

Innovative International Initiative to Address Bullying at School

BY SHANE R. JIMERSON, SUSAN M. SWEARER, & DOROTHY L. ESPELAGE

Bullying negatively impacts social relationships and creates an unhealthy school climate. Research emphasizes that bullying may be physical, verbal, or social. Deleterious psychological effects and academic outcomes associated with bullying are far-reaching, and victims of bullying experience a range of negative emotions including loneliness, helplessness, and despair. Some victims report loss of self-esteem, thoughts of suicide, fear of being in school, and poor school performance. The bullies fare no better, especially later in life as bullying behaviors have been linked to vandalism, fighting, shoplifting, and drug and alcohol abuse. Both theory and research suggest that bullying and victimization are phenomena that are reciprocally influenced by the individual, family, school, peer group, community, and society. In recent years, many bullying prevention resources have been developed; however, the outcomes of these programs have been mixed (e.g., Rigby, 2006; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004). Therefore, the importance of developing and evaluating school-based universal prevention (e.g., tier 1) programs to promote positive peer relationships is paramount. In early 2008, a new bullying prevention program called *Promoting Positive Peer Relationships (P3R): Stories of Us—Bullying* will be available to help support students, educators, and the broader community address bullying in schools. The P3R program includes a unique series of

film-based didactic education resources modeled after the Australian *Stories of Us* program.

AUSTRALIAN RESOURCE—STORIES OF US

Christopher Faull is an Australian filmmaker who created the bullying prevention program with the help of local psychologists. Mr. Faull developed an investigatory process that helps students examine bullying as it occurred in their lives. This experiential process culminated in the production of short films that authentically reflect the perspectives of the students involved. The students then worked on the production of these films as well as acted in them. The University of South Australia awarded a 1st Class Distinction for an Honors' Thesis examining *Stories of Us*. The project involved a pilot evaluation of the use of the primary school bullying resource and concluded that: "Viewing the *Stories of Us* videos and participation in the corresponding class work had a measurable, statistically significant, positive influence on student attitudes towards victims" (Stephens & Spears, 2006). The post-intervention findings included a 20% reduction in students who reported that, "Kids who get picked on usually deserve it."

This bullying prevention program has been widely supported by education professionals in Australia. The Australian Primary Principal's Association and all Australian state education

departments continue to encourage every school in the nation to implement the *Stories of Us* bullying prevention program. The *Stories of Us* program is also supported by Australia's mental health professionals, including "Mind-Matters," the predominant Australian mental health initiative for schools, which continues to use the *Stories of Us* program in their student and professional development workshops.

INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVE—PROMOTING POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS (P3R)

Mr. Faull has teamed with three U.S. experts on bullying and school violence—Professors Dorothy Espelage, Susan Swearer, and Shane Jimerson—and, together, they are collaborating in developing the program and jointly writing the accompanying text and curriculum materials. The P3R materials will include resources for use in the classroom, for staff professional development, and for community education, each built around the professional films produced in collaboration with students. Three P3R bullying series are planned for the United States—for elementary, middle, and high schools—beginning with middle school. The P3R: *Stories of Us—Bullying* prevention program is aimed at reducing bullying in schools in the United States by promoting positive peer relationships.

The *Stories of Us* methodology uses the medium of film to engage students in

Mr. Faull developed an investigatory process that helps students examine bullying as it occurred in their lives. This experiential process culminated in the production of short films that authentically reflect the perspectives of the students involved. The students then worked on the production of these films as well as acted in them.

a thoughtful and reflective self-analytical journey and facilitates the sharing of their experience of issues related to bullying. In the film, students develop trust and feel empowered to share their unique perspective on bullying. Their honesty in turn engenders empathy for the characters they portray in the film—in particular the bully, bullied, and/or bystanders—and demonstrates the complex reciprocal interplay among these roles. The postintervention finding of the previously cited Australian study that found a significant reduction in students

who felt, "kids who get picked on usually deserve it," can be interpreted as resulting from an increase in empathy. It is anticipated that the American P3R: *Stories of Us—Bullying* prevention program will evoke similar sentiments in students and other program participants, thus promoting and facilitating an increase in positive peer relationships.

OPPORTUNITY FOR RESEARCH COLLABORATION

Research has found that there are dynamic and reciprocal influences among social skills and academic achievement (e.g., Fonagy, Twemlow, Vernberg, Sacco, & Little, 2005; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Social skills (including responsibility, self-regulation, and cooperation), have been found to be related to academic outcomes. The extant research emphasizes that schools will be most successful in facilitating academic achievement when they integrate strategies to promote students' social, emotional, and academic learning. In addition to the potential of the P3R: *Stories of Us—Bullying* prevention program to help create safer school environments, it is also anticipated that the resulting healthier peer relationships will have a positive impact on academic performance over time. Drs. Espelage, Swearer, and Jimerson are planning a multisite national research project during 2008 to examine the effects of the P3R: *Stories of Us—Bullying* prevention program. If you are interested in collaborating on the research project or examining the program, please contact us at Jimerson@education.ucsb.edu. For current information on P3R: *Stories of Us—Bullying*, you may visit the website at <http://www.storiesofus.com>.

References

- Fonagy, P., Twemlow, S., Vernberg, E., Sacco, F.C., & Little, T. D. (2005). Creating a peaceful school learning environment: The impact of an antibullying program on educational attainment in elementary schools. *Medical Science Monitor, 11*, 317-325.
- Rigby, K. (2006). What we can learn from evaluated studies of school-based programs to reduce bullying in schools. In S. R. Jimerson & M. J. Furlong (Eds.), *The handbook of school violence and school safety: From research to practice* (pp. 325-338). Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Smith, P. K., Pepler, D., & Rigby, K. (Eds.). (2004). *Bullying in schools: How successful can interventions be?* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stephens, R., & Spears, B. (2006). *Changing attitudes to bullying: The 'Stories of Us' video intervention*. Unpublished with Honors Thesis. University of South Australia.
- Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Wang, M. C., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* New York: Teachers College Press.

SHANE R. JIMERSON, PhD, NCSP, is a Professor of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the lead editor of *The Handbook of School Violence and School Safety*. SUSAN M. SWEARER, PhD, is an Associate Professor of School Psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. DOROTHY L. ESPELAGE, PhD, is a Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Susan and Dorothy are coeditors of the book, *Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention*.