

Study evaluates program that aims to curtail anti-social behaviors such as bullying in children

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Arizona State University social scientist Sabina Low is the principal investigator in a multi-site study that addresses behavior such as bullying as part of an evaluation of the Second Step program that encourages positive social and emotional development as early as kindergarten.

"We know that bullying and [disruptive behaviors](#) are manifested very early on. Many teachers are seeing the genesis of this earlier and earlier," said Low, assistant research professor in the ASU College of Liberal Arts and Sciences School of Social and Family Dynamics. "It's important to establish foundational academic and social and emotional learning skills early on, given their interdependence."

The two-year study that got under way this academic year in Mesa and Seattle schools evaluates the effectiveness of the "Second Step: Skills for Academic and Social Success" program for kindergarten students and first-graders. Next year, researchers will follow the students as they enter first and second grades. Low says she believes this study is the largest of its type for this age group.

"The idea is that social and emotional skills serve as the bridge between instruction and learning. The Second Step program focuses on skills such as learning empathy, problem-solving and brain-building exercises," Low said.

The study, "Project Yes (Youth Engagement in Schools)," is currently under way in 20 Mesa schools and 41 schools in the Seattle metropolitan area. The co-principal investigator is Clay Cook of the University of Washington.

While the target outcome is academic engagement, the study also takes into consideration social and emotional behaviors and classroom management to give teachers skills to reinforce what the children are learning and ultimately improve classroom climate.

"Relationships matter," Low said. "[Healthy relationships](#) allow for a host environment in which peer problems can be identified, discussed and solved effectively and respectfully."

Early engagement in school could prove to be a protective factor for a variety of anti-social behaviors since working in collaboration with others and forming positive friendships are incompatible with bullying behavior, Low added.

The Mesa School District is excited to be part of the study since they already use the Steps to Respect curriculum for third- to fifth-graders in their schools. Second Step is widely recognized as one of the top research-based and best practices curriculum, said David Shuff, executive director of Student Support Services for Mesa School District.

"Principals who see what the program has to offer have been very excited. It's very cutting edge," Low said.

Mesa school officials say they want to proactively address behaviors such as bullying early to build control skills, empathy and respect for others. Less time spent on problem behaviors in the classroom also gives teachers more time for instruction, Shuff said.

"Teachers are looking for kids to have the ability to control their emotions, exhibit self-regulation skills and not strike out when they are angry," he said.

ASU graduate students will record observations in Mesa classes for the study using an established coding system to document behaviors and academic engagement. Teachers are also engaged in results and surveying the children.

"The motivation behind the study is to build a relationship with the district to develop a vision for a systematic prevention program to address [bullying](#), classroom climate and optimal learning environments," Low said. "Often times, so much emphasis is placed on initiating research studies with districts, and it's important to put in the place the supports necessary for sustainability and fidelity after the study is over."

Provided by Arizona State University

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