

SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES [5238]

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Abstract

Theoretically grounded in Jeffersonian participatory democracy and the social science research method, the school violence prevention curriculum now known as Project REACH empowers students to study and reduce student-on-student victimization in their school. The REACH acronym is intended to convey the values implicit in the curriculum: respect, empathy, activism, community, and heart. Over the course of four units, students engage in experiential learning activities designed to help students “buy in” to the premises of the curriculum, create a self-governing mechanism for their classroom, practice empathy skills, reduce social barriers and build community, and conduct a school-specific action research project to make their school safer. The Project REACH curriculum is the culmination of an extensive, iterative process of formative evaluation in three distinctly different school settings (urban, rural, suburban). Through weekly and sometimes daily on-site observation, formal and informal interviews, and quantitative measures, the curriculum has been adapted progressively to the real-world challenges and opportunities associated with asking students to become instrumental actors in the process of increasing the safety of their schools. This paper outlines the results of this formative evaluation, and discusses specific challenges and opportunities related to the needs of students, teachers, and administrators. Actual outcomes related to the schools’ physical plants, programming, policies, or procedures are described, and the paper concludes with an agenda for future study.

Introduction

Despite recent reports indicating that the level of violence in schools has decreased over the last ten years, significant numbers of students continue to witness or experience student-on-student victimization (DeVoe, et al., 2004). The No Child Left Behind legislation enacted by the U.S. federal government in 2002 requires that schools monitor and address the safety of their students, and schools have responded by utilizing a variety of

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This publication was made possible by a grant [#97-MU-FX-KO12 (S-1)] from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), United States Department of Justice (USDOJ). This grant is administered through the Hamilton Fish National Institute on School and Community Violence at George Washington University. All points of view and opinions in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of Florida State University, East Carolina University, the Hamilton Fish National Institute on School and Community Violence, the OJJDP, or the USDOJ.

violence prevention methods, with mixed results (Fetsch and Silliman, 2002; Nation, et al., 2003). By and large, such school-based approaches to reducing youth violence attempt to modify student behavior through the use of technology (e.g., metal detectors, surveillance cameras), changes in policy, or prevention programs that often contain little room for student input (Derzon, Wilson, and Cunningham, 1999). Over the past three years, researchers from the Florida State University's School Violence Prevention Project have sought to develop and implement a school violence prevention curriculum designed to enable middle- and high-school students to become the initiators of violence prevention strategies at their schools. Theoretically grounded in Jeffersonian participatory democracy and the complementary social science research method known as action research, the curriculum empowers students to make their schools safer by taking leadership in studying student-on-student victimization at their school and advocating for carefully considered change.

The school violence prevention curriculum developed by the School Violence Prevention Project team has benefited from a substantial commitment to formative research using proximal outcome measures such as student receptivity and engagement, teacher satisfaction, and student attainment of learning goals. As with much formative research, the target of this undertaking has been the improved effectiveness and appeal of the curriculum over the first years of its implementation. (Sadler, 1989) In three diverse school settings, researchers have worked with approximately 200 students and seven middle and high school teachers in an iterative process of improvement involving regular on-site observation, student, teacher, and administrator feedback, analysis of student work, and quantitative measures. This process has enabled researchers to progressively adapt the curriculum to the real-world challenges and opportunities associated with asking students to become instrumental actors in the process of reducing student-on-student victimization in their schools. This paper will briefly describe the Project REACH curriculum, and report on related challenges and opportunities for students, teachers, and administrators. The paper will also describe actual concrete, school-wide outcomes that have occurred as a result of the Project REACH curriculum, and discuss an agenda for future research.

The Relevance of Participatory Democracy to School Violence

The notion of participatory democracy draws on Thomas Jefferson's contention that a well-informed citizenry can take an on-going role in the determination of policy and even diminish their reliance on government by handling most of their public concerns by private means. Schurgurensky (2003) distinguishes participatory democracy from "token consultations without authentic decision making power." (p. 1) Instead, he says, participatory democracy refers to "inclusive processes of deliberation that are bound to real and substantive decisions." (p.1) A curriculum based on participatory democracy, then, has the potential to maximize student inclusion, democratic enlightenment, and real school improvement. It has the potential to contradict the social rejection and isolation typically experienced by aggressive students (Astor, et al., 1996) and enhance the important sense of community among students (Battistich and Horn, 1997).

Democratic enlightenment involves the "recognition that one has a shared interest—a collective interest that may sometimes contradict and override one's individual preferences" (Nie, et al., 1996, p.97). Further, membership in a democratic body implies a shared connection with others in the community as well as a tolerance for the expression of diverse ideas and beliefs. As educator and philosopher John Dewey wrote, "A democracy is more than a form of government: it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience." (Dewey, 1916, p. 87) Thus, the use of participatory democracy as the foundation for a school violence prevention curriculum can profit students in several ways. First, it can make students aware of the concept of "shared interest" and the impact of individual behavior on the common good. Second, it can give students, through their participation in the democratic processes in the classroom, experience in respectfully hearing diverse perspectives—and being heard. Third, in creating opportunities for students to mutually create solutions to school safety problems, it can increase students' support for the solutions they themselves have derived.

The Relevance of Action Research to School Violence

Since participatory democracy calls for informed constituents, the research team felt that the use of the social science research method, in the form of action research, could provide the means by which students could meaningfully and methodically identify, analyze, and think about solutions to the violence they witnessed or experienced at their own school. Action research is an essentially democratic, practical, and active form of inquiry (Carson, et al., 1990). As such, it provides an effective complement to the participatory democratic orientation of the curriculum as described above. Because action research is not as concerned with global issues of education as it is “with particular learners and specific cases,” (Collins, 2004, p. 4), it has the potential increase a student’s sense of ownership and inclusion in his or her school. Increasingly, students in the U.S. have been empowered by educators and community activists to participate in and even lead school and community improvement efforts, with demonstrated positive results (Cervone, 2002; What Kids Can Do, Inc. and the MetLife Foundation, 2004).

The Project REACH Curriculum

The Project REACH curriculum began with the simple idea that students are in the best position to identify, analyze, and remediate the student-on-student victimization that occurs in their own schools. The research team frequently used the term “student-on-student victimization” in order to emphasize a broader scope of behavior than that suggested by the term “school violence.” Similarly, the concept of student-on-student victimization was used by the research team in the development of a related set of self-report survey protocols, the Adolescent Index for School Safety.* (Kerbs, et al., 2002)

Over the course of four units, the Project REACH curriculum engages students in inquiry-based, experiential learning activities designed to help students: 1) expand their understandings of school violence and create a self-governing mechanism for their own classroom; 2) improve their empathic skills; 3) reduce social barriers between students and build community in the classroom; and 4) conduct a school-specific action research project on violence at their school. In the course of this ambitious five-week curriculum, Project REACH students assume the roles of social scientists and student activists, interacting with their school institution in a way most never have before.

The learning activities that comprise the Project REACH curriculum are primarily research-based. In the first unit, the curriculum advances a definition of violence that broadens the range of problematic behavior to include incidents of an emotional, sexual, or property nature that violate the safety of individual students and compromise student perceptions of safety in the school community. In part, the rationale for this broader definition of violence emerged from research suggesting that measures of physical violence alone are inadequate to describe the range of victimization students actually experience. (Sullivan, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Whitney and Smith, 1993) Research also informed the development of an activity in the first unit in which students create a “Classroom Bill of Rights,” a potentially vivid introduction to democratic processes at work in the classroom. (Collins, 2004; Westheimer and Kahne, 2004) Through a process of brainstorming and voting, students develop a set of rights, rules, and consequences that they themselves uphold over the course of the semester. Early on in the curriculum, then, students begin to gain experience with two of the underlying principles of a participatory democracy: full participation and inclusion (Collins, 2004).

In the second unit, the decision to include empathic skills training was based on research suggesting that such learning can promote pro-social behavior (Hoffman, 2000; Kohn, 1991). Activities were derived from descriptions of the teaching of epiphastic poetry (Gorrell, 2000) and the use of role-playing techniques to develop empathy (Blatner, 1992; Blatner and Blatner, 1991). In addition, the need to heighten the students’ awareness of empathy as a value was indicated by our own observations and related research on student

perceptions of violence at school (Kerbs, et.al., 2004). After observing a number of students characterize their experience of the fights they witnessed at school as “fun,” the School Violence Prevention team set out to better understand this contention. In 30 one-on-one interviews and four focus groups, the researchers found that of the 63% of students who were able to remember a time when they experienced physical, emotional, sexual, or property violence at school as “fun,” the vast majority (86.3%) also experienced a kind of empathy for the victim that made the experience “less fun.” Frequently they described the violent incident as “fun” at first, but “not fun” when the consequences of the violence (crying, injury, humiliation, punishments) became real through the witnesses’ own thinking about or viewing of the victim. Thus, the decision to add activities to the curriculum that would engage students in empathic skills training was based on evidence from several sources.

In the third unit, the focus on social relationships between students reflects the reality that student-on-student victimization is a social phenomenon. A decision was made to strengthen interpersonal relationships in the classroom as a means of providing the experience of a supportive student community. Froyen and Iverson (1999) refer to the teacher’s focus on the classroom group as a social system with its own features as “covenant management.” The concept of a “covenant” is introduced in the first unit prior to the creation of a Class Constitution, so acknowledging and challenging barriers to student relationships in this third unit is a way of experientially revisiting this notion. In fact, the Class Constitution activity provides a foundation for improving classroom conduct that might impede the successful execution of the barrier-challenging exercises in the third unit. In both the first and the third units, the teacher, as the facilitator of increased student responsibility for the environment of the classroom, demonstrates an important willingness to enable students “to become co-participants in the teaching-learning process, striving to make the most of themselves and their collective experience” (Froyen and Iverson, 1999, p. 256).

Research that has sought to understand school violence in terms of the locations in schools where it takes place (Astor and Meyer, 1999; Astor, Meyer, and Behre, 1999; Miethe and Meier, 1994) formed the basis for the inclusion of a “mapping” activity in the fourth unit of the curriculum. This activity was designed to help students think more analytically about the student-on-student victimization they experience or witness during the school day and ground their impressions in the physical reality of the school. This activity provided a natural foundation for the action research component of the fourth unit, based in part on the team’s decision to involve the students themselves in the creation of violence prevention strategies for their school. This decision to ground the curriculum in the students’ own experience also was consistent with the notion that heightened relevance increases student engagement (Gutierrez, et al., 2005). (For an expanded discussion of the pedagogical origins of the Project REACH curriculum, see Gutierrez, et al., 2005) Thus, as students began their action research project they were able to be specific about a problem with high personal relevance. For example, in one school the students characterized the problem they would address in this way: “The commons area during lunch is not free from physical and emotional harassment because it is too crowded.”

The Formative Evaluation Process

The Project REACH curriculum is the product of an iterative process of ongoing improvement. As the culmination of three years of development, field implementation, and revision, the curriculum represents a true bridging of theory and practice. Implemented at a public “lab” school affiliated with Florida State University in its first year, at an urban public middle school in its second year, and at a rural public high school in its third year, Project REACH has benefited from the extended measurement of proximal outcomes such as student engagement, teacher and administrator satisfaction, and the achievement of learning objectives. Just as in much formative evaluation, on-site observation, student individual and group interviews, teacher and administrator interviews, and surveys were used for this purpose (Sadler, 1989). Distal outcomes related to the broader goals of the curriculum were also measured, including reductions in reported incidents of violence, substantive school change at the structural or policy level, and student experiences/perceptions of

violence as measured by the Adolescent Index for School Safety (AISS) (Kerbs, et.al., 2002)⁵. However, this paper focuses on process variables that are often difficult to quantify yet integral to the success of a complex intervention such as a school curriculum.

Results of the Formative Evaluation

The weekly, and in some cases, daily, observation of classes in which the school violence prevention curriculum was taught provided many insights into the challenges and opportunities involved in its effective implementation. These insights were deepened and verified through interviews, examination of student-produced materials, and survey data. The formative evaluation process made clear which curricular activities were useful and not useful in moving students toward lesson objectives. In addition, the analysis of the data enabled researchers to make inferences about the influence of administrators, teachers, and students on the achievement of both broad and specific curriculum goals. While these inferences have been organized according to these different roles, the researchers acknowledge the relational quality of the phenomena under study. In reality, the school is an ecological system where causality is never unidirectional and where events are best understood in the context of interdependent relationships. For this reason it is important to note that the category system used to organize the researchers' observations and impressions is artificial, and serves mainly a heuristic purpose. Often in the accounts below, the distinctions between student-, teacher-, and administrator-related influences are blurred.

Administrator-Related Challenges to Effective Implementation

Competing Needs

Faced with the need to ensure that students at their schools succeeded on state minimum competency tests of reading, writing, and math, some school principals described their difficulty with scheduling in the curriculum. They were uncomfortable mandating the teaching of this curriculum given the demands already placed on their teachers. Interestingly, though the curriculum was originally designed for and implemented at public middle schools, it seemed to find a comfortable home in the Life Management classes required of all high school students in Florida. Because the curriculum overlaps in places with character education standards, and includes the teaching of skills like interviewing, it matched several required benchmarks for Life Management.

Commitment to Change

In general, school administrators were very open and responsive to the work of the students. In only one case, a principal (who had replaced the outgoing principal in mid-semester) failed to provide encouragement or positive feedback, interrupting students before they were finished with their presentations and providing an extended explanation of why the students' recommendations would not work. More frequently, school administrators listened carefully to the problems and potential solutions that students identified, and were impressed with their work. One principal shared her keen awareness that the curriculum could not be successful if its impact was felt only in isolated pockets of classes, and agreed with the importance of

⁵ The AISS was developed by John Kerbs, Stephen Rollin, Isabelle Potts, and the Florida State University School Violence Prevention Project in order to fill a need that became apparent to researchers as they developed the curriculum, and to assist schools concerned with meeting the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The survey was designed with three specific purposes: 1) to provide teachers with timely, highly relevant data when called for in Project REACH activities; 2) to collect self-report data from students (as per NCLB Act requirements) on violence/harassment in schools; and 3) to heighten administrators' sense of urgency, when appropriate, in working with students to identify and solve violence-related problems. While both the REACH curriculum and the AISS protocol can be used independently of one another, they conjoin to effectively measure psychological, property, physical, and sexual student-on-student victimization among secondary students, as per Title IV (Part A) of the NCLB Act.

administrator support and public acknowledgement of the work of curriculum-involved students. Nevertheless, it was the actual responses of the administrators – the establishment of a new sexual harassment policy, the purchase of more tables for the lunchroom, the permission to distribute a student-created brochure on sexual harassment – that made the experience of the curriculum meaningful for both students engaged in the curriculum and for the student body. Thus, while it was essential for the school principal to promote the curriculum publicly, it was even more essential that he or she follow-through on strategies for ameliorating the problems identified by students and ensure that changes were widely known to be associated with curriculum.

Teacher-Related Challenges to Effective Implementation

Classroom Management

For many teachers, classroom conduct management seemed to pose a significant challenge that might have been addressed, in part, by more ongoing reflective use of the curriculum. The teachers who taught the curriculum often neglected to highlight the conceptual links between particular lessons in the curriculum (respect, empathy, etc.) and the disruptive behavior of students in the classroom. One teacher, for example, reported that students had become more aware of the disrespectful and disruptive behavior of other students following the creation of the Class Constitution. Yet as the class moved on to later lessons, the teacher did not post the Constitution in a remind students of the commitment they had made to each other. A similar observation was made by a researcher who observed an interaction in which one student called another a “faggot.” All the students at the tables nearby noticed, stopped, and got quiet, until one girl said, “*Hey, that’s against the rules!*” and insisted that the offender draw a slip from the “consequence jar” that the students had created. Yet, as the class moved through the curriculum, students and teachers seemed to leave the Constitution and its rules and consequences behind. Had teachers repeatedly revisited the Constitution they might have created a classroom environment more conducive to the listening and discussion that so many of the curriculum activities required. Many of the curriculum activities, such as the expanded definition of violence, empathy skill-building, and barrier-breaking between groups were designed to build a foundation for a more cohesive classroom community that would, in turn, maximize the impact of later activities. Such observations made researchers more aware of the need to devote more time and resources to the training of teachers who intend to teach the curriculum.

Academic Background

The teachers who agreed to teach the curriculum came from a variety of academic backgrounds. Only in the first year of field implementation was the curriculum implemented in a core class—Social Studies. The amount of time that the teacher at this university-affiliated “lab” school was allowed to devote to our curriculum was highly unusual and was not duplicated elsewhere. At the urban middle school where, in its second year, the Project REACH curriculum was implemented, none of the teachers involved taught English or Social Studies, the foundational subjects for many of the curriculum activities. For the English and Social Studies teachers at this school, the curriculum seemed to add content that the teachers of these subjects simply could not accommodate. Given the pressure on Florida public schools to literally “make the grade” and fulfill standards established by the Florida Department of Education, the teachers of English and Social Studies at schools where the curriculum was implemented were not willing to take on new curriculum materials that did not directly accomplish their objectives. Thus, all but one of the teachers who agreed to field test the curriculum taught elective subjects, or life management, or exceptional student education (ESE) classes with fewer content-related requirements. One of these was an art teacher who was assigned to teach a peer mediation class, one was a life management teacher, three were ESE teachers, and one, whose background was math, taught a leadership class. The techniques specific to engaging students in writing activities, or supplemental knowledge that might fill out activities involving historical accounts or the social science research method, were understandably not part of these teachers’ training and repertoires.

Engaging the Students

The skepticism that some students expressed at the start of the curriculum made it more difficult for most teachers to engage the students right from the start. Perhaps because teachers hadn't taught the curriculum before, they failed to convey the "big picture" to students and adequately lay out the ultimate goal of the project: that students become agents for real change in their school. (The one teacher who taught the curriculum for two semesters in a row effectively drew on the successes of the previous semester to motivate her second semester students, however.) In addition, because the students would ultimately conduct an action research project, it was essential that teachers ensure that students acknowledge some negative consequences of student-on-student victimization right from the start, that is, that students "buy in" to the fundamental premise of the project, that school violence is a "problem" worthy of their attention. In some cases, students still seemed to be questioning late in the curriculum whether they needed to address school violence at all. Better training and more experience with the curriculum would likely have enabled teachers to better relate the larger goals and potential rewards of the curriculum to students.

Teachers also differed greatly in the extent to which they conveyed real enthusiasm for the curriculum. This factor was significant because it was the teacher who had the largest part in helping inspire students to believe that they could "make a difference," and even more importantly, that it was *worth their while to do so*. Not surprisingly, the teachers' enthusiasm grew noticeably after witnessing what the curriculum might accomplish. Like any learner, teachers themselves were more engaged in the curriculum only after it became more relevant and meaningful, that is, until the force of the students' actual experiences with the larger school community – administering and analyzing student surveys, conducting administrator and staff interviews, and presenting findings and recommendations to school and county administrators – finally "hooked" them.

Sensitizing Students

As discussed above, it was not unusual for students to dismiss the idea that teasing, harassment, excluding, and other forms of emotional student-on-student victimization deserve serious attention. Yet such behavior is often a precursor to physical violence on and off school property. (Rollin et al., 2003) In addition, like sexual harassment, emotional student-on-student victimization can lead to school avoidance, school failure, and feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem. (Rollin et al., 2003) Some of the curriculum activities required that teachers facilitate honest discussion of students' sense of vulnerability. The use same-gender small groups for some curriculum activities may be necessary in order to enable students to speak honestly and openly about their everyday experiences of victimization.

Student-Related Challenges to Effective Implementation

Student Disengagement

Despite the clear fondness that many students held for their teachers, other attitudes characteristic of student disengagement were persistently present. Many frequently were disrespectful to their teachers and to each other. Further, most students in classes in which the curriculum was taught seemed less than enthusiastic about being in school at all. At the rural high school where the curriculum was implemented, and where, by the teacher's account, only 10-20% of students aspired to a college education, many students frequently came to class without paper, a pen or a pencil. In the words of one student:

The only thing I got, like, to write with is lip gloss.

In all the classes studied, students typically resisted activities requiring them to write, or to read even a page of text. After receiving a single-page handout on community, cliques, and groups at school, for example, the following exchange was overheard:

Student: *"This is too much work!"*

Teacher: *"This isn't work...this is reading."*

Student: *"I don't like reading!"*

Another boy reported at the end of the curriculum:

It was fun making up our own rules in class...but it sucked because it was work. [I liked] getting out of class to go do interviews.

In several of the classes observed, many students would talk out loud to each other though the teacher was speaking to the class as a whole, making it hard for other students to participate in the ongoing discussion. In two of the classes observed, students frequently got up from their seats and moved around the room to talk with other students during class discussions or while the teacher gave the class instructions. Often, this disruptive behavior was not addressed by teachers. In addition, teachers did not seem to expect that students would complete and return homework, so they rarely assigned it, and in every class there were students who failed to finish (or sometimes begin) even those activities assigned in class. Although such classroom management and teaching challenges did not always apply to the majority of the students in each class, when present they interfered with the full experience of the activities underway, since these activities often hinged on meaningful discussion or cooperative learning. In addition, these challenges limited the extent to which teachers were able to capture the imagination of the class as a whole and effectively work to create momentum that carried the students along in the conviction that they could, in fact, benefit from their participation in the curriculum.

Acceptance of Violence as a Given. Early in the curriculum, many students seemed to accept the reality of student-on student victimization at school as a "given." With a kind of bravado, some students denied any feelings of vulnerability or distress in response to their own victimization or the observed victimization of others. In one empathy building activity, for example, students read about Miss America 2003, Erica Harold, who, in ninth grade, was the victim of such severe sexual and racial harassment in school that she eventually transferred to another high school. In discussing this activity during a later interview, one girl expressed her disdain for Ms. Harold's efforts to better her situation: *"I get called a whore all the time. Don't see me leaving school for it...I'm used to it."* When girls raised the issue of sexual harassment at school, it was generally with a timid hesitancy. The teacher's encouragement was essential in validating the opinions of girls' who publicly identified sexual harassment as a problem.

In terms of physical violence, it was more common to hear students laugh about enjoying fights at school than express a desire to prevent them from happening. One student observed, *"This is a ridiculous class, man...cause you know that everybody who sees a fight, whenever they see a fight, they gonna want to see it."* Many students at the urban middle school where the curriculum was implemented, and where several fights occurred weekly, voiced only one response to watching fights at school: amusement. Yet the true feelings and attitudes of students may have been more complex than they were willing to reveal in a youth culture that places a premium on "being cool." In a related study at this same school, researchers from the School Violence Prevention Project (Kerbs, et al., 2004) conducted one-on-one interviews with 30 students who were not participating in the curriculum intervention. Though a majority of these students were able to remember a time when they enjoyed watching or participating in violence at school, most of these volunteered that they later felt guilt or even remorse after their initial enjoyment, when they began to think about the consequences for the victim and even for the aggressor.

Public Pose. Although not all students displayed such cavalier attitudes about violence, few spoke openly about violence at school as something undesirable. The premise of the curriculum, then, was not *openly* embraced by students right from the start. As described above, the public pose that students took at the start of the curriculum was often different from the sentiments expressed by students in one-on-one interviews.

Similarly, students initially failed to show much enthusiasm for the opportunity to improve their school. In some cases, students were loathe to identify problems at their school because they felt it would make their school “look bad.” In other cases, students felt that the responsibility for improving school safety was exclusively the administration’s job. Nevertheless, interviews revealed that many students wanted to make things at their schools better. As one eighth-grade student said, *“There’s a lot of problems with violence in this school. I see it every day. Maybe this can help.”* A petite seventh-grade girl who had been very quiet throughout the semester acknowledged in an interview that she hated the violence at school, adding, *“...some kids don’t think there’s anything you can do, but I do.”*

Skepticism. Many students displayed apathy or skepticism when introduced to the curriculum, maintaining, *“nothing’s going to work,”* and, *“students don’t care...they don’t want to go along because it’s not cool.”* Two girls at the urban middle school maintained that no one listened to them anyway, so they didn’t think much would come of this project. One girl admitted during an interview that she liked the project, but didn’t want to look like a “nerd” by openly showing her enthusiasm. Students seemed to need to be convinced that their school administration and teachers were indeed interested in their views and willing to work with students. (This skepticism among students underlines the necessity that administrators create some meaningful change—or movement toward change—in response to the work of students, and that teachers guide students toward realistic recommendations for change.) Typically, students became highly engaged only when they began to interact meaningfully and purposefully with other members of the school community, that is, when they began to ask their own research questions and obtain information – data – through survey students or interviews with school staff, like the School Resource Officer, Principal, Assistant Principal, custodians, and cafeteria staff. Recent research on the impact of social norms on the behavior of students (Berkowitz, 2003; Berkowitz, 1998) suggests that the presentation of examples of high school activism at public schools in the U.S. may be helpful in contradicting in shifting student perceptions—and subsequently, behaviors—related to their potential to make meaningful changes in their schools.

Opportunities for Administrators

More Concerted Effort to Address Violence

One administrator noted that the Project REACH curriculum directs teachers to identify and bring together school organizations and school staff with a common interest in creating a safer school community. Among these organizations and staff are the school advisory committee, the student government, School Resource Officers, school safety patrols, assistant principal for discipline, school principal, and so on. Administrators can make use of such a concerted effort to strengthen the effectiveness of each of these safety-related entities. The curriculum provides the opportunity for such groups and individuals to jointly focus their efforts on specific, attainable goals based on evidence gathered by students in the course of their action research project and by the school itself (through such data as that gathered in required school climate surveys and incident reports. As Fetsch and Silliman (2002) noted in their review of youth violence prevention programs, schools and school districts are most likely to be effective at preventing school violence when they focus on “practical problem-solving and conflict resolution” in the school community.

Reductions in Student-on-Student Victimization

Despite the many secondary gains that may result from the curriculum, the primary opportunity it presents is a reduction in violent behavior. As student-on-student victimization impedes the ability of students to learn, a safer school can result in a more involved, engaged student body with higher levels of achievement. The curriculum provides administrators with a means to achieve a safer school without engaging every teacher and student in lesson-based activities. The principal, in particular, can maximize the impact of the curriculum by enhancing its legitimacy in the school community and ensuring that actual changes result.

Relationship with Students

The support of administrators for the curriculum signals an openness to improvement that is, in itself, a sign of a robust school. What students most frequently reported liking about the curriculum was being asked for their input, and being listened to by administrators during the feasibility interviews that the students conducted, and during their final presentations to the school principal. The feasibility interviews were conducted near the end of the action research project, after students had collected and reflected on their data, gathered any further data needed, and brainstormed a set of possible solutions to the problems they'd identified. Students conducted feasibility interviews with those persons at school who might contribute to related decision-making. Students were typically anxious about these interviews (especially with the principal,) so several roleplayed interviews in front of the class to demonstrate. Students were given a structured protocol to follow, beginning with a set of directions instructing them to introduce themselves, shake hands, and state their purpose before asking the interview questions. Despite their initial nervousness, students enjoyed the feasibility interviews:

It was fun going to talk to Mrs. X [because she was cool. She was up-to-date with everything. She wasn't confused about the issues the students raised] or nothin'.

We was treated good...She answered our questions with respect. I liked it.

In one school, 41.6% of students reported that they began the project with the sense that administrators cared about their views about school, and 58.3% reported that they ended the project with that sense. Even apparently disengaged students were positively affected by this constructive interaction their principal or vice-principals. Administrators can use the curriculum's opportunities to interface positively with students as one means of encouraging an atmosphere of openness and caring. They may want to ask students engaged in the curriculum to make presentations to student government or the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) or School Advisory Committee (SAC) at school, or continue to work with a small group of students to monitor the extent to which solutions have actually impacted the level of student-on-student victimization at school. In any case, administrators must be aware that *some level of change related to the identified problems must occur*, and that the students' part in initiating this change must be acknowledged.

Opportunities for Teachers

Professional Development

Over the course of the curriculum's formative evaluation, it became clear that a thorough teacher training session and follow-up support would be essential for the full realization of the curriculum in the classroom. Efforts are currently underway to develop a more extensive teacher training experience that additionally will give teachers the opportunity to obtain professional development credit. The training will highlight fundamental skills and understandings related to the pedagogical foundations of the curriculum, that is, inquiry-based and co-operative learning. In addition, the training will emphasize the importance of creating a classroom environment in which authentic shared decision-making and collaboration can take place. Both the Classroom Constitution and the action research activities contain the opportunity for teachers to learn alternative approaches to classroom disciplinary management as well. As one teacher noted,

Once they [the students] did the Constitution, some of the [difficult] behaviors disappeared.

Broadening the Student's World

The curriculum offers teachers many opportunities to broaden their students' experience of the world. In a number of places throughout the curriculum, teachers are supplied with information about websites that link students to the writing of other students in the U.S. For example, a lesson in which students write about their experiences of violence at school contains several addresses of websites where students may publish their

writing online (with parent permission, of course.) When students begin their action research project, students are provided with websites where they can begin doing online research about the school and community improvement efforts of other young people around the U.S. Even in guiding students to engage with parents, the student body, other school staff, and school administrators by administering surveys, conducting interviews, and making presentations, the teacher has the opportunity to broaden the students' experience within the ecosystem of the school. As a Life Management teacher noted,

I love it [the curriculum]. I like it in Life Management, which can be boring. This is life – so it's a good thing for Life Management...It's self-esteem building for them [the students] to be active participants in the classroom and in the school.

Clarifying the Consequences

Despite the distribution of student handbooks at the start of the school year, students are often misinformed or unaware of the disciplinary consequences for many common types of misbehavior that occur at their school. The roleplaying activities contained in the curriculum have frequently stimulated discussion among students that enables teachers to clarify the school disciplinary code for various sorts of misconduct. In one Project REACH class, a teacher invited the uniformed School Resource Officer (SRO), who serves a law-enforcement function at many schools, to join the discussion that followed the roleplays. The SRO was able to provide students with statistics about disciplinary referrals in the previous school year and share a number of cautionary stories from her experiences with other students.

Opportunities for Students

Expanded Roles

The curriculum gave students concrete experiences with new roles as students – as contributors to the common good, problem-solvers, and advocates for change. The curriculum activities placed students in situations in which they were compelled to relate differently to their principal, school administrators and staff, and other students. In the process of creating surveys and analyzing results, students took a meta-analytic view of their own behavior and that of other students. In interviewing school administrators and other staff, they became active citizens of the school community, empowered to ask questions and seek answers. A teacher who implemented the curriculum in a nine-grade class concluded:

It [Project REACH] helps with [the students] transition into high school life because it helps them create more ownership in their student body.

In the urban middle school where the curriculum was implemented in five classes, 60.4% of participating students reported that they ended the project with the sense that they could “make a difference” at their school, compared with 39.5% who reported that they began the project with this sense. Thus, despite the challenges that presented themselves in the course of curriculum implementation, the majority of student comments about the curriculum were positive. Students were glad to be asked about how they might make their school safer, and in describing what they liked about the curriculum, typically referred to an expanded sense of efficacy:

I liked picking a problem and trying to fix it...How we could make a change in our school, and just...improve it.”

It was fun making up our own rules in class [for the Class Constitution].

I liked discussing what we could change in the school. It felt good to be heard.

I liked the interaction. I liked how I had a chance to talk instead of just listening to other people talk.

Acquiring Skills

The curriculum teaches students actual skills that they can carry with them far beyond the classroom: empathy skills, analytic skills, social science inquiry skills, and interviewing skills. In the words of several students:

After we got done [with the curriculum] I felt like if I wanted to change something else it'd be more organized, 'cause I'd know how to do it.

We interviewed teachers about moving the doors [in the hallway]. I liked getting the truth, but I was nervous. If I interviewed somebody again, I'd do it better.

I liked talking to the superintendent. I introduced myself and he introduced himself. I told him what we were doing and he said that he liked the idea of what we were trying to do. It made me feel good that he was actually trying to help us...If they would have done it, it would have changed the atmosphere. Now I feel like we could [change something] if we wanted to.

Young people can only benefit from experience with these skills if they are to be active citizens in their democracy and engage with the power structures of government and of the institutions of which they are a part. To this end, a shorter extension of the Project REACH curriculum designed to consolidate gains in the following school year is being developed.

School-wide Outcomes

Concrete Outcomes

A variety of concrete outcomes in school plants, policies, and procedures have resulted from the efforts of students involved in the school violence prevention curriculum known as Project REACH. These include:

- The creation of an anonymous, online reporting system for students to report incidents of student-on-student victimization (SSV) that resulted in increased reports of SSV.
- The creation of a sexual harassment workshop for staff and students; attendance is mandatory for students identified by their peers as perpetrators of sexual harassment like “booty patting” and inappropriate sexual remarks.
- The purchase of additional tables for a lunchroom where overcrowding had caused stealing of food, pushing and shoving, and tension between students.
- The design of a student-developed brochure defining sexual harassment and giving advice on how to deal with it, to be distributed to incoming students the following year.
- The production of a skit on sexual harassment, to be introduced by the student government president and performed at the opening school assembly the following year.
- The institution of new policies for a locker room from which a majority of students had had money and clothing stolen, as well as the posting of a student-created sign in the nearby locker room: “*What ain't yours, you don't touch.*”

Survey-based Evaluation

In the third year of field implementation, the research team administered the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1996), the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham and Elliott, 1990), and the Adolescent Index for School Safety (AISS) (Kerbs, et al., 2002) as pre- and post-tests with Project REACH students at a

rural high school in North Florida and with students at a control school. The results of these surveys are currently being analyzed.

Conditions for Successful Implementation

Formative research has revealed that particular conditions are essential to the success of the school violence prevention curriculum now known as Project REACH. Among these are overt administrative support, teacher training, and adequate preparation of students. More specifically, successful implementation depends on the following:

Students must:

- Enter into the premises of the curriculum: that student-on-student victimization is problematic, that related experiences with student-on-student victimization are valid, and that their school can be improved by their active participation.
- Be fully prepared to make a presentation of their findings and recommendations to school and/or county administrators. Role-playing and editing of written materials in advance of any such presentation are essential.

Teacher must:

- Receive thorough training in content and skills associated with the Project REACH curriculum.
- Be prepared to deal constructively with direct or implied criticism of school staff by students. Students may identify a lack of adequate guardianship, ineffective supervision, or poor school maintenance as problems compromising the safety of the school.
- Publicly acknowledge the ongoing efforts of Project REACH students (e.g., assemblies, local paper, school newsletter, PTO meetings) through as many venues as possible.
- Be prepared to provide follow-up and referral for students who disclose personal problems needing intervention.
- Emphasize and reemphasize the themes of the curriculum (respect, empathy, activism, community, and heart) whenever advantageous to the building of an alternative set of classroom norms.

The principal and/or other school administrators must:

- Meet with the class at least twice during the semester for supportive curriculum-related activities.
- Demonstrate support for the students' efforts to improve their school, framing efforts to improve school safety as a sign of school vitality.
- Take action to address problems identified by students. Provide honest feedback to students about what changes may or may not be possible, and commit to addressing the problems identified by students.
- Publicly acknowledge changes that come about as a result of the students' work in order to reinforce the students' sense of commitment to the school and increase the perceived value of participation in the project. A local newspaper, school assembly, or school newsletter may all be used for this purpose.

Future Research Agenda

The evolution of an optimum research design by which to test the full effectiveness of the Project REACH curriculum is still underway. Originally focused on reductions in violent behavior and student perceptions of safety, the research team has become aware that secondary gains related to the students' sense of personal

efficacy, civic awareness, and school engagement are also potential outcomes, as well as knowledge gains. Further, the research team seeks to continue to implement the curriculum in schools with diverse safety needs. Finally, the research team recognizes the need to work with schools to establish an ongoing means of meaningful exchange of ideas between students, teachers, and administrators. This may mean a continuation of the Project REACH curriculum with incoming groups of students, or another feedback system.

Summary

In promoting the ideals of participatory democracy, the school violence prevention curriculum known as Project REACH calls upon administrators, teachers, and students to engage with one another in ways that may be inconsistent with institutional norms. This restructuring of roles was found to be one of the features of the curriculum most appealing to students. The hierarchical and non-hierarchical flow of communication that occurred in the course of the curriculum, that is, the give-and-take of ideas between students, teacher, staff, and administrators, was the feature of the curriculum that students most frequently reported valuing over any other. Put even more simply, students greatly appreciated the opportunity to be *heard*. When executed correctly, the curriculum stretched students and staff, creating new opportunities for communication and problem-solving. Fundamental questions about the safety of the school, for example, required that administrators and teachers be open to possible criticisms and responsive to the recommendations of students. Lessons that asked students to examine their own behavior and create a set of standards in the classroom—that they themselves would enforce—pressed students to give up their apathy and passivity in favor of accountability and responsibility. Most importantly, the curriculum resulted in concrete changes in schools' physical plants, programming, policies, or procedures that were grounded in the actual experiences of the students and which the students themselves, in cooperation with teachers, administrators, and other staff, devised.

The Project REACH curriculum is, in large part, a product of the generosity of students, teachers, and administrators who met with researchers to discuss their perceptions of and responses to the curriculum. Teachers and administrators advised researchers of the importance of framing school improvement efforts in positive ways that enhanced the school image rather than detracted from it, as well as emphasizing the importance of including the School Resources Officers and others in the school community who work on behalf of student safety. Students provided valuable feedback about the aspects of the curriculum that worked and those that didn't, and were candid in sharing their thoughts and feelings about their daily school experiences. The researchers are indebted to these many individuals who helped shape the Project REACH curriculum.

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