

## ***Using Community-Based Research to Study Bullying at a Local Non-Profit Organization***

Courtney Gray, Michele Beausoleil, and Abigail Johnson  
*Merrimack College*

Bullying is a serious problem in the United States. Research indicates that bullying, defined in literature as “repeated aggressive behavior against a victim who cannot readily defend himself or herself”, is prevalent in schools, afterschool programs, and extracurricular activities (Karna et al. 2011). Anti-bullying programs for schools have been implemented and tested throughout the world, but little research has been conducted on after-school programs. In order to examine how bullying is perceived, defined, and experienced by participants at the YWCA Girls Center, a local agency in Merrimack Valley, MA that is devoted to ending racism and empowering young girls and women, a three-member student research team from Merrimack College conducted community-based research. In collaboration with agency leadership, the student team conducted focus group research and educational workshops that incorporated both qualitative and quantitative methods in the forms of group interviews, surveys, and educational activities. Specifically, we conducted surveys and focus groups with a nonrandom sample of students and staff members of the YWCA to ascertain how they define and experience bullying. The main purpose of this community-based research was to develop a deeper understanding of how bullying plays out in a local community-based organization and to use the research gained to develop an effective curriculum for the staff for the education and prevention of, and the response to, bullying.

This project began at Merrimack College in Dr. Krista McQueeney’s Sociology of the Family course in which students were to participate in a semester-long community-based research project in conjunction with a local community organization. This student research team chose to work with the YWCA of Greater Lawrence to research bullying taking place in their after-school program. We collaborated with Dr. McQueeney and Maricelis Ortiz, Director of Youth and Fitness at the YWCA, to develop focus group and survey questions. Ortiz told us that bullying was a serious problem for them and she was hoping that our community-based research approach would provide the YWCA with new tools to help prevent bullying.

We conducted three informal, discussion-based focus groups at the YWCA with agency staff and youth, selected specifically by Maricelis Ortiz. The agency youth and staff also filled out surveys. All questions were designed to examine participants’ perspectives on bullying, its effect on young people, and how it can be prevented and properly handled. The goal of this project was to determine how the agency youth and staff view bullying and how it should be dealt with. The team was to then develop a curriculum, in the form of a pamphlet, based on their research to educate agency youth and staff about bullying and provide them with guidelines and activities to prevent and handle bullying.

Initially, the team was worried about collecting accurate data because of the difficulties we encountered while conducting the research. These challenges ranged from lack of participation to fear of giving honest answers to hesitancy in opening up to complete strangers. However, as the team spent time talking to the staff and students, we were able to gather useful information. We found that the staff was very tentative to offer their honest opinions of the questions we asked, and several participants did not speak at all during the focus groups. Some staff members were vague in their responses, and it almost seemed as if they were trying to avoid

giving concrete, straightforward answers. We attributed this tentativeness to the influence of their fellow co-workers and even their manager, who were present in the room during our focus group discussions.

We stopped facilitating the group for a moment to stress that this was not a review of their performance and that answering honestly would not get them in trouble with their bosses, it would just help provide answers for our project. Once we stressed that, the staff was much more open in their responses and discussion. In retrospect, we should have asked to meet with just the staff and not the managers in order for the staff to feel more comfortable. We also should have stressed from the beginning that this project was not a review of their performance and role as a staff member, but simply a research project.

The children were by far the most difficult focus group to facilitate. The responses they gave were very vague and often did not seem relevant to the questions we asked. The youth, girls aged 6 to 13, seemed restless and were perhaps too young for the questions and group discussion that we had planned. It was also extremely difficult to get some participants to speak up; a few of the children appeared very shy and uncomfortable speaking in a group. The vagueness and avoidance displayed by some children seemed to indicate that they didn't truly understand our questions or that they don't comprehend the severity of bullying. In response to these challenges, we developed a "bully ball", which we later used with the students to gather further data. This activity allowed the children to discuss bullying while interacting with their peers, moving around, and having fun, which made them more forthcoming with their answers. Though it was difficult to get everyone to participate, we did get valuable answers from the children. If more children had participated, we believe our data could have been more accurate.

Our research indicated that parental involvement is also an important part of reducing the prevalence of bullying. Although we were unable to include parents in our study, the staff and youth were able to stress the important role of parents. The youth indicated that they consistently do not report bullying because it is discouraged by their peers, so a strong parental support system would be very important for youth to feel comfortable enough confiding in them. Although we learned of the importance of parental involvement from students and staff, we did not include recommendations about parental involvement in our pamphlet. This pamphlet was directed to the staff of the YWCA, so the team felt it might be ineffective to include recommendations for parents when it was to be viewed primarily by staff. It is also important for the youth to feel comfortable enough to approach the staff about bullying, regardless of the pervasive "snitches get stitches" mantra that the youth reported, which discourages children from seeking help from adults when they or their peers are being bullied.

Despite the research challenges, we obtained sufficient information to follow through on our analysis and, most significantly, the pamphlet. The focus groups yielded great information that helped us understand the cycle of bullying and how it emotionally affects children. The agency youth seemed to hold nothing back, unlike the staff members who were more reserved. We heard stories from participants that indicated that many students who bully are also bullied themselves. We found that there are a lot of misconceptions about bullying; many participants defined bullying as a single act of harm while the true definition requires that bullying be a repeated act. For example, the children thought ignoring someone was grounds for calling someone a bully. This led us to believe that both the staff and the agency youth might be overusing the term "bullying," which is dangerous because bullying has serious consequences.

Some of the staff members revealed to us that they encourage bullied youth to stick up for themselves and fight back. Although the staff had recently received bullying training, a few

participants insisted that fighting back is the best way to get a bully to leave a child alone. Research shows, however, that “children who fight back when bullied also tend to watch or join in when others are bullied” (Brown, Birch, and Kancherla 2005). This cycle renders “fighting back” ineffective, as it perpetuates the cycle of bullying. Research indicates that a program encouraging education about, and prevention of, bullying is the most effective (Harris and Petrie 2003). We highlighted nonviolent approaches to bullying in our recommendations to the staff, but we believe it might take a more organized program with detailed steps to ensure that the staff consistently discourages physical altercations among the youth.

It was extremely difficult and upsetting to listen to the children talk about incidents in which they were victims of a bully and how it affected them. Even the staff shared stories where they have witnessed or experienced bullying themselves. When we asked if they had witnessed bullying at the YWCA, one staff member said “all you can do is tell the little kids it’s not their fault.” We were very struck by this comment, because it seemed as if the staff member had lost hope for these children and the bullying that occurs within the YWCA, as if it is inevitable. This attitude that bullying is unavoidable may contribute to the prevalence of bullying at the YWCA. Although the term ‘bully’ appeared overused at the YWCA, there still appeared to be clear-cut bullies within the program, as identified by the staff and youth.

Developing the pamphlet was a slow, thoughtful process. We used the answers from both the surveys and the focus groups to develop steps for the staff to take when they encounter bullying. Many students believed that the staff was ambivalent to their situation, so we wanted to develop steps that encouraged the staff to engage the students and directly address the problem. We included two activities in the pamphlet that we had tested at the YWCA to encourage discussion among the students. Our general tips came from both things we heard from staff members and our own knowledge of mediation. The overall pamphlet was a combined effort to merge the data that we collected and our own, objective observations.

The pamphlet, which was distributed to the YWCA at the end of this research, was based on our knowledge about bullying, feedback from the staff, and input from the children. The “Tools” section was developed based on the students’ research about bullying; it was a common thread amongst research to defuse a situation, maintain neutral emotions, listen to both student’s stories, separate the children if necessary, and have them work together on a project to encourage collaboration if possible. The ‘Activities’ section contains original activities that we developed and tested on the children at the YWCA. Because we found that these activities were both age-appropriate and effective in prompting conversations with agency youth, we suggested to that the staff continue to use them on an ongoing basis. For example, we created a “bully ball” which had a bullying discussion prompt on each panel of the ball to encourage casual conversations about bullying. The children at the YWCA greatly enjoyed that game, so we left the ball with the organization to encourage them to use it. The ‘Videos’ section offers videos that are useful in opening up conversations among staff and children about what bullying is and how to handle it. We based the “General Tips on Bullying” on what we heard and learned throughout our research. For example, not many children knew the formal definition of bullying, by which their actions would be judged. Thus, our first tip is “Make Sure Children Understand Bullying.” This pamphlet was developed to be an asset to the YWCA in their prevention and response efforts.

Overall, despite the difficulties we faced, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of bullying and its effects on children. We collected valuable data which led us to develop the pamphlet. It is our hope that this pamphlet will be widely distributed among the staff and used frequently in an effort to reduce the prevalence of bullying at this organization.

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