

Exemplar – PSY30014 Applied Social Psychology



Swinburne
Online

Assignment 1: Critically evaluating strengths and weaknesses within the Friendly Schools Initiative (FSI) through an ecological systems framework and peer-reviewed anti-bullying-based literature

CRITICALLY EVALUATING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES WITHIN THE FRIENDLY SCHOOLS INITIATIVE (FSI)

The Friendly School's Initiative (FSI) (first developed in 2014) is an internationally recognised and ongoing anti-bullying program based upon extensive empirical research conducted at the Child Health Promotion Research Centre (CHPRC) at Edith Cowen University (Friendly Schools, 2018). The FSI implements evidence-based literature via a multi-component design that includes the whole-school community in creating supportive environments in order to effectively reduce bullying behaviour within a school context (Friendly Schools, 2018).

Bullying is a complex yet unique expression of interpersonal aggression, serving multiple functions across different contexts such as within the family, community and school setting (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Bullying is not recognised as a dyadic issue that simply occurs between a victim and their bully, it is acknowledged as a concrete sociological problem occurring as a part of a larger group phenomenon within contemporary society (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Cross et al. (2011) highlighted the prevalence of bullying behaviour by stipulating how of the 7,418 self-reporting surveys collected from their student sample, just over one quarter (26.7%) reported experiencing bullying every few weeks (Cross et al., 2011). Subsequently, the developers of the FSI identified the need for an initiative that not only focused on the prevalence of bullying behaviour, but also took an evidence-based wholistic approach to social and emotional wellbeing in order to see a reduction of bullying within a school context (Friendly Schools, 2018).

Although there appears to be a plethora of peer-reviewed research conducted in to understanding bullying behaviour within a school context, there appears to be a gap in research regarding multimodal intervention approaches that implement step-by-step components in order to decrease bullying, adding to the justification and apparent need of

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whole-school social and emotional wellbeing-based programs such as the FSI (Friendly Schools, 2018).

By conducting research across 11 empirical studies over 13 years, researchers at the CHPRC identified how issues such as lack of awareness or understanding of bullying and lack of adult discouragement of bullying occurrences acted as both triggers and factors that sustained the behaviour (Friendly Schools, 2018). The FSI hypothesised that by adopting a whole-school approach to bullying behaviour, educators, parents and peers would be able to assess the emotional and social wellbeing of students, and identify areas within schools that require change in order to decrease bullying behaviour (Friendly Schools, 2018).

It is important to acknowledge that victims of bullying are not the only stakeholders with a vested interest in its occurrence, with the scope of bullying indirectly impacting relationships with teachers, peers, family members and the wider community (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Thus, the research conducted within the FSI is underpinned by an ecological systems framework in an attempt to understand external influences relative to bullying behaviour (Friendly Schools, 2018). In the context of peer victimisation and school bullying, the ecological systems framework strongly focuses on how children's individual characteristics interact with their microsystem (including family, peers, community and school) in order to prevent or promote bullying behaviour (Espelage, 2014). By viewing the issue of bullying through an ecological systems lens, FSI researchers were able to understand external influences and consider their impact upon the prevalence of bullying behaviour within a school context, adding strength to the validity of their research (Espelage, 2014).

Ultimate long-term goals of the FSI include creating a pro-social school environment that actively discourages bullying behaviour and encouraging students, staff and parents to engage in respectful behaviour towards all members of the school community (Friendly

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Schools, 2018). Additionally, short-term goals included establishing a coordinating team that consisted of potential agents of change (such as staff, parents and students) in order to effectively facilitate the implementation of the intervention, building teacher capability in implementing learning activities within the classroom and evaluating current student needs, policies and practices via self-reporting surveys (Friendly Schools, 2018). Although it can be argued that self-reporting surveys invite social-desirability bias, Lester et al. (2017) utilised self-reporting methods within their research in order to successfully measure a positive correlation between parental involvement in bullying and a decrease in bullying behaviour (Lester et al., 2017). It can therefore be suggested that the use of a self-reporting survey is an essential factor in effectively measuring decreases in bullying behaviour.

In order to create a theoretical link between the activities and the goals of the intervention, the FSI added strength to their program by implementing classroom-based learning activities that promote skills in self-management, social awareness and decision-making (Friendly Schools, 2018). Similarly, prior research has highlighted a positive correlation between increases in self-reported wellbeing within a school context and the use of classroom-based learning activities, subsequently highlighting how a curriculum-based approach to learning is an essential factor in increasing emotional and social wellbeing within a school context (The Resilience Project, 2018).

Although essential factors conducive to the success of The Resilience Project (2018) and research conducted by Lester et al. (2017) have uncovered essential factors within the FSI, it is difficult to gauge the success of the FSI in measuring their hypothesis as the initiative is currently ongoing. However, by adopting measures such as a classroom-based approach to implementing peer-reviewed literature and self-reporting surveys that have been proven to yield empirical results in prior research, it is clear that the FSI are implementing

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effective empirically-tested strategies. The creators of the FSI were transparent in discussing the cost effectiveness of the required learning materials involved with their program, however, mention of the financial cost of the entire program is limited (Friendly Schools, 2018). Clearer illustration of entire program costs would remedy this issue and would allow prospective schools to determine if it is fiscally viable within their budget to implement the FSI.

Although this critical analysis has uncovered strengths and weaknesses within the FSI, it can be argued that in order for the initiative to continue, it needs to continue to evolve by providing the most current evidence-based practices that are available in order to decrease the prevalence of bullying behaviour within a school context (Friendly Schools, 2018). FSI researchers have recognised this need and have subsequently collaborated with Headspace and the Supré foundation in order to develop resource packages (such as a website training package and a free book titled 'Bullying, so not OK') to extend the reach of their evidence-based research in decreasing the prevalence of bullying (Friendly Schools, 2018). By engaging in progressive collaborations with well-known organisations, the FSI is not only promoting further opportunities for students, parents, teachers and members of the community to engage in a whole-school community approach to bullying prevention, they are increasing the opportunity to enhance emotional and social wellbeing for students within a school context.

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