Researching Possible Causes of
Violent Behaviors in Byhalia Sixth Graders

Molly Goldwasser

University of Mississippi

EDLD 605
Identification of the Problem

The students in my sixth grade class at Byhalia Middle School have a propensity towards violent behaviors. My action research proposal examines how to reduce the levels of violence in my classroom. The proposal will analyze why the students in my sixth grade classes have a propensity towards violent behaviors.

Given the number of fights on school grounds during the current academic year, the resulting suspensions and consequentially decreased instructional time is cause for concern. During this era of heightened significance of standardized test scores, missed instructional time by the aggressors or constant fear of their peers can exacerbate to long-term negative consequences for both the students and their schools (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). Causes of this observed violence among my students may be linked to racial or socioeconomic factors, it might be related to the pervasive use of corporal punishment in the school (Hyman & Perone, 1998), or a combination of these and other factors. Parents, school district personnel and community members all have a vested interest in the results of this action research proposal that seeks to identify plausibly classroom-level interventions that aim to mitigate the violent outbursts of the students in my classroom.

Review of Research

In order for students to maximize their potential, feel safe at school, and excel both academically and socially, the school must foster a positive learning environment. Frequent bullying episodes and the presence of violent, aggressive peers can significantly detract from the positive learning environment. Given that educators are constantly seeking ways to maintain a classroom environment where students feel safe and learning is valued, it is vital to minimize the factors that detract from the ideal learning environment. One way to reach this goal is to reduce
classroom bullying and mitigate the aggressive, violent behaviors some students may exhibit. This essay reviews and summarizes the findings of seven studies on how to reduce bullying and violence among middle school children.

The purpose of D. Newman-Carlson’s research (2004) was to examine the effectiveness of a bully prevention program that school counselors could use as a reference to help modify teachers’ knowledge and use of bullying intervention skills. Her research also looks at teachers’ self-efficacy and students’ bullying behaviors within the middle school classroom, as measured by disciplinary referrals (2004). Newman-Carlson’s study participants attended training sessions about bullying prevention and worked as a part of a school-based support team. Findings indicate that the training session attendance and support team participation effectively increased teachers’ knowledge and use of bullying intervention skills when working with specific children. The intervention also reduced the discipline referrals related to bullying behaviors (Newman-Carlson, 2004).

J. Lawrence Aber, Joshua L. Brown, and Stephanie M. Jones’ research (2003) examined developmental trajectories towards violence over middle childhood, if and how these trajectories differed based on the demographics of the subgroups in the study, and how responsive the trajectories were to a more universal school-based preventative intervention. The researchers collected data over a two-year period on the social-emotional developmental behaviors that are known to forecast violence and aggression; the sample of students were in public elementary and middle schools in New York City. The research team used hierarchical linear modeling techniques to assess how well students responded to the teachers who taught conflict-resolution skills as a part of their curriculum (Aber, Brown & Jones, 2003). The results of the study indicate that different demographic subgroups did respond differently to the trajectories, that children whose teachers
taught a higher number of lessons in conflict resolution curriculum demonstrated more positive changes in their social-emotional development, and the students of these teachers also exhibited deflections from a path toward future violence and aggression (Aber, Brown & Jones, 2003).

K. J. Cirillo et al.’s research (1998) examined the effects of social-cognitive group interventions on violence avoidance beliefs among at-risk adolescents. Researchers randomly assigned high school students to experimental and control groups; the students in the experimental group attended two-hour weekly sessions of a social-cognitive intervention for ten weeks. Questionnaires were given to the students in both the experimental and control groups prior to, immediately following, and three months after the interventions. The results of the study indicate that there was no significant difference in between the students who participated in the intervention and those who did not. In both the experimental and control groups, students with a record of drug use and a pre-established propensity towards violence had a greater belief in using violence as a coping technique (Cirillo et al., 1998).

The research of S.J. Wilson, M. W. Lipsey, & J. H. Derzon (2003) examined the effectiveness of school-based programs in preventing and reducing aggressive behavior in students. Wilson, Lipsey & Derzon used a control group that did not receive treatment and an experimental group (2003); members of both groups took the same pre- and post-tests. The study found that the students in the control group exhibited little-to-no change in aggressive behavior while those in the experimental groups did show a decrease in such behaviors. The study also found that, as a result of the interventions, higher-risk youth showed greater reductions in aggressive behaviors, that the poorly-implemented interventions brought about fewer changes, and that various models of intervention programs could all illicit the desired results if implemented properly (Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003).
The research of J. K. Luiselli et al. (2005) examined the effects of whole-school positive behavior support on discipline problems and academic outcomes of urban elementary students. The intervention included technical assistance consultations with teachers that emphasized improving instructional methods (including increasing engagement in classroom activity and increased positive reinforcement), formulating expectations in behavior, teachers’ self-monitoring through data-driven evaluation. Researchers examined qualitative data (pre- and post-tests given to the participants) as well as quantitative data (number of referrals and test scores) (Luiselli et al., 2005). The results of the study indicated that the school-wide intervention was associated with a decrease in office referrals and school suspensions and with an increase in standardized test scores over several academic years (Luiselli et al., 2005).

J. A. Mytton et al. (2002) sought to quantify the effectiveness of school-based violence prevention programs for students who were identified as at risk for aggressive behaviors. The researchers used systematic reviews of electronic databases and assessed standardized, weighted mean effect sizes of control trials by meta-analysis. The researchers measured observed and reported aggressive and violent behaviors and subsequent school responses in elementary, middle and high schools (Mytton et al., 2002). Mytton et al. (2002) concluded that school-based violence prevention programs may produce reductions in aggressive and violent behaviors in students who already exhibit violent and aggressive behaviors.

The research of Orpinas et al. (2000) evaluated the effect of Students for Peace, a multi-component violence-prevention intervention, on reducing aggressive behaviors among students of eight middle schools randomly assigned into intervention or control conditions. According to Orpinas et al. (2000), “The intervention, based on Social Cognitive Theory, included the formation of a School Health Promotion Council, training of peer mediators and peer helpers, training of
teachers in conflict resolution, a violence-prevention curriculum, and newsletters for parents. All students were evaluated in the spring of 1994, 1995 and 1996 (approximately 9000 students per evaluation). Sixth graders in 1994 were followed through seventh grade in 1995 or eighth grade in 1996 or both (n = 2246). Cohort and cross-sectional evaluations indicated little to no intervention effect in reducing aggressive behaviors, fights at school, injuries due to fighting, missing classes because of feeling unsafe at school or being threatened to be hurt. For all variables, the strongest predictors of violence in eighth grade were violence in sixth grade and low academic performance.” The study found that holistic approaches to teacher-led peaceful conflict resolution are not effective in middle school-aged students, as the damage has already been done by this age (Orpinas et al., 2000). Multi-component violence-prevention interventions, according to Orpinas et al. (2000), are only effective when implemented during elementary years.

There is a great deal of available research regarding interventions aimed at reducing school violence and bullying. These reductions are desirable because they are associated with fewer school discipline problems and greater academic success. Much of the bullying and violence-intervention research indicates that, when implemented effectively, interventions in school can reduce violent and aggressive behaviors, as well as augment academic performances (Aber, Brown & Jones, 2003; Luiselli et al., 2005; Mytton et al., 2002; Newman-Carlson, 2005; Orpinas et al., 2000; Wilson, Lipsey & Derzon, 2003). Interventions that focus on training school personnel, namely teachers, to implement interventions as a part of their daily classroom practices prove more effective than those directed at the students directly (Aber, Brown & Jones, 2003; Cirillo, et al., 1998; Luiselli et al., 2005; Newman-Carlson, 2005; Orpinas et al., 2000; Wilson, Lipsey & Derzon, 2003). Additionally, interventions directed towards younger students (elementary and middle school-aged), according to the research, are more effective than those implemented at the
high school level (Aber, Brown & Jones, 2003; Cirillo, et al., 1998; Luiselli et al., 2005; Newman-Carlson, 2005; Orpinas et al., 2000; Wilson, Lipsey & Derzon, 2003). Overall, there is strong evidence to support the claim that teacher-led intervention programs can reduce aggressive behavior and lower the incidents of bullying among middle school students.

Research Questions

The central question my action research proposal seeks to address is: What causes sixth grade students at Byhalia Middle School to frequently exhibit violent behaviors? There are five sub-questions that add specificity to the central question in this study: (1) What punishments are in place for the sixth graders at Byhalia Middle School to discourage or reprimand violent behaviors? (2) Do the parents of sixth grade students at Byhalia Middle School exhibit violent behaviors in front of their children? (3) What situations provoke violent behaviors among sixth graders at Byhalia Middle School? (4) What is the current behavior-modification process for sixth graders at Byhalia Middle School? (5) What reward scheme is currently established for sixth graders at Byhalia Middle School who do not engage in violent behaviors?

Overview of Data Collection Methods

In this action research study, data regarding the causes of the violent behaviors exhibited by sixth grade students at Byhalia Middle School will be collected through interviews and via observations. While document analyses may seem like a viable means of data collection – namely an analysis of the number of discipline referrals and the infractions leading to the referrals – these documents are confidential.

I will conduct three principle interviews. These will be one-on-one interviews conducted with the three Byhalia Middle School administrators (this use of purposeful sampling will target the individuals who might provide the most useful information). The purpose of interviewing
these individuals is that they are the most familiar with the students and the trends in the school, thus their responses will provide the most knowledgeable insight to aid in answering the research question. I will email the administrators to gain their permission to conduct the interview and to schedule a day for the interview to take place. These interviews will be open-ended, in a question and response format, and unstructured. I will take notes during the interviews but I will not utilize a recording device. The interviews will take place in my classroom, during my planning period. The questions asked during the interview will be the central question and the sub-questions listed above in the “Research Questions” section of this proposal. Because I work closely with these administrators on a daily basis, there are no gatekeepers preventing me from conducting these purposeful interviews.

The second type of data collection will come via observation. As sixth grade students at Byhalia Middle School engage in violent behaviors on school grounds throughout the school day, I will record information about the action on my clipboard of daily notes. I will note who engaged in the violent behavior, what sparked the outburst, the time of day, the proximity of the nearest teacher, the gender and race of the violent student, as well as any other pertinent information related to the action. I will also record any conversations following the outburst. For example, if a student hit another student and immediately proclaims, “She hit me first,” this comment will be recorded. In addition to recording descriptive fieldnotes on my clipboard as soon as I observe the actions, I will also sit down after school each day and draft reflective fieldnotes. At the end of each week, I will review my reflective notes and write more polished reflections on my observations from the week. My position as a teacher and my presence in the school qualifies me as a participant observer, as I am an insider who engages in activities at the study site.

Overview of How Data Will Be Used
There are direct links between each research (sub)question and the two types of data collected to answer the questions. The first research subquestion – What punishments are in place for the sixth graders at Byhalia Middle School to discourage or reprimand violent behaviors? – will be asked directly during the administrator interviews. Additionally, the observation logs may include notes referencing administrative interactions with and reactions to violent behaviors that the administrators witness.

The second research subquestion, regarding violent incidents by parents, will also be asked directly during the administrator interviews. The three members of the administrative team will draw from their experiences with parents at Byhalia Middle School to recall and hypothesize theories about levels of parent-initiated violence. Observational data will be collected during parent-teacher conferences and as students comment on what their parents would say or do when they are informed of the students’ actions.

The subquestion addressing possible sparks that illicit violent reactions will primarily be addressed through the observation logs. Noting the placement of students in the room, the time of day, the conversations leading up to the violent actions, and other details should help the researchers identify causal trends. Additionally, the administrators’ hypotheses about causes of these actions may help observers have a more focused idea of what to look for while observing.

The subquestions addressing the specifics of the current plan – currently implemented rewards and punishments for violence, or lack there of – will be answered during the administrators’ interviews. Researchers will ask the administration if there are standard policies in a handbook (either from the school or the district) that address specific violent actions and if these policies are enforced (or enforced consistently). Some observational research will supplement the
administrator responses; if the researcher witnesses inconsistent enforcement of policies, or no standard policies to be enforced, this will also be noted.

The data collected about the causes of violent behaviors among the sixth grade students at Byhalia Middle School will ultimately be used in the development of a grade-wide intervention plan. Based on the interviews with the administrators and the observation logs, a teacher-education plan will be drafted. The sixth grade teachers will work with the administrators to devise and implement a teacher-training program to help the sixth grade teachers at Byhalia Middle School understand ways that they (we) can prevent violent behaviors from occurring. By using interviews and observations to research the causes of the violent behaviors of the sixth grade students at Byhalia Middle School, the grade-level teachers will be able to address the underlying causes of the undesirable behaviors. This way, teachers can prevent the violent behaviors rather than doling out putative reprimands after the actions have already occurred.
References


