conducted on students' photos additionally found that existing bystander responses were largely seen as ineffective. This is particularly interesting, given the proliferation of anti-bullying posters, signs, and positive messages that youth noted throughout the school. This provides further support for the notion that approaches to bullying prevention that

primarily focus on student characteristics is largely ineffective (Nickerson, 2017). An ecological intervention to impact overall school climate, such as the one implemented here, might be more effective at reducing bullying (Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003).

The photovoice component in general was very well-received by both teachers and school staff, and by students alike. Students enjoyed participating in the project, even going so far as to applaud project staff when arriving on site. Students and school teachers and staff alike felt that a byproduct of the approach was stronger connections to each other and building of trust. As can be seen in the resultant videos (available online), school teachers and staff noticed that participating youth shared more about their personal lives and experiences after participating in the project. Further, the photographs were valuable to school teachers and staff, allowing them to not only better understand student experiences, but also to better identify physical locations where bullying was occurring in the school. This subsequently allowed the school to make minor, but meaningful, alterations in the school environment to reduce the likelihood of bullying (e.g., restructuring classrooms to discourage “packing,” monitoring physical areas of the school that were perceived as areas in which bullying frequently occurs, etc.).

### Limitations

This manuscript presents a preliminary look at a participatory action research project to address bullying, which included a photovoice component. Limitations to the project include lack of assessment of the impact on reports of bullying and the omission of quantitative indicators of bullying, such as counts of reported incidents. Further, as students were occasionally absent, there was some variation on the

extent to which students fully participated in the program; future work should explore dosage effects, and how attendance and participation effect program efficacy.

The intervention was short-lived, occurring over a six-week period. It is possible that effects dissipated upon conclusion of the project. Projects attempting to modify school climate are more effective when they are long-term and ongoing (Nickerson, 2017). Further, the middle school in which the project was conducted had an existing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program in place. PBIS is a common bullying prevention approach which seeks to reduce bullying by way of character development and reinforcing positive behaviors (e.g., see Nickerson, 2017, for a review). PBIS programs have had some success in promoting a positive school climate. It is possible that the SU2B project might have had a different impact in a school without an existing PBIS program.

### Implications for Practice and Future Research

This project has several implications for both bullying prevention programming and for future research. First, we implemented an intervention component, that of a yarn web, as both a preliminary icebreaker and as an analogy of the importance of community interconnectedness and support. To our knowledge, yarn webs, although a common icebreaker activity, have not been incorporated into bullying prevention programming in this manner. The activity was well-received by students, and engagement with the process was high. Future work should empirically assess the impact of this activity on student interconnectedness and their understanding of the need to support each other as a way to reduce the impact of bullying.

Perhaps most importantly, the project highlights the promise of photovoice as a practical and effective intervention and research tool with youth (Bashore et al., 2017). Our experiences support prior research which has found that photovoice was seen by youth as more engaging than traditional research methods (Drew, Duncan, & Sawyer, 2010; Guillemin & Drew, 2010). Youth enjoyed the opportunity to express themselves through photography. Further, our findings support prior work that found photovoice can lead to novel discoveries that differ from those uncovered with more traditional methodology (Power, Norman, & Dupre, 2014). Photovoice holds great potential as a tool with which to address bullying and to gain insight into the experiences of youth.

The feedback received from students, teachers, and school staff suggests that the SU2B project had potential impact that went well-beyond the targeted purpose of addressing bullying. Students, teachers, and school staff indicated informally to project staff and on the created videos that an outcome of the project was a stronger, more trusting relationship between students and school teachers and staff. This was an unexpected outcome; teachers and school staff were not directly involved in nor addressed in the intervention. This feedback suggests that bullying prevention interventions which address bullying as a school climate issue might have a secondary impact of strengthening interpersonal relationships across different stakeholders in the school. This is a possibility worthy of future research.

One of the benefits of photovoice is the portability and wide utility of the resultant product. The photos generated by student ambassadors served a variety of functions. Not only were they accessible to the general public in a public art show, but they were used as the basis for a series of bullying

prevention posters and videos that were subsequently adopted by the county public school district. The adaptability of photos to be used in these other creative outlets, and as an advocacy tool, is an advantage of photovoice methodology over traditional research methods (Wang & Burris, 1997).

From a research standpoint, the project suggests that qualitative methodologies might provide useful ways of assessing the impact of field experiments. Paluck (2017) posits that qualitative research methodologies can supplement or replace traditional quantitative methodologies in field experimentation settings. Our experience suggests that photovoice could be used as a primary source of measurement in field experiments quite easily, and that the findings would provide information above and beyond that gleaned from quantitative approaches.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Other definitions of bullying exist. For instance, Paluck and Shepherd (2012) discuss bullying in terms of harassment, defined as a cyclical pattern of student-to-student abusive behavior, which can occur regardless of student social status or perceived power. The CDC definition of bullying was used for this project, as it is consistent with the definition of bullying adopted by the county public school system in which the work was conducted.

<sup>2</sup> The SU2B project was conducted at a second intervention site consisting of an alternative school for youth who have exhibited behavioral problems requiring disciplinary action. However, the number of participants going through the SU2B program at this second site was minimal. Second, attendance and participation of youth at this site greatly fluctuated, due to both high absentee rates among this population, and the fact that many students were transferred back to the general

school population during the course of the project. Therefore, this second intervention site is not reported on in this manuscript.

<sup>3</sup>We are unable to calculate standard deviation on participants' age, due to the manner in which the public-school system maintains student records and reports aggregate data.

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