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# Proactive measures in combating bullying in schools: examining the effectiveness of the Bucket Fillers program in character building education

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# PROACTIVE MEASURES IN COMBATING BULLYING IN SCHOOLS: EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BUCKET FILLERS PROGRAM IN CHARACTER BUILDING EDUCATION

by
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A Thesis

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Thesis Chair: Roberta Dihoff, PhD.

**Dedications**

    I would like to dedicate my work to my family.  This is dedicated to my parents, Alfred and Zhanna, who are my biggest cheerleaders in life.  I dedicate this to my children, Leonidas, Alek and Hannah for their patience and beautiful spirits and to my husband, George, whose support in all areas of my life allowed me to accomplish my goals.

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# Abstract

Karina Katsikis
PROACTIVE MEASURES IN COMBATING BULLYING IN SCHOOLS:
EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BUCKET FILLERS PROGRAM IN
CHARACTER BUILDING EDUCATION
2013
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Master of Arts in School Psychology

Bullying continues to plague our schools. Some schools are implementing proactive solutions in the form of character building education to address bullying. The purpose of this research was to examine the character education program, Bucket Fillers, and its effectiveness on reducing bullying in one public elementary school by examining questionnaires containing homeroom teachers' evaluations. Data of behavioral incident reports from prior to the program's initiation and after were also collected and compared. The majority of teachers noticed more spontaneous positive interactions and less negative interactions between students after the establishment of the program. There was no significant correlation found between how teachers felt about the program and how often it was implemented or between how often the program was administered and changes witnessed in students. Likewise, there was no statistically significant difference between observations and teachers grade level. Sample size was small since the study focused on one elementary school's implementation of the program. A larger subject pool may have yielded statistically significant results. Discipline reports declined even with the new HIB laws. The findings of this research show the potential value of the Bucket Fillers program in character education.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

**Focus of the Study**

Awareness has grown in the past couple of years on the escalating problem of bullying. It has recently become the hot topic in schools. This is partially due to a few highly publicized cases in the media where the bullied victims have taken their own lives out of desperation. School policy has shifted and a zero tolerance for bullying approach is now employed (Chamberlain, 2003). School staff and administrators are expected to mediate and not turn away in indifference (Sassu, Elinoff, Bray & Kehle, 2004). What was considered an unfortunate "rite of passage" (Chamberlain, 2003) for many children is no longer tolerated. Instead, harsher consequences and detailed incident reports have become the expectation (New Jersey Department of Education [NJDE], 2011).

Patience for bullies is running out and researchers and educators are trying to find new solutions and preventative methods (Crawford, 2002). Though schools implement various behavior modification techniques, the techniques that are punitive do not have long lasting effects and may contribute to antisocial behavior (Good, 2011; Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010). Many of these programs are only activated in response to a problem behavior instead of being preventative (Good, 2011). Some schools have turned to positive psychology and have become proactive in changing the dynamic of how children relate with one another and create opportunities for students to have positive interactions that are recognized and rewarded (Bear, 2011).

**Purpose of the Study**

This research investigated the effectiveness of a character education program in one elementary school through teachers' evaluations and comparing data of discipline incidents prior to the program's execution and after. Since teachers' assessments of the program were studied, treatment integrity was also examined.

**Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1: Teachers report more spontaneous positive interactions and less negative interactions between the students after the establishment of the Bucket Fillers program.

Hypothesis 2: Teachers, who are more engaged in the program, as measured by the amount of time devoted to implementation of materials and to the program, are more likely to perceive positive change. In other words, the teachers that are more emotionally invested and believe in the program will administrate it more often and in a variety of ways. The fidelity of the program depends on its exposure and needs to be studied.

Hypothesis 3: Girls typically embrace the program more than boys based on the nurturing differences in these two groups.

Hypothesis 4: No significant difference between the kindergarten through 2nd grade teachers' and the 3rd to 5th grade teachers' responses is expected because of adjustment in the program to account for age.

Hypothesis 5: Behavioral incidents will decline after implementation of the program.

**Definitions**

1.  Bibliotherapy- the use of reading material that is selected to help the
    individual heal, change, grow and learn to handle conflicts (Heath, Moulton,
    Dyches, Prater & Brown, 2011)

2.  Character education- an educational approach aimed at teaching children to
    become compassionate, successful, productive and responsible citizens
    (Character Education Partnership, n.d.-b)

3.  Common language- frequently repeated words in which the meaning is
    understood by all participants, chosen to express a theme and unites an
    institute

4.  Harassment Intimidation and Bullying (HIB)- According to the New Jersey
    Department of Education HIB is defined as:

    any gesture, any written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic
    communication, whether it be a single incident or series of incidents*,
    that:

    - is reasonably perceived as being motivated by any actual or
      perceived characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry,
      national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and
      expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or by any
      other distinguishing characteristic,

    - takes place on school property, at any school-sponsored function,
      or off school grounds as provided for in section 16 of P.L. 2010, c
      122,

- substantially disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students, and that:

- A reasonable person should know, under the circumstances, will have the effect of physically or emotionally harming a student or damaging the student's property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm to his person or damage to his property;

- Has the effect of insulting or demeaning any student or group of students; or

- Creates a hostile educational environment for the student by interfering with a student's education or by severely or pervasively causing physical or emotional harm to the student. (NJDE, 2011).

**Limitations**

The first limitation of this study is the size of the subject pool since the study focuses on one school's implementation of the program. Furthermore, the study is largely based on the opinions of teachers which some researchers have argued tend to show larger effect sizes than student reports (Osher, et al., 2010). Another limitation to this study is the discipline reports are only based on two years of data and changes cannot be directly linked to program.

Additionally, the HIB laws were newly enforced during the time that the Bucket Fillers program was introduced to the school and the data on behavioral incident reports may not clearly represent any positive changes because the rates of bullying incidents may have risen after new rules have been imposed on school faculty. The pressure has

been placed on schools to report all instances of conflicts between students in which potential HIB infractions have occurred. Staff discretion has become limited and no longer taken into account concerning which situations should be reported. It becomes questionable if rates are a true representation of the climate of a school. If prior to the administrative changes, true cases of bullying were under reported and after the changes hypersensitivity and fear of being reprimanded caused over reporting of incidents previously seen as mild, a false over exaggerated representation of the true state of behavioral problems in the schools will emerge. Researchers in the past have found referrals to be a valid measure, but changes to referral practices may lead to false conclusions and therefore should be used in conjunction with other information (Osher, et al., 2010). More accurate data will be available in future years when reports of bullying will level out and become a more honest representation.

**Summary**

The focus of this study will be placed on the teachers' evaluations of the program. In a school that has utilized the Bucket Fillers program for the past year and a half, would teachers evaluate the school's climate as more positive since it has been implemented? This research will investigate the administration and impact of this program on one school through the teachers' perspective. In this sensitive time of determining how to combat bullying, some schools have taken a proactive approach and choose to concentrate on building mutual respect and empathy instead of only dealing with the consequences of a lack thereof. It is important to study which methods work in order to spread more productive initiatives in the schools.

**Chapter 2**
**Literature Review**

**Addressing Bullying**

In New Jersey, The Department of Education has in place the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (P.L.2010, c.122) to address matters of bullying (New Jersey Department of Education, 2012). Implementing a strict policy to combat Harassment, Intimidation & Bullying (HIB) has become a requirement for all school districts in New Jersey. In the annual report on violence statistics from the same district as the school in this research, it showed the effects of the newly reported HIB occurrences on the overall total count of district incidents. According to the New Jersey Department of Education's website, in the 2011/2012 school year there were 236 incidents of violence, vandalism and substance abuse reported in this school district (New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.-a). When compared with the 2010/2011 year of 116 incidents (New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.-b), it appears there was a substantial increase in behavioral problems for the district but 144 of the 236 incidents were newly enforced HIB reports. Without them, the number of incidents drops to 92, which is a decrease from the previous year. Approximately half of the incidents under the violence, vandalism and substance abuse category were HIB in the state of New Jersey, even though the majority of cases were verbal and not physical confrontations (Mooney, 2012). Stricter laws to combat bullying have changed the perception and increased the numbers of behavioral incidents in school districts in New Jersey.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Division of Violence Prevention reported that in one study done in 2011, 20% of high school students claimed to have been bullied at school in that

past year.  Another 16% claimed to have been bullied electronically (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2012).  In a 2009 study, The United States Department of Justice and Education reported that 32% percent of 12 through 18 year old students had been bullied that previous year (NJDE, 2011).  Both sites report, a quarter of all responding public schools admitted that bullying was transpiring on a weekly and daily basis (CDC, 2012; Of NJDE, 2011).

Technology is todays bully's new weapon (Li, 2006).  Victims of bullying no longer find a safe haven in their homes because the bully now could reach them through the internet.  Bullies can reach a larger group of students to join them in the tormenting. In one survey study on internet harassment, researchers found that reports of online harassment had increased from 6% in 2000 to 9% in 2005 and then to 11% in 2010. Though the study did not find significant differences between ages or races and ethnicity, it did find significant differences in gender.  There was a 50% increase of online harassment for girls, which went up "from 10% in 2005 to 15% in 2010" (Jones, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2012).  The law on HIB states that school districts' policies on HIB must contain guidelines for procedures for HIB incidents that occur not only in school but those that occur outside the school (NJDE, 2011).  As witnessed over and over on the news, cyber bullying is a problem that has led some children to take their own lives (Brubaker, 2012).  The publicity of nationwide cases where victims of bullying, in and out of school, have resorted to suicide made the public and school officials aware that dealing with bullying on school grounds is no longer enough.

Suicide that is the result of bullying is sometimes referred to as "bullycide", a term coined by Marr and Field (2001) after their book, "*Bullycide: Death at Playtime*".

According to the Center for Disease Control, suicide is the third leading cause of death for those between the ages of 10 to 24. One of the suicide risk factors listed on the CDC's internet site is a "stressful life event or loss" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). In Idsoe, Dyregrov & Idsoe (2012) study, they looked at the association between exposure to bullying and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms and found that more than one third of the children in the study that had reported being bullied had PTSD symptoms in the clinical range and girls' scores were twice as high as boys.

**School Climate**

Awareness on which environments allow bullying behavior to thrive is needed. Rao, Wright & Stark claim that bullying is a symptom of dysfunctional interrelationships within schools (1995). Blaming the victim gives students the perception that they can turn away or even join in on the torment (Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). One study of 176 teenagers' views on bullying found that the students felt that the reasoning behind incidents of bullying were characteristic and not a condition of the school climate, peer groups, nature or society. 42% of the students believed that the victims had certain attributes that provoked the bullies; deviant behavior was the most common reason, 37% of the total response. Only 7% view the school as the source of the problem (Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). Students may not always be able to see the larger picture and may blame the victim which in turn allows the bullying to continue unchallenged. Though teaching empathy skills may not discourage bullying it may be essential to motivating student bystanders to defend victims (Caravita, Blasio & Salmivalli, 2009; Heath, Moulton, Dyches, Prater & Brown, 2011).

Overall hostile environments may cause aggressive unfriendly school climates that are difficult for many students. In a case study in England, researchers held semi-structured interviews with a random sampling of students and faculty to uncover the overall climate of their school, six months prior to and after a holistic behavior program was set in place. The initiative was implemented throughout the school and centered on developing skills needed in decision making, problem solving and conflict resolution. The school established a common language for students to express themselves when experiencing a conflict and support resources within the school to help them verbalize their thoughts. Though they acknowledge that their results are preliminary in the overall study of effects of character behavior initiatives in schools, their study yielded positive outcomes. Disruptive incidents and office referrals declined during observations, content delivery during a lesson and on task behavior increased while need for behavior management and off task behavior decreased. An observation one student made after the program was implemented was "It is a lot easier to make friends now. . . . I think because…..there's a lot less bullying" (White &Warfa, 2011, p. 56).

**Time for Prevention**

When should preventive measures be taken? According to Milsom and Gallo (2006), bullying is most evident in middle school and intervention is essential at this stage. Even though $5^{th}$ to $8^{th}$ grade students makeup one third of all enrolment, more than half of the HIB incidents in New Jersey, from the 2011-2012 school year, originated from this age group (John Mooney, 2012). Starting character education in elementary school according to Howard, Berkowitz & Schaeffer (2004) may have beneficial effects reaching past elementary school. They discuss researchers, Battistich, Schaps, and

Wilson's findings that the impact of character education taught in elementary school continued onto middle school. Children involved in the Child Development Project, a character education program in elementary school, later in middle school, and no longer in the program had lasting effects such as "higher grade point averages and academic achievement scores (both statistically significant) than their peers who had not participated in the Child Development Project. These students also liked school, had greater respect for teachers, and had higher educational aspirations than their peers" (p. 205). In one longitudinal study of 6437 adolescents, it was found that those that were bullied between the ages of 8 to 10 had double the risk of psychotic symptoms (Stephenson, 2009). Even though it cannot be assumed that starting early would address all bullying incidents and their effects, there is an argument for early prevention.

**Evaluating Approaches**

Researchers, Lewis, Robinson III, & Hays state that based on different demographics and diversity, it is essential that every school adopt a program to fit its unique structure and no one program fits every school's needs (2011). One study evaluated an emotional well-being program known as the Zippy's Friends program, in two labeled economically disadvantaged elementary schools in Ireland. Though teachers in both schools implemented over 93% of the program and understood promoting mental health programs was important, the teachers from the small, rural, less diverse school rated the program more positively than the large, more diverse urban school. The researchers are confident that understanding the dynamics of the community that surrounds a school is vital to understanding how to implement these programs (Clarke,

O'Sullivan M. & Barry, 2010) and involving families is a significant asset to behavioral programs (Clarke & et. al., 2010; Lewis & et al., 2011; Osher & et al., 2010).

There are different approaches that schools can adopt to deal with discipline issues and under them a multitude of programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Osher & et al. addressed three popular approaches and their benefits and limitations. The first approach they evaluated was Ecological Approaches to classroom management, which aims to indirectly improve school climate by concentrating on improving classroom activities and lesson plans through creating an engaging and dynamic learning environment. The concentration is on educating teachers and not on student activity. Osher & et al. found that studies have shown that well managed classrooms promote academic achievement but there is a lack of studies that evaluate its role in discipline and the assumption that students come in ready to learn is not the case in schools, where the climate is negative and disordered (Osher & et al., 2010).

The second approach that Osher & et al. (2010) examined was Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Supports (SWPBS) which uses a tier system and course of actions that are grounded in data retrieved. Its goal is to manage student behavior and improve school climate by concentrating on prevention of behavioral problems through the use of behavioral techniques such as positive reinforcement and punishment (Osher & et al., 2010). Around 10,000 schools in the United States are implementing SWPBS (Bear, 2011). Studies have shown that SWPBS can reduce problem behavior and aggression in students (Osher & et al., 2010). Researchers acknowledge limitations to SWPBS, because there is a strong emphasis on external control as well as an external reward system. Compliance is taught, but students lack the guidance to develop internal self-

discipline (Bear, 2011; Osher & et al., 2010).  Researchers have found extrinsic rewards

to be limiting and control bad behavior instead of instilling the desire for behaving and

doing well (Bear, 2011; White & Warfa, 2011). They argue that many school based

behavioral programs fail because punishing bad behavior and rewarding good does not

lead to consistent change. In the end the external world would dictate the actions and

reactions of the individual.  The individual never develops the internal reasoning or

gratification for behaving well, since all decisions would be based on whether he or she

will be punished or rewarded (Bear, 2011; White, & Warfa, 2011).  Bear (2011), claims

that he as well as other researchers believe the instilling of these selfish narcissistic

desires are in line with a bullying mentality instead of opposed.  Hoffmann, Huff,

Patterson, & Nietfeld (2009) found that all of the teachers in their study used rewards for

behavior control and to enhance academic performance in general whether it is with

token systems, special privileges, praise or etc.  Hoffmann, Huff, Patterson, & Nietfeld

(2009), found conflicting results from researchers on whether external rewards lessen

intrinsic motivation.  Achieving compliance without instilling internal reasoning within

the students disempowers them and according to Giroux & McLaren (1986):

> Educators must replace pedagogical practices which emphasize disciplinary
> control and one-sided character formation with practices that are based on an
> emancipatory authority, ones which enable students to engage in critical analysis
> and to make choices regarding what interests and knowledge claims are most
> desirable and morally appropriate (p. 225).

Schools may need to limit rewards and concentrate more on students learning

responsibility and practicing authentic forms of positively relating with one another

(Osher & et al., 2010).  Researchers believe along with SWPBS other types of programs

could be implemented that encourage internal growth (Good, 2011; Osher & et al., 2010; Northeast Foundation for Children Inc., 2009).

The third approach used in schools to improve discipline that Osher & et al. critiqued was Social Emotional Learning (SEL).  Most SEL programs have curriculum lessons that are conveyed through either a "packaged program or integrated throughout the existing curriculum" (Osher & et al., 2010, p.51).  SEL programs have helped reduce disruptive behavior and aggression as well as bullying.  The researchers claim that these student centered programs have more of an emphasis on fostering students' internal assets by helping them with problem solving, processing information and developing them socially, emotionally and morally (Osher & et al., 2010).   Under the umbrella of the SEL approach stands character education.

**Discussion of Character Education Programs**

There are numerous types of programs that fall under the umbrella of character education that defining it becomes difficult.  For the sake of defining it, Berkowitz & Bier (2005) chose as one of their options, Character Education Partnership's definition:

> Character education is a national movement creating schools that foster ethical, responsible and, caring young people by modeling and teaching good character through emphasis on universal values that we all share.  It is the intentional, proactive effort by schools, districts, and states to instill in their students important core, ethical values such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others (p. 2).

As of now, eighteen states mandate character education, eighteen encourage it, seven support it and eight do not specifically address character education in their legislation (Character Education Partnership, n.d.-a).  Evaluating the effectiveness of character programs has proved challenging because of the lack of definite applications

and it is more of a general idea than a concrete program (Peterson & Skiba, 2001).

According to Lewis & et al., character education lacks a well-defined definition and

therefore has an array of programs implemented by schools that only fit the guidelines

loosely as character education and in addition to this, inappropriate benchmarks are used

in determining the effectiveness of character education programs. They also argue that

attendance and academic scores are not proper indicators of whether or not programs are

effective, though may improve as a result of it (2011). What Works Clearinghouse does

list grades, attendance and graduation as applicable results (U.S. Department of

Education, n.d.). Character Education Partnership considers academics a good arena to

study character. They state that along with moral character there is also performance

character and argue that when students value themselves and are taught valuable skills

such as delayed gratification they perform better in school (Character Education

Partnership, 2008). The idea of character values are fluid and various programs target

different aspects (Lewis & et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), but since

human nature does not evolve in a bubble, a positive ripple effect could transpire from

one domain to another in students' lives. This is not a negative occurrence but Lewis & et

al. (2011) are correct that based on the particular program implemented researchers must

be careful on what effect they choose to study in order to attain accurate results of its

value (2011). Character education should have as its goal comprehensive outcomes that

encompass behavior and cognitive understanding in all capacities of the student life (U.S.

Department of Education, n.d.).

Schools in general appear to benefit from character education according to Parker,

Nelson & Burns. They compared 12 elementary schools, with and without character

education, and found that variables that are considered problematic on behavior such as large class sizes and poverty measured by percentage of children receiving free/reduced lunch had a weaker relationship with rates of disruptions in schools that practice character education. Though the researchers acknowledge the limitation of not having baseline data they imply that character education may offset the challenges that face many schools (2010). Berkowitz & et al. (2005) found in reviewing research on various character education programs that have been studied that slightly more than half the time there was an improvement in the programs' targeted variable and they concluded that if these programs are designed and implemented well they are in fact, effective.

According to researchers, a successful program needs to be comprehensive and implemented throughout the school and become part of the overall standard and not a temporary fix to behavioral issues and it also needs to be implemented throughout the day and not as a detached lesson plan (Lewis & et al., 2011; Character Education Partnership, n.d.-b). As Cooley referenced Paige (2003), a former United States Secretary of Education, "Character education cannot be covered in ten minutes a day. It must be at the heart of the entire education program. . . Character can't be taught as a course, it is a way of living" (Cooley, 2008, p. 188). One of the people who drafted the new bullying law, Stuart Green, chairman of the New Jersey Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention, believes that assemblies and preaching to students is not enough. Instead, he claims, the answer is to involve all the students and have full participation throughout the school year (D'Amico, 2011). The character development program, Bucket Fillers (n.d.), which is the basis of this thesis, is designed to actively involve the student body throughout the school day.

It also has a common language and relies on bibliotherapy. In Berkowitz and

Bier's (2004) review of character education programs that have been researched, they

found that there was a lack of research on programs that centered on character words and

literature. Even though there are few studies that examine the effectiveness of

bibliotherapy on bullying issues, it has shown promise in some studies in decreasing

aggression (Heath & et al., 2011) and Vitz (1990) found it to be a necessary element for

successful character education. Bibliotherapy may be useful in reducing bullying, not at

the level of victim and bully but instead by bringing an overall focus on building a

positive unified school climate (Heath & et al., 2011). When screening books to use in

the classroom, they should have a clear positive core message that is age appropriate.

Throughout the school year teachers should hold discussions, facilitate activities and use

a common language centered on the book to promote the core concepts of "friendship,

kindness and conflict resolution" (Heath & et al., 2011, p. 14).

**Introduction to Bucket Fillers Program**

The character development program, Bucket Fillers (n.d.) is being used by various

schools and businesses to promote a positive congenial environment. The idea was

originated in the 1960's by Dr. Donald O. Clifton who "in 2002 the American

Psychological Association presented Clifton with its Presidential Commendation for

lifetime contributions as 'the father of strengths-based psychology and the grandfather of

positive psychology'" (Bucket Fillers, n.d., FAQ section, para. 8). He wrote *Dipper and

Bucket* and co-authored *How Full is Your Bucket?* with his grandson, Tom Rath. The

latter book reached #1 on the New York Times bestseller list (Bucket Fillers, n.d.). Later,

Tom Rath also co-wrote with Mary Reckmeyer a children's version, *How Full is Your*

*Bucket? for Kids* (Rath & Reckmeyer, 2009).  Others along the way have become

inspired and helped spread the fundamental ideas of bucket fillers.  In the 1990's, Carol

McCloud, a childhood educator, became motivated by the concept and in 2005 decided to

adapt the concept to kids and wrote books geared to help children understand the

philosophies of bucket filling.  Her books include: *Have You Filled a Bucket Today?,* for

ages 4 to 10,  *Fill a Bucket,* for ages birth to 7, *Growing Up with a Bucket Full of

Happiness: Three Rules for a Happier Life,* for ages 9-14 and *Will You Fill My Bucket?

Daily Acts of Love Around the World,* for ages birth to 9 (Bucket Fillers, n.d.).  From all

of this, a character program evolved from books to other materials and various activities

to seminars and trainings (Bucket Fillers, n.d.).

The concept behind the Bucket Filler character development program is that each

one of us has an invisible bucket and that "bucket represents your mental and emotional

self." (Bucket fillers, n.d., FAQ section, para. 1).   When others fill your bucket by being

kind, loving, or respectful it allows you to then fill other people's buckets in a "ripple

effect".  If we are mean to one another we are considered "bucket dippers" and deplete

that emotional bucket belonging to another.  One of the main activities consists of each

child having a little bucket in the classroom to symbolize his or her "emotional self".

When one child does something nice for another child, both of their buckets are filled.

For younger children, a pom-pom is placed inside the bucket, but for older children, a

little note expressing the deed and gratitude is deposited into the bucket (Bucket fillers,

n.d.).  A common language is used throughout the school.  Everyone understands what it

means to be a "bucket filler" or a "bucket dipper".  Also, in order for change to be

genuine, the Bucket Fillers program is designed to have children focus on intrinsic motivation instead of relying on extrinsic rewards.

Bullying is contagious, (Bucket fillers, n.d.) and some of those who are bullied then become bullies themselves (Milsom & Gallo, 2006). The opposite might be true as well, empathy may also be spread if children are guided and involved in various activities that promote opportunities to practice kindness. If how we are treated impacts how we treat others, then a program that encourages children to be nice to one another may have the same contagious effect (Bedley, 2004).

**Teachers' Roles**

Howard & et al. are certain that teachers are engrossed in implementation of character education but more focus needs to be placed on evaluation of these programs. They argue that research; especially longitudinal studies are needed (2004). Some researchers claim that even though there are various prevention and intervention programs there is little data gathered on their effectiveness (Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Brank, Hoetger & Hazen, 2012; Bear, 2011) Therefore it is important to gather information on whether a program is effective. Berkawitz & Bier (2004) stress that character education could be effective if certain conditions are met: quality teacher training, high student exposure, complete school wide and community inclusivity, a principal with strong leadership skills that "buy into it" (p. 77) and providing a sense of belonging.

Teachers are expected to impart moral values on students and teacher training is crucial to the success of bullying prevention programs (Milsom & Gallo, 2006), but teacher educators disagree on which curriculum and methods to use when training

teachers (Milson & Mehlig, 2002).  Character education is not a priority for some schools

(Milson & Mehlig, 2002) and support for teachers is lacking (Clarke & et. al., 2010).

Berkowitz & Bier (2004) insist that fidelity and application are essential and agree that

teachers are not always fully or adequately trained.   In one study concerning bullying,

Sherer & Nickerson found that school psychologists felt that in their schools, staff

education and training needed to be improved (Brank, et al., 2012).

Additionally, teachers need to become empowered because they play a large part

on determining how well a character education program is implemented (Giroux &

McLaren, 1986).   One study found that, 80.4% of teachers in their questionnaire

answered strongly agree or agree to the statement: "When a student becomes more

compassionate, it is usually because teachers have created caring classroom

environments" (Milson & Mehlig, 2002, Table 3, question 18).  Though many teachers

may feel responsible for instilling character, they need to believe in what they are

teaching.   Lewis & et al. (2011), claim that researchers have found that teachers' input

on which character programs should be implemented in their schools is vital for its

success because if they do not "buy in" to it and consider it a nuisance on an already busy

curriculum the initiative will not be nurtured and therefore will fail (p. 229).  It is a

challenge to find the interest and time for incorporating character education when so

much pressure is placed on teachers to teach the basics and raise test scores, but when

teachers believe in the benefits of "respect, honesty, and integrity" they will make the

time (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).  As one teacher indicated, "I cannot tell you who taught

me to answer inferential questions; however, I can name every teacher who made me

believe in myself and taught me how to be a better person!" (Brannon, 2008, Conclusion section, para.2).

Since teachers have a large role in administering programs and their views hold an impact on whether a program is successful, this study will gain perspective, through the teachers at one suburban elementary school in New Jersey, on the effectiveness of the specified character building program. Data comparing discipline reports between the school year prior and the first year during the program will be compared but results may be affected by the stronger anti-bullying laws that came into effect at the same time as the start of the Bucket Filler program

## Chapter 3

## Methods

**Participants**

In the first part of the study, questionnaires were distributed to the teachers of one suburban public elementary school located in New Jersey. Only teachers who taught there both in 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years were included in the study. Both homeroom teachers as well as special area teachers (physical education, art, music, etc.) were given a questionnaire but were to be evaluated separately. There were 26 female homeroom teachers. One teacher was excluded because she was recently hired and therefore did not qualify to do the study. Out of the 25 homeroom teachers that were given a questionnaire 18 had completed it, a return rate of 72%. From the 15 special area teachers that were given a questionnaire only two had participated, a return rate of only 13.33%. For this reason, the data for the special area teachers was not evaluated. Originally, these results were to be analyzed separately because homeroom teachers were expected to have more time to implement the various aspects of the program than special area teachers.

The second part of the study looked at possible school climate changes from the same school by comparing data of student behavioral incident reports from the school years, 2010-2011 and 2011-2012. The demographics and makeup of the school student body were as follows: 48% female and 52% male, 53.2% white, 20% Hispanic, 11.1% black, 15.2% Asian, and 0.4% other. A total of 28% of the student body qualified for free

or reduced lunch and 23% of the students indicated English was not their home language. The teacher/student ratio ranged from 1:15 to 1:26 depending on the grade level.

**Materials**

There were two separate parts to the study. The first part consisted of a questionnaire composed and distributed by the researcher (see Appendix). The second part consisted of gathering numerical data of behavioral incident reports from the school years, 2010-2011 and 2011-2012. The SPSS computer program was used to run data.

**Design**

Descriptive data analysis was used to gather information regarding the percentage of teachers that reported they noticed more spontaneous positive interactions and less negative interactions between the students, after the establishment of the Bucket Fillers program. The percentage rates on how effective they found the program in reducing bullying were also calculated. To address the fidelity of the program's administration, teachers' enthusiasm for the program was examined through the amount of time spent on administering it and the degree of behavior changes witnessed. Furthermore, 3rd to 5th grade teachers' responses were compared to K to 2nd grade teachers' replies to answer the question: Do younger grades benefit more from the program? Also teachers' observations of differences between male and female students were examined. The method of analysis used was cross-tabulation to analyze the relationship between these variables. From the second part of the study, records consisting of numerical data on behavioral incident reports, collected from the guidance office, were reviewed to see if discipline reports

declined.  These behavioral incident reports were collected the year prior to implementation and the year of initiation.

**Procedures**

Many questions on the survey were geared towards discovering the teachers' opinions about the program.  Questions pertaining to the time teachers spent on administering the materials and activities were also examined.  Furthermore, there were questions that gathered the teachers' sentiments on the overall effectiveness of the program.  There were questions on the survey about interactions between students in order to gain perspective on whether this program has altered the school's climate for the better.  There were also questions pertaining to gender to gauge if there were differences in behavior responses from exposure to the program between girls and boys.  Furthermore, there was a question that divided teachers by grade level in order to examine any differences between the primary grades and intermediate grades.

The following procedures were followed.  Forty questionnaires were placed in individual and shared office bins belonging to the teachers.  In order to receive back a higher turnout of completed questionnaires, an incentive was offered.  A raffle ticket for a chance to win one $50 gift card to a restaurant was placed along with the questionnaire in each of the teacher's individual office bin.  Two collection boxes were setup in the school to collect both the raffles in one and the questionnaires in the other.  A raffle was held and the winner was presented with a gift card.  This procedure was repeated once more for a smaller prize a week later to encourage more responses.  Around the same time,

behavioral incidents from the two school years 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 were gathered

and compared.

## Chapter 4

## Results

The first hypothesis stated that teachers would report more spontaneous positive interactions and less negative interactions between the students after the establishment of the Bucket Fillers program. 89% of teachers responded that they did notice more spontaneous positive interactions between students and 67% of the teachers responded that they had noticed less negative interactions between the students since the implementation of the Bucket Fillers program.
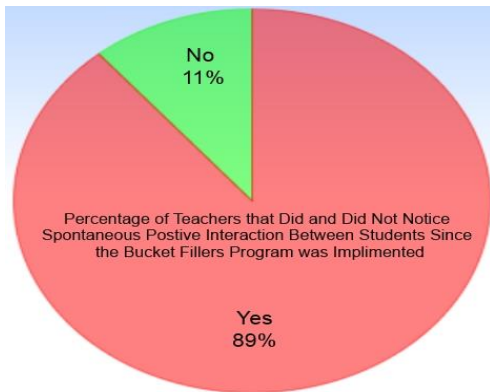


Figure 1: Teachers' Observations of More Spontaneous Positive Interactions
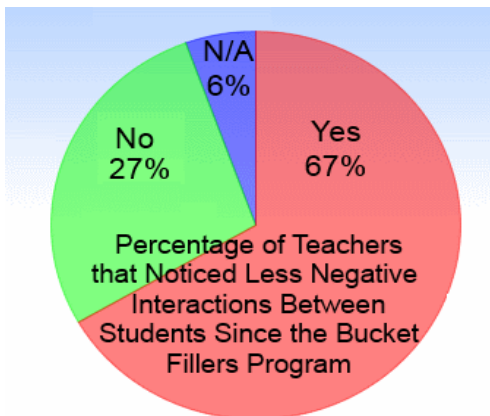


Figure 2: Teachers' Observations of Less Negative Interactions

When asked if this program, in their opinion, helped to minimize the amounts of conflict incidents in light of the more stringent requirements in reporting bullying, 72.22% responded yes and 27.77% responded no. Out of the teachers responding, 66.66% found the program beneficial, 33.33% found it neutral and 0% felt it was a waste of time. When asked how effective they found the program in reducing instances of bullying: 0% found it extremely effective, 28% found it considerably effective, 44% found it somewhat effective, 17% found it not really effective, 0% found it not at all effective and 11% were not sure.



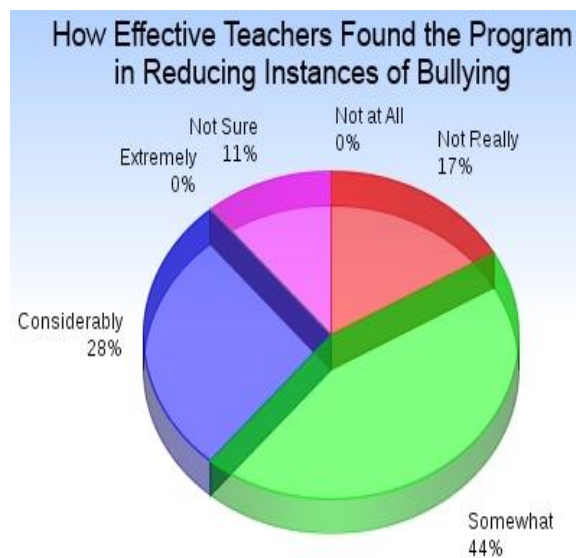Figure 3: How Effective Teachers Found the Program in Reducing Bullying

The second hypothesis indicated that teachers, who are more engaged in the program, as measured by the amount of time devoted to implementation of materials and to the program, would perceive positive changes and the teachers that believe in the program will administrate it more often. There was no significant correlation found

between how teachers felt about the program and how often it was implemented.  There was no significant correlation found between how often the program was administered and changes witnessed in students.

According to the teachers' responses, there were no significant statistical differences found for the third and fourth hypotheses.  The third hypothesis was that girls would embrace the program more than boys.  66.66% of teachers did not see any gender difference in response to the program, 27.77% responded that girls were more receptive and had more positive changes and 5.55 % thought boys were more receptive and had more positive changes.  As expected, for the fourth hypothesis, there were no significant statistical differences between any of the responses and teachers' grade level.

Teacher and student knowledge and understanding of the program was evaluated. Moreover, teacher feedback in regards to other programs administed in the school and how they rated in relation to the Bucket Fillers program, was also explored.   When the teachers were asked if they felt confident in their knowledge of the program and how to administer it, 100% of the teachers answered, yes.  When asked if the students grasp the program's concept, 77.77% of the teachers responded, yes and 22.22% responded, sometimes.  When asked if other character building materials exist in their school that they feel may have a greater impact on students' interactions, 44.44% responded no, 0% responded yes, 16.66% did not respond and 38.88% responded, not better but in addition to it, helps.

As anticipated, for the fifth hypothesis, behavioral incidents dropped after the implementation of the program.  There were 194 behavior incident reports for the 2010-

2011 school year.  This was one year prior to the introduction of the Bucket Fillers

program.  In the 2011-2012 school year, there were 179 behavior incident reports.  This

was the first year of implementation of the program.   There was a decline of 7.73% in

incident reports.  Bus incidents were unavailable and not included in the report for either

school year.  HIB reporting started in 2011-2012.  This school investigated 3 possible

HIB reports but considered all 3 not to meet the criteria for HIB.  The final count for HIB
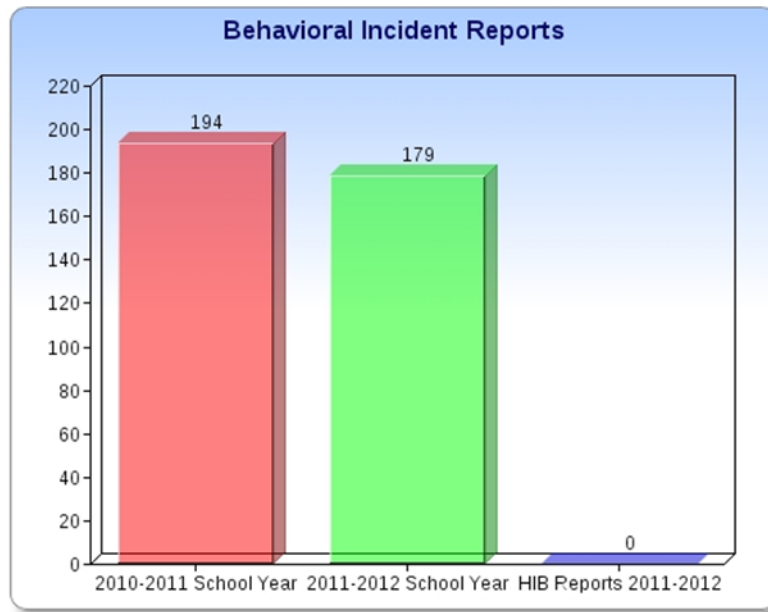
reports in 2011-2012 were 0.



Figure 4: Incident Reports from 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 School Year

## Chapter 5

## Discussion

**Explanations of Findings and Implications**

The large majority of teachers responded that since the program's initiation students have more spontaneous positive interactions and just as significant, more than half of them noticed a decline in negative interactions between students. The majority of the teachers in the study found the program beneficial which according to Lewis & et al. (2011) is vital to the success of the program. As one teacher responded, "I love the positive reinforcement it gives to the kids. It is tangible and easy to promote/run" (anonymous).

There was no statistical significant correlation found between teacher engagement in the program and perception of change. The reason for this may be due to the small sample size in which many of those key questions measuring this hypothesis were answered with great similarity. Likewise, there was little variety in teachers' responses to questions that gauged the relationship between teachers' emotional investment and their time spent on administering the program. Since the research literature concluded that a teacher's enthusiasm towards a character program will determine its success, a larger sample size may have yielded different results. Exposure is essential for a program to be effective and determining the effort placed towards its success is important. More questions regarding the amount of time invested in bucket filling activities and readings may have also helped tease out differences in application between teachers. As one teacher commented in the questionnaire:

I believe the success of bucket filling is contingent upon the number of times you reinforce/acknowledge bucket filling behavior. For example, once a month we have a bucket filling ceremony where I read all slips in buckets and pass them out. The students are especially proud of having their buckets emptied and read aloud (anonymous).

There was no statistically significant difference found neither between observations and teachers' grade level nor between boys' and girls' receptiveness and positive changes in response to the program. The former may indicate that the program adjustments made between grades K-2 to 3-5 helped all grade levels relate. The most obvious modification being the changeover from the pom-poms used by younger students to notes expressing the gratitude for a good deed that older students use and then place in small buckets in the classroom. Though, two teachers did mention that they felt this program is geared to the younger grades. One teacher responded that 4th and 5th grades need something less "cute" and one teacher wrote in respect to her 5th grade class "I do not use all of the same lessons (obviously). I come up with more mature scenarios to use" (anonymous). Once the concept is established teachers have room to be creative and adjust the program to bring about the intended results. As mentioned in the literature review, there are books geared toward older students, as well. They may not have been used in this school. Also, according to the responses, the majority of teachers felt that boys and girls equally benefited from the program.

All the teachers in the study felt confident in their knowledge of the program and their ability to administer it effectively, which is a positive indication since according to Berkowitz & Bier (2004) teacher training is at times inadequate and in order for a program to be successful teachers must be sufficiently trained so that they may impart key values to their students (Milsom & Gallo, 2006). A majority of teachers also felt

confident that their students grasped the program's concepts which is important because by understanding the emotional damage of "bucket dipping" the students could begin to apply the behaviors of "bucket filling" to circumstances where bullying is transpiring. One teacher responded in the questionnaire, "I think the concept of bucket filling is an excellent visual for students, especially our special needs students to see the process and how it works" (anonymous). This demonstrates the Bucket Fillers potential to have widespread student body engagement in the program.

The concept of the Bucket Fillers program has the flexibility to be generalized to other areas of a student's life. Family involvement has been found by many researchers to be vital to the success of a character education program. One teacher added in the comments section of the questionnaire "…I also know that some parents have initiated it in their homes as well which helps build a connection between home and school" (anonymous). This showcases the materialization of family involvement in the Bucket Fillers program at this school.

The challenge of finding the time to incorporate a character education program has been discussed in the literature review. One teacher echoed this sentiment in the questionnaire, "The Bucket Fillers is a good program. The major problem is finding the time to allow students to fill out slips and share" (anonymous). The key according to researchers is to have teachers find the program worthwhile enough to make the needed adjustments to their already cramped schedules.

A discrepancy in return rates between homeroom teachers, 72%, and special area teachers, 13.33%, may suggest a limitation in time and knowledge of the program by the

special area teachers. This may indicate that the program was not implemented throughout all school activities. As mentioned in the literature review, character education programs should be implemented throughout the school. If the special area teachers had in some form promoted the program as well, it would have shown a more widespread collective approach to character development but without a strong return rate this could not be studied.

The findings from examining the school's discipline reports were encouraging. The 7.73% decrease in behavioral incidents is a positive occurrence but conclusions to the reason for the decline cannot be directly linked without the availability of data from more years and controlling for other variables such as other programs that may also have been utilized by the teachers. Just fewer than 40% of teachers in this study responded that there were other character building materials used in the school that were helpful, but not better than the Bucket Fillers program. HIB results proved to be a surprise to the researcher. Since it was the first year HIB guidelines were enforced the researcher expected an over labeling of conflicts as HIB that would skew the number of discipline incidents, increasing the amount of reports. Not only did the school's discipline incidents decrease but having 0 HIB incident reports is encouraging. 72% of the teachers who responded in the questionnaire felt that this program either considerably or somewhat reduced instances of bullying. The school district that this elementary school is part of had reported 144 HIB incidents from that year (New Jersey Department of Education, 2012-a). The majority of the teachers in this study felt that in light of the more stringent requirements in reporting bullying, this program helped to minimize the amounts of conflicts.

**Limitations**

There were some internal and external limitations to the study. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher and its validity has not been tested. Other questionnaires with proven reliability may have been used. The study lacked baseline data both with the questionnaires as well as the discipline records collected. Initial questionnaires prior to the implementation of the program would have been beneficial for further research and more years of discipline reports may have revealed a prior pattern preceding the program. The sample size was small since the study focused on one elementary school's implementation of the program and could be the reason the study lacked any statistically significant results. Teachers' responses were the criteria used to judge the program's effectiveness and according to findings in Osher's & et al. (2010) literature review, some researchers argue these results may differ from students' perceptions.

**Future Directions**

A further study of this program that is gaining popularity is needed. This may include longitudinal studies to show any lasting effects of the program on children's social interactions. Interschool comparisons investigating the quantity of HIB reports between those that utilize the Bucket Fillers program and those that do not would be another interesting dynamic to study. Student's responses may be yet another avenue for researchers to gain insight from the actual population the program is intended to benefit.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this research show the potential value of the Bucket Fillers program in character education. The progressive changes teachers observed in their

students may have helped the school children relate to each other in a more respectful fashion and reduced the negative interactions that lead to bullying. In consideration that teachers are the ones that are most closely observing the students, they have the best opportunity to witness its effectiveness. Since researchers believe that a school's climate will either foster or prevent bullying, improving the interactions of the students would encourage a positive resolution through intervention. With all the psychological, emotional and physical damage bullying causes, the best solutions are the ones that are preventive in nature. Researchers acknowledge the value of SEL programs that promote internal growth of the individual but more research is needed on individual programs and their effects on character building.

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# Appendix A

## Questionnaire

Study on the Bucket Fillers Program

Please check off the most accurate and honest answer:

1. Are you a:

      Homeroom Teacher _____                    Special Area Teacher _____

2. If you are a homeroom teacher: Which grade level did you teach **last year (2011/2012 school year)**:

   Kindergarten to second grade _____                    3rd to 5th grade _____

3. Have you noticed more spontaneous positive interactions between students since the "Bucket Fillers" Program started?

            Yes _____                              No _____

4. Have you noticed less negative interactions between students since the "Bucket Fillers" Program started?

            Yes _____                              No _____

5. How often did you read the "Bucket Filler" books to your class **last school year (2011/2012)**?

   Never _____    Once_____    2 to 6 times _____    7 to 10 times _____    11 or < _____    N/A _____

6. How often did you allow your students to fill each other's buckets **last school year (2011/2012)**?

   Throughout the day _____        Once a day _____        A couple/few times a week _____

   Once a week _____        Once every two weeks _____        Once a month _____        Rarely _____

            Never _____                              N/A _____

7. How effective do you find the program in reducing instances of bullying?

   Extremely _____        Considerably _____        Somewhat _____        Not Really _____

            Not at All _____                              Not Sure _____

8.  Has there been more of an observable difference between the boys and the girl?

    Yes _____                                    No _____

9.  If you answered **Yes**, which group is more receptive and has had more positive changes since the "Bucket Fillers" Program has been initiated?

    Boys _____                                    Girls _____

10. With the more stringent requirements in reporting bullying, has this program, in your opinion, helped to minimize the amounts of conflict incidents?

    Yes _____                                    No _____

11. Do you find the Bucket Filler Program:

    Beneficial _____           Neutral _____           Waste of Time _____

12. Are there other character building materials in your school that you feel may have a greater impact on students' interactions?

    Yes _____           No _____           Not better but in addition to it helps _____

13. If you answered **Yes** or **Not better but In addition to it helps,** please list the name(s) of the program(s)

    1._____

    2._____

    3._____

14. Do you feel confident in your knowledge of the program and how to administer it?

    Yes _____                                    No _____

15. Do you feel that the students grasp the concept of the "Bucket Fillers" Program?

    Yes _____           Sometimes _____                    No _____

16. Please add any other Information you would like me to know and thank you for participating!

    _____