

**The other side of bullying prevention research: The state of bullying prevention after  
program implementers have left**

Thesis Proposal Summary

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## **Prevention Programs**

### **Objective**

Bullying Prevention programs have been mandated and widely implemented across the country. However, the programs themselves have not been consistently effective in reducing bullying, and their implementation integrity is often lacking (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). The current research project seeks to explore the state of bullying prevention within a school board where an evidence-based prevention program has been systematically implemented (e.g., Leadbeater, Hoglund, & Woods, 2003). Specifically, the primary objective of the research is to gain an understanding of how a school system responded to a researcher-led implementation of an evidence-based bullying prevention program. Findings from the study will shed light on factors that enhance and hinder bullying prevention programs, school climate, and school staff experiences with such initiatives.

### **Research Context**

Research has shown that a whole-school approach to bullying prevention has proven to be the most effective at decreasing the incidences of bullying. Programs that include student, staff, parental, and community engagement appear to show highest promise at reducing bullying rates. Programs such as WITS provides school staff with a framework rather than strict protocols, allowing for flexibility and some adaptation. This may be beneficial, as strict program adherence is rare in program implementation (Leadbeater et al., 2003; Sukhawathanakul et al., 2013). The WITS program has been systematically implemented in schools across Canada and evaluated in the context of a randomized control trial, and thus provides a unique opportunity to explore the state of bullying prevention following systematic, researcher-supported implementation (Farrington, Gaffney, Lösel, & Ttofi, 2017).

While bullying has been explored using socio-ecological approaches (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; 1976; Cohen, Espelage, Twemlow, Berkowitz, & Comer, 2015; Henry, 2000), the research on bullying has focused primarily on individual-level attributes (e.g., gender, theory of mind, empathy), beliefs (e.g., peer or teacher support), or outcomes (e.g., popularity, depression, anxiety; see Thornberg, 2015). Research has focused on the bully, the victim, and more recently, the bully-victim. However, this narrows the focus to the individual, which may be problematic. Focusing on the individual risks labelling children and focusing solely on the behaviour (Orpinas & Horne, 2006; Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015), limiting the exploration of social, contextual, and cultural factors that may influence bullying behaviours (Rodkin et al., 2015). The research on bullying and school climate has predominantly focused on the beliefs of students, often neglecting other key perspectives (e.g., teachers and administrators). The limited research on teachers within bullying prevention has focused on their beliefs about bullying, the occurrence of bullying within their school (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Boulton, Hardcastle, Down, Fowles, & Simmonds, 2014; Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000), and their confidence to address bullying within the classroom (Ahtola, Haataja, Kärnä, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2012; Byers, Caltabiano, & Caltabiano, 2011).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current research will be approached using systems theory, also called the theory of cybernetics (Boulding, 1956; Von Bertalanffy, 1972). As bullying prevention programs are predominantly situated within schools, systems theory allows for exploration of the organizational and social structures that influence bullying prevention initiatives and their outcomes. Systems theory has long been utilized in the study of organizations and professional development (Zehetmeier, Andreitz, Erlacher, & Rauch, 2015). As program uptake and

implementation rely on organizational structures (Leadbeater et al., 2012; Sukhawathanakul et al., 2013), systems theory is a fitting framework on which to base the current research. Similar to Bonfenbrenner's models (1974; 1976), systems theory accounts for micro-, macro-, meso-, exo-, and chrono-systems. However, the focus of systems theory is placed on the feedback loops, which are circular communication patterns that provide perpetual feedback into a relational system. Such loops permit behavioural adaptations to emerge within the group as new information or experiences become available to the system.

When attempting to change something within a system, such as the introduction of a bullying prevention program, systems theory accounts for homeostatic processes that effect organizational behaviour. According to systems theory, homeostasis is a regulatory process through which a system seeks to maintain a constant state by devising ways to resist or correct disruptions or change (Boulding, 1956; Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Although developed on biological models, the theory has been extended to include social systems, such as schools. Thus, when disruptions occur, such as the implementation of an intervention or new program, there may be resistance to change (Boulding, 1956). Often times, within professional development and bullying prevention program implementation specifically, the programs may be neglected or assimilated to fit the prevailing norms and practices of the system (Dane & Schneider, 1998).

There are, however, other forces at work in systems that have the effect of countering homeostatic processes such that systems may adapt to and integrate changes that lead to growth and development (Boulding, 1956). Specifically, organizational learning theory posits that learning occurs as a natural evolution through practice and can lead systems towards new ways of functioning (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Research indicates that learning and organizational change occurs most effectively when communities of practice are utilized and training is based in practice rather than abstract knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Thus, through engagement of all members of an organization or community, over a prolonged period of time, effective change or adaptation is possible (Boulding, 1956; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Von Bertalanffy, 1972; Wenger, 1998).

### **Description of the Problem**

While there is research regarding bullying prevention implementation (Cross & Barnes, 2014; Haataja, Ahtola, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2015), there is little to no research regarding what happens with bullying prevention after the researchers leave the schools within Canada. Thus, there is little understanding of how programs are taken up over time, or how they may be adapted into the organizational social system. Understanding how bullying prevention evolves after implementation and understanding the social system within which bullying prevention occurs may lead to more effective bullying prevention programs and evaluations of existing and new programs.

### **Research Questions**

1. How has bullying prevention unfolded in a school board since researcher-led implementation of an evidence-based program ended?
2. How did the organization respond to the implementation of the program?
3. What changes, if any, were observed in the system following the implementation of the program?
4. What lessons were learned by the organization through the experience of implementing an evidence-based program with the support of a research team?
5. How can open-research contribute to collaborative research on bullying prevention?  
(Methodological)

## **Methodological Framework**

Case study methodology will be utilized for this study, as it aligns well with the theoretical tenets of systems theory. The case study was chosen to allow for a thorough exploration of the phenomenon of interest within a bounded group or system (Creswell, 2014). Case studies are optimal when exploring a phenomenon where the phenomenon itself cannot be separated from the context within which it occurs (Yin, 2014). The goal of the current study is to explore bullying prevention within a school board where there has been a systematic implementation of a program from an external agent. Thus, a case study provides an optimal methodology to explore the phenomenon within the organization. Within the methodological framework of a case study, multiple data collection methods can be utilized to gain a more complete perspective on the phenomenon-in-context (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 1981).

Specifically, an elaborative iterative mixed method approach will be used (Caracelli & Greene, 1997). A survey will be used to inform the qualitative portion of the study. The study will be iterative as multiple focus groups will be used, which will then further inform more directed in depth interviews (Caracelli & Greene, 1997; Patton, Hong, Patel, & Kral, 2015). The proposed study will be an open research project (see [digitallyliterate.net](http://digitallyliterate.net) as an example). Specifically, throughout the research process, the researcher will engage in reflective practice using blogs on a dedicated research website. The researcher will share preliminary findings and reveal and discuss the emergent aspect of the research process along the way. This will provide the participants and the larger community the opportunity to engage with the research and provide feedback as the analyses develop. Thus, open research provides the opportunity for a more collaborative research project (Nosek et al., 2015). Additionally, this will provide school boards with an opportunity to engage in organizational learning and actively participate in the research process.

Firstly, a quantitative survey will be used to explore teachers' and administrators' perceptions of school climate and the prevention programs and strategies that are being used within their classroom/school. This data will predominantly be used descriptively, and will facilitate the formation of focus group questions, and interview questions.

Focus group questions will be formulated around teacher and administrator's experiences with program implementation, observed effects of the program at all levels of the school community. Four focus groups will be held with 5–10 participants each. Two of the focus groups will consist of teachers, while the other two will be held for administrators.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Freeman, 1998) will be used to explore themes and relationships that may emerge from the data (i.e., focus group transcripts, interview transcripts, online engagement from participants). Qualitative data will be analyzed using constant comparison, whereby process codes, themes and interviews will be compared and contrasted throughout the analysis. This in turn will generate new questions for the subsequent focus groups or interviews, allowing for elaboration and additional perspectives to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Freeman, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Finally, eight in-depth interviews (four with teachers, and four with administrators) will be conducted. Interviews will allow for a more complete understanding of teachers' and administrators experiences with bullying prevention, systems change since implementation, and experiences with the open research process.

## **Contribution to the Field of Education**

The goal of social systems theory is to develop a thorough understanding of the social organizational structures and experiences that contribute to a phenomenon. In the proposed

study, I seek to understand the state of bullying prevention within a school system where a systematic implementation of a bullying prevention program has taken place. The findings may contribute to a better understanding of bullying prevention program efficacy and provide practitioners and researchers with new factors to consider when implementing bullying prevention programs.