

A systematic approach to changing school culture: The Caring Corner

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UNIV 100: The Power of Storytelling

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November 25, 2024

Every recess, he sits alone, quietly playing by himself. But one cold and dreary day in late October, a moment unfolded that he would never forget. A girl from the grade above approached the slide he often used as a private retreat. She wore a smirk as she moved closer. The moment she glimpsed what he was doing beneath the slide, she dashed off to share her discovery with her friends.

Before he knew it, a group of children had gathered around, their laughter, giggles, and sneers echoing through the playground. They stared at the younger boy, who sat alone under the slide, playing with his dolls.

He likes to imagine they were jealous of his fancy dolls, but in reality, they were mocking him because, according to them, boys were not supposed to play with dolls. This innocent act of imagination, no different from playing with a toy helicopter, was enough to label him as "girly."

The other students taunted him, calling him "gay," a word he had never encountered before that day. Though he didn't fully understand what it meant, their laughter and ridicule made it clear that, whatever it was, it must be something awful.

The boy looked up at his mother and asked, "What does it mean to be gay?" His mother's expression shifted, and she replied sharply, "Gay? Who called you gay?" Lowering his head, he quickly responded, "No one! I just heard it on the playground today." Noticing his unease, his mother softened her tone and reassured him with a gentle smile, "To be gay is to be happy."

The boy could sense his mother wasn't being entirely honest, why else would she react so defensively to a word that was supposed to mean "happy"? Still, he chose not to push the matter, resolving to uncover the truth alone. Later that night, he quietly slipped into the office, powered

up the family computer, and hesitated momentarily before typing “gay definition” into the glaringly bright search bar.

Overwhelmed by the implications of his discovery, doubt began to creep in. The voices of his peers, once confined to the playground, now echoed relentlessly in his thoughts.

Not until he was able to sit and listen to others tell stories about their similar experiences was he able to move on. He was never ashamed of who he was, but he was lonely, unable to heal.

Not enough schoolchildren understand the importance of difference and are often taught, whether in school or out, that being different is something to be ashamed of. This causes students to bully and belittle their classmates, resulting in these individuals thinking less of themselves, distracting them from their learning.

I am the boy who played with dolls under the slide, outcast from the rest of the students. Being different in my adolescence often resulted in me thinking less of myself. This burden of difference wasn't something that I was proud to embrace until I was much older. Experiencing life through this lens makes me want to teach the youth that embracing our differences makes the world a beautiful place. Beginning from a young age, if I had the opportunity to express myself freely, I would have been more focused on my studies than suppressing who I truly was and wanted to be.

If we were to implement a program or extracurricular for young school children that allows them to express themselves without judgment, the implications could be huge. Not only would students feel safe in their school, but they would be able to perform better and score higher without limitations placed on them by their peers.

It wasn't until I joined my first support group that I learned how helpful they can be. Expressing my feelings was always hard, especially in a one-on-one situation that therapy often put me in, however, support groups can offer an exchange of experiences that allow you to learn and grow through each other. The feeling of mutuality that is found in support groups led me to think back to my elementary days; and how much easier it would have been for me to cope with my emotions if there were other people that I could relate to. This could foster a sense of connection among young children and their peers, giving them an outlet to express their truth. Even if they don't communicate their emotions, hearing others describe similar emotions could help them get through a rough time.

Anti-bullying campaigns are an effective way to educate students about the implications of their words, but it is difficult to stop children from saying what they want. So rather than focusing on bully prevention, which is still vital, it is also imperative to implement an avenue that allows students to recover from what their peers have said/done. The PBIS framework is an anti-bullying campaign that I am most familiar with. PBIS, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, promotes positive behavior across all areas of a school, not just for bullying. It emphasizes teaching respectful behavior, rewarding positive actions, and creating clear expectations for students' conduct. The article, "Examining the Evidence Base for School-Wide Positive Behavior Support" by Robert H. Horner, George Sugii, and Cynthia M. Anderson, outlines the effectiveness of PBIS. Stating that schools using PBIS report reductions in bullying and an increase in positive behavior. This indicates that PBIS can create a more positive school culture, though it is less targeted than some other anti-bullying programs. The article also references that schools often use PBIS as a foundation and pair it with targeted anti-bullying components for greater effectiveness. While anti-bullying campaigns and inclusive classroom

practices can foster a safe school environment, peer-to-peer interactions can still be difficult to deal with. This is why small group therapy can be revolutionary to young students.

The Caring Corner is a support group designed to provide young students with a safe space to connect, share experiences, and support each other in a structured and age-appropriate way. With small, welcoming group sizes of around 10/15 students, interactions are kept personal and supportive. These groups can be formed based on shared experiences or be mixed to foster a deeper sense of community. Which group the student wants to belong to should ultimately be left up to them. The Caring Corner should meet regularly, every week/ every other week, for 30 minutes in a safe and comfortable location for students. This is so they don't interfere with academic time and can fit within the school day. The groups should not talk without purpose but should perform some structured and age-appropriate activities. For instance, the group's facilitators would likely offer discussion prompts and icebreaker questions to offer some momentum for discussions. The activities don't always have to be verbal either, with art and play-based activities, students can articulate their feelings healthily and productively.

By providing structured peer support that addresses the emotional and social aspects of bullying, helping students build resilience and empathy, empowering bystanders, and creating a supportive school culture, these groups have a lasting impact on students and the overall school environment. Support groups allow students to learn empathy and perspective-taking by hearing others' experiences and feelings. Through structured activities, role-playing, and guided discussions, students can better understand the impact of bullying and develop compassion. These groups would not just focus on the bullied; for students who bully, support groups can serve as a space to understand the harm their actions may cause and learn positive ways to interact with peers. Children who are targets of bullying may feel isolated or marginalized.

Support groups provide a place to connect with others, feel valued, and develop friendships, reducing their feelings of isolation. By connecting students with supportive peers, support groups can act as a buffer against bullying and help students build resilience and self-confidence.

Support groups can encourage students who witness bullying to become upstanders, willing to step in and report bullying to an adult. Through role-playing exercises, students can practice safe ways to moderate, support victims, or seek help when they see bullying. Empowering bystanders to take action can change the social dynamics in the school, making it clear that bullying is unacceptable and that students will support each other. Support groups reinforce a culture of acceptance, understanding, and mutual respect. Schools that openly promote support groups recognize bullying needs to be taken seriously and have a role in creating a safe environment. By helping children feel connected and supported, support groups foster a school environment where students are more inclined to look out for one another and less likely to engage in or tolerate bullying.

Support groups may provide solutions to create a supportive school culture but also present challenges that require specific attention. Students might feel embarrassed or singled out for participating in a support group for bullying, especially if they are a bully. This embarrassment could lead to social stigma and deter students from joining the group. Schools can reduce stigma by normalizing participation and framing the groups as opportunities for all students to learn social skills. Presenting the groups as a positive experience open to everyone can encourage broader participation and prevent students from feeling labeled. The groups could also lead to some difficulty being honest. Younger children may find it challenging to open up about personal experiences or lack the vocabulary to express their feelings accurately.

Additionally, children involved in bullying may resist discussing their behavior, especially in a group setting. Facilitators use age-appropriate activities like storytelling, drawing, or role-playing to help children express their feelings in less direct ways. Creating a safe, non-judgmental environment with group guidelines around respect and confidentiality can also encourage more honest sharing. In sum, while support groups can be beneficial, addressing these potential challenges requires careful planning, trained facilitators, and ongoing adjustments to ensure they effectively support students in creating a positive and inclusive school environment.

Different parties would be affected by the support groups in elementary schools. Involving them in the design and engaging with these groups to incorporate their input could help make the Caring Corner as effective as possible. Initially, administrators provide essential support, resources, and permission to initiate and maintain support groups. Because of this, it is crucial to have an educated team of admin who understand the benefits of support groups and how they can emphasize improvements in student well-being and school climate. Teachers and staff members are often the first to observe social dynamics among students, and their input can help identify solutions to problems that they are experiencing firsthand. Inviting teachers to suggest topics or themes for group sessions based on observed student behaviors, such as managing conflicts or developing empathy can further improve the effectiveness of these groups. Parents are also necessary for the success of these group sessions. Encouraging open communication, and inviting parents to ask questions, share concerns, or suggest topics that they feel would benefit their children can help parents stay informed about their child's well-being. The Parent's role can also be carried out at home, they can reinforce the group's objectives at home, support attendance, and advocate for their child's involvement. Finally, and possibly most importantly, the students hold a huge stake in the success and effectiveness of these groups.

Without involvement and enthusiasm about their engagement, students might defer their group sessions, ultimately making them useless. Involving students in the design process of these groups could foster a sense of ownership and make the groups more relevant and engaging for them. By involving these stakeholders at every stage, schools can create a well-supported, impactful program that meets the needs of students and enhances the school community as a whole.

Support groups in non-school settings have provided a range of benefits that contribute significantly to a patient's recovery and well-being. For instance, support groups for people living with HIV are incorporated into care and treatment programs to enhance patient education and effectively address their psychosocial needs. A study conducted by the Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes (JAIDS) has revealed significant advantages for clinical and psychosocial outcomes. Some of the findings of this study include the alleviation of common HIV-related symptoms, including anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Additionally, they contribute to better overall health by boosting CD4 cell counts and decreasing the presence of detectable viral loads. People involved in support groups often report better access to healthcare services and ART. Peer-led interventions also foster improved self-management and active participation in healthcare (Bateganya 2015). Facilitated by professionals, support groups often teach coping mechanisms, stress management techniques, and communication skills. Patients learn practical strategies to manage symptoms and improve their daily functioning. These benefits would impact the lives of students in the groups proposed.

Support group participants across the board can share their experiences with others facing similar challenges, fostering a sense of connection and reducing feelings of isolation. They receive empathy and understanding in a non-judgmental environment. Support groups are also

used in rehab treatments and offer a wide variety of outcomes to aid in the recovery of addicts. Kathlene Tracy, Director of Substance Use Disorder Treatment at Yale Health, outlines the value of support groups when she states, “Peer support groups included in addiction treatment show much promise in reducing substance use, improving engagement, reducing HIV/HCV risk behaviors, and improving substance-related outcomes” (Tracy 2016). This research has shown the true value of group therapy and how effective it can be for a diverse group of participants, from school children to patients struggling with HIV. Group therapy is an effective tool that helps individuals gain diverse perspectives and practical advice from peers. In combination with other programs aimed at the improvement of school culture, group sessions provide students with fundamental emotional intelligence and social skills that will have a lifelong impact.

Integrating support groups into schools is a vital step toward fostering emotional resilience, improving peer relationships, and supporting the mental health of young students. By providing a safe space for children to express themselves, learn coping strategies, and build social connections, schools can lay the foundation for lifelong emotional well-being. School administrators, educators, parents, and students must all collaborate to prioritize the implementation of these groups, ensuring every child has access to the support they need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Act now to create inclusive and nurturing environments that empower our youngest learners, our future, and our children to succeed!

References

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