

2013

# High school staff perceptions of interpersonal relationships with students as a result of an intervention called Challenge Day

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HIGH SCHOOL STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF INTERPERSONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS AS A RESULT OF AN  
INTERVENTION CALLED CHALLENGE DAY

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2007

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Interpersonal Relationships With  
Students As a Result of an  
Intervention Called Challenge Day

## ABSTRACT

This project was undertaken to capture the responses of administrators and teachers in a public high school setting in regard to their perceptions of interpersonal relationships with students as a result of participation in Challenge Day, an experiential youth program that targets the cause of social oppression on school campuses. As there was little prior research that indicated how teachers and administrators of public schools understand and integrate teachings presented in large-scale interventions, this research attempted to offer data that will allow for a broader discussion of prevention and intervention programs involving school staff and students collectively.

A public high school in East Texas was selected for participation in the study utilizing a flexible method research design with open-ended questions. Within this high school, six personnel were interviewed and asked the same 11 questions. The instrument used in this study was a qualitative questionnaire that explored reasons for hosting a Challenge Day youth workshop, the impact, and issues encountered post-workshop.

The findings show that school staff perceptions of “problem” or “distressed” students shifted in response to students’ disclosure of personal testimony and authentic emotions.

This study implies a need for more research on staff perceptions of the implementation and impact of large-scale bullying interventions focused on school climate, as school social workers are likely to be called upon to deal with the effects of ongoing disciplinary problems and school social conditions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is dedicated to those teachers and administrators who dared to get close to their students.

Cherished Influences:

Beloved Challenge Day friends

Mom, Sis, Bro

Ayelet, Jenni, Val

Bi-cultural upbringing (Mexican/Hillbilly)

Unbelievably supportive boyfriend, James D. III

The Clarifying Goddess, Colette

Mentorship

Partnership

And a sailing ship – the Pao San, who provided reprieve and a nice view

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“What permeated the voices of these social workers was the lack of a connection between teachers or other staff and parents...and students.”*

*Social work PhD researchers, Children & Schools, Oct 2000*

When studying the academic value of strong bonds between teachers and students, Stolp (1995) conveyed,

“School community, like other concepts that require large-scale change in the school environment, can seem ambiguous and often impractical. Those who spend time engaged in daily administrative procedures and student discipline may underestimate the dedication necessary to build a strong school community. Others may see the time commitment as too great” (p. 4).

Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, reminds teachers and administrators trapped in bureaucratic minutiae that the dedication and commitment required to build school community is worth the time invested (Stolp, 1995). Stolp (1995) cites Botstein (1993) who asserts, “We have to struggle with our own sense of pessimism as adults and create an environment that is much more about hope.” This strong statement puts the importance of strong social bonds among teachers, students, and administrators in perspective.

Social oppression on school campuses is an indication that a school community has not fostered strong social ties that maintain a safe environment for its members. A number of authors have looked at school climate and culture, although we still do not know a lot about how educators’ perceptions of these factors influence prevention efforts (Fanning, Murphy, Schertz, 2004).

This purpose of this study to determine school staff (administrators and teachers) perceptions of interpersonal relationships with students after a school-wide intervention

called Challenge Day. The Challenge Day program is a one-day experiential youth workshop that is “designed to eliminate bullying, teasing and other forms of oppression, in order to create connection and support among participants, and inspire people to live in an environment of compassion, acceptance and respect” ([www.challengeday.org](http://www.challengeday.org)). The founders of Challenge Day believe that “a safe school community can be achieved through strong social bonds among teachers, students and staff” ([www.challengeday.org](http://www.challengeday.org)).

School personnel must assume a leadership role in conceiving and implementing interventions designed to change the culture and climate of schools to reduce violence (Dupper, Meyer-Adams, 2002, p. 361). Top down approaches tend to prescribe the solution to the problem and are usually applied in the same way to every school (Astor, Benbenishty, Marachi, Mayer, Rosemond, 2005). Without strong leadership and support from school administrators there is rarely adequate staff development and support for program implementation (Elias, Fredericks, Greenberg, Utne O’Brien, Weissberg, Zins, 2003).

Empirical knowledge concerning school violence and intervention programs that have been supported by research is essential for the successful adaptation of school violence prevention programs (Astor et al., 2005). Yet, knowledge of national trends and model programs is not sufficient. Practice paradigms insist that an intervention must address the specific needs of the school it’s supporting. School social workers must balance the importance of programs, which tend to be identically implemented, and “grassroots” involvement at the school level to adapt programs to fit the needs and intricacies of each school (Astor et al., 2005). Astor et al. (2005) asks, “Can school



interventions reflect a social work belief in democracy and participation in the definition of the problem and the creation and implementation of the interventions?”

Research plentifully describes social problems that youth face as well as tactics to modify them. Studies are starting to appear that promote empirically research-based interventions in response to escalating violence on school campuses. There is also data on classroom interventions to decrease violence. These studies effectively describe the problem and some solutions. However, research is needed to understand how the leadership on school campuses understand and integrate teachings presented in large-scale interventions.

Currently, there are no narrative studies that examine the interpersonal connections between teachers/administrators and students that are fostered as a result of school-wide interventions. This study aims to delve deeper into the interpersonal dynamics of teachers and administrators in order to better understand the needs and sources of empowerment for the high school community being studied. The researcher seeks to examine interpersonal relationships with an effort to better understand how to enhance, promote, restore, and maintain the wellbeing of individuals in the school community. This study also offers greater insight into the relevant social stressors experienced by adolescents, which enables school social workers and school staff to develop a more effective, individualized plan of care.

The NASW Code of Ethics states that social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships (NASW, 1999). School social workers understand that relationships between teachers/administrators and students are an important vehicle for

social change. Thus social workers engage people as partners in a helping process to facilitate social progress.

The next part of this paper will look at literature that explains sources and consequences of social oppression and discrimination that impact youth as well as examines current interventions.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to determine high school staff perceptions of interpersonal relationships with their students as a result of a school wide intervention called Challenge Day. Thus to conceptualize this study, the literature examines current social problems youth face at school as well as environmental stressors that contribute to an oppressive school climate. Then, the research explores intervention efforts and evaluates reactionary tactics followed by theoretical literature that helps us understand the need for school reform.

#### Social Oppression on School Campus

*“When you’re talking about one oppression, you can’t not talk about all of them.”*  
High school teenager

Social oppression occurs when “one group of people systematically – routinely – is given less privilege or power than another group” (Dutra-St. John, October 2007). An oppressive school social environment includes high-level violence such as murder, fighting, rape, possession of weapons or low-level violence such as bullying, peer sexual harassment, victimization based on known or presumed gay or lesbian sexual orientation, and the psychological maltreatment of students by teachers (Dupper, Meyer-Adams, 2002). According to Olwe (1993), bullying is a pattern of unprovoked repeated aggressive behavior, with negative intent, directed from one child to another where there is a power imbalance (p. 93). Studies confirm that school bullies are often star athletes or class leaders, popular with students, teachers and administrators who are often reluctant to discipline them (Greenya, 2005). Regardless of socioeconomic status, bullies, unlike their victims, have social capital and power.

Bullying takes many forms, and findings about the types of bullying that occur are fairly similar across countries (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Scheidt, Simons-Morton, 2001, p. 2094). A British study involving 23 schools found that direct verbal aggression was the most common form of bullying, occurring with similar frequency in both sexes (Rivers, 1994). Direct physical aggression was more common among boys, while indirect forms were more common among girls (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2094). ...The most common types of bullying reported boys were threats, physical harm, rejection, and name-calling. Nansel et al., (2001) says that the most common forms for girls were name-calling teasing, rumors, rejection, and taking personal belongings. While it is possible to derive helpful information from studies outside of the United States, Espelage (2004) cites Stein (2001) who noted that conclusions from such investigations should be interpreted cautiously given the ways in which the United States differs from the countries in which the majority of bullying research has taken place (e.g., the U.S. is less homogenous than most other countries surveyed).

Victimized children, regardless of the form of victimization to which they were exposed, reported relatively high levels of internalizing problems such as emotional distress and loneliness (Crick and Bigbee, 1998). Up to 75 percent of American children have been victims of bullying according to the National Crime Prevention Council. On an average school day, three out of 10 American youngsters in grades six through 10 are involved in bullying — as perpetrators, victims or both — according to a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study (Greenya, 2005).  
School children's testimony:

“There were a bunch of them, and they were older than me. They took my backpack and kicked it along the ground like a soccer ball, and when I tried to stop them they kicked me. One boy pulled my hair so hard a big clump came out.” 6<sup>th</sup> grader

“If a kid is getting picked on, they turn to a teacher who says, ‘I’ll take care of it’ and never does-then the kid gets picked on more for telling, so that’s when you take control and put matters into your own hands and deal with it your way. That’s how people become violent.” 10<sup>th</sup> grader

“I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things. You people had my phone number, and I asked and all, but no no no no no, don’t let the weird-looking Eric kid come along.” Excerpt from the journal of Eric Harris, Columbine High School shooter (Cloud, 1999).

The act of bullying has long-term implications for victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Dupper et al. (2002) express that negative impacts of chronic victimization include increased rates of truancy and dropping out as well as difficult psychosocial and psychosexual relationships based on a study by Hazler, Hoover and Oliver’s (1994) about bullying (p. 352). Dupper et al. (2002) quotes the American Psychological Association (1993) that states youth who are not direct victims of violence at school “may be victimized by the chronic presence of violence.” Hazler (1994) states,

“Even students and adults who are witnesses are affected [in that] they must deal with the lowered self-esteem and loss of control that accompanies feeling unsafe and unable to take action. The result is children and adults do all they can to avoid recognizing when someone else is being hurt” (p. 39).

While looking at teachers’ attitudes on school bullying, Holt and Keys (2004) reported,

“Extant investigations of bullying in the United States have provided valuable insight into the problem (bullying), but have relied heavily on student questionnaires or student behavior observations (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, Power 1999; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, Sarvela, 2000). Although assessing students offers a crucial lens through which to understand bullying dynamics, it is also important to delineate school staff members’ perspectives. School personnel have frequent interactions with students and are also often involved in bullying interventions (Newman, Horne, Bartolomucci, 2000). Accordingly, it is critical that staff attitudes and behaviors are evaluated given their contribution to the pervasive school culture (Olwes, 1992), which, in turn serves to promote or to discourage bullying. Unfortunately, few studies have addressed attitudes maintained by adult members of school community” (p. 122).

### Current Policy Considerations

The Anti-Bullying Act effective August 1, 2003 requires school districts to define Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB) as “any intentional, written, verbal, or physical act including but not limited to those motivated by any characteristic in RCW 9A.36.080(3), or other distinguishing characteristics, when the act (a) Physically harms a student or damages the student’s property; or (b) Has the effects of substantially interfering with a student’s education; or (c) Is so severe, persistent, or pervasive that it creates an intimidating or threatening educational environment; or (d) Has the effect of substantially disrupting the orderly operation of the school” (Reed, 2003). Biased based bullying RCW 9A.36.080(3), this malicious harassment statute lists eight characteristics as common motivators of bias-based acts: “race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, and mental or physical disability” (Reed, 2003). According to the law, school districts must tell students explicitly that they may not harass one another on these eight or any other bases.

### Reactionary Tactics

School shootings over the past several years, especially the carnage at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, have propelled the issue of school violence

prevention and school safety to the forefront in communities across the United States (Dupper, Meyer-Adams, 2002, p. 350). Shootings in schools have amplified interest in developing ways to identify youth who may be at risk for committing violence.

Schools employ the following tactics to promote campus safety (Juvonen, 2001).

- Physical surveillance, including weapons deterrence and the presence of security guards or officers on campus
- School policies designed to prevent violence by punishing those who perpetrate violence
- Instruction-based programs designed to address the precursors of violence, including bullying
- Profiling of potentially violent individuals
- Counseling at-risk students
- Conflict mediation and resolution

These reactionary tactics are problematic as they can make school seem more intimidating to students (Juvonen, 2001). For example, surveillance is anxiety producing. Reports from school administrators suggest that some schools are decreasing their use of metal detectors and searches because they appear to increase students' fears and anxieties. "Weapons deterrence may increase the physical safety but compromise the psychological safety of students. It does not address the reasons why students carry guns to school" (Juvonen, 2001).

Devine (1996) believes that an antagonistic terrain is created by the paramilitary operations of the schools, including security guards metal detectors, and surveillance equipment in hallways. "This imposed setting, brought about by misguided beliefs that

these curb violence, adds stress for students and teachers alike and does little to reduce violence” (Smith and Smith, 2006, p. 41). Epp (1997) asserts that through “surveillance, observation, and classification (we) normalize children but do not seem to acknowledge or even understand the point that the developing child is an ‘object’ produced by those very same practices” (p. 31).

Profiling as method to identify perpetrators is labeling. Profiling is based on the assumption that we can predict who will become violent. Juvonen (2001) says that although a great deal is known about early warning signs of violent behavior, the truth is many students fit this “profile” and only a very few will ever commit a violent act. The label itself can lead to stigmatization and, if linked with a segregated group intervention, the labeling can also significantly limit healthy social opportunities of the identified students (Juvonen, 2001).

Consequence tactics puts kids on the street. Juvonen (2001) states,

“Get tough practices are presumed to send a message to potentially violent students and decrease school violence. They may actually exacerbate problems as well. Zero-tolerance policies employed by schools that result in suspensions are relatively strong predictors of dropping out of school, which, in turn, is associated with delinquency. Punishment tactics might result in an increased risk of violence for the individual student and for society at large.”

Juvonen (2001) believes that conflict resolution and mediation alone does reach everyone in need. Although a host of school violence-prevention programs promote conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, perhaps there is insufficient attention to the alienation of disliked and lonely students (Juvonen, 2001). Resolution and mediation is a helpful reaction to problems, but the efforts are not proactive approaches.

Proponents of zero-tolerance credit policies with recent declines in crime and school weapons cases, even though they acknowledge there is little data to support that



claim (Koch, 2000). “All we have is anecdotal experience and the broad acceptance among administrators that zero-tolerance polices have been very helpful,” says Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center in Westlake, California.” Koch (2000) cites William Modzeleski, director of the Education Department’s Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program who says, “There is no good, quantitative research to show whether zero-tolerance policies are effective or ineffective but many educators and law enforcement officials will tell you that because of zero tolerance, we have less violence in schools than we had five years ago.” Federal statistics confirm that the number of crimes in schools per 1,000 students decreased from 155 in 1993 to 102 in 1997 (Koch, 2000). Despite the lack of compelling statistics, 85 percent of principals, 79 percent of teachers and 82 percent of students credit zero-tolerance policies with keeping drugs out of schools, according to a 1998 Columbia University survey (Koch, 2000).

Juvonen (2001) believes that schools are sincere in their efforts to confront the antecedents of violence and alleviate students' fears, and they have implemented a variety of thoughtful programs. But do these efforts work?

School safety is clearly one of our national priorities. School bullying, equated by legislators with harassment and intimidation, is a national public health problem of growing dimensions. We owe it to our children to make sure the methods we use to promote school safety will work. Popular methods such as physical surveillance and zero-tolerance policies regarding guns and violent behavior may be convenient, but they are not necessarily the most effective approaches to prevent the development of violent school bullying behavior (Graham, Juvonen, Schuster, 2003). Prothrow-Stith (2001)

states that currently a tendency exists to blame children for problem behaviors rather than trying to understand what may be underlying their behavior (p. 2131). Environmental and social influences must be considered (Prothrow-Stith, 2001, p. 2131). Creation of support programs for isolated students and a positive, accepting school climate are more likely to decrease fear of school and angry acting-out behavior than draconian disciplinary measures (Smith and Thomas, 2004).

### School-wide Intervention – A Systemic Approach

Theory and research on behavior change support the need for ongoing prevention programs targeting all members of the school community (Kelder, McAlister, Murray, Orpinas, Zhang, 2000). Smith et al. (2004) writes that unlike reactionary tactics, a systemic approach to eliminating bullying, harassment and intimidation alters social norms by changing school responses to bullying incidents and increasing social awareness. A systemic approach consists of a set of routines, rules, and strategies that empower the entire student body and teachers to deal with existing and future bullying problems in schools (Smith and Thomas, 2004). These interventions also increase the social competence and connectedness of alienated students.

Dupper et al. (2002) says that rather than focusing on the perpetrators or victims alone, effective interventions must happen at multiple levels, concurrently (p. 361). Multiple levels include school-level interventions (e.g., conflict resolution and diversity training workshops for teachers and school staff), classroom-level interventions (e.g., regularly scheduled classroom meetings during which students and teachers engage in discussion, role-playing, and creative activities related to preventing all forms

of...violence), and individual-level interventions (e.g., formation of discussion groups for victims of...violence) (Dupper, Meyer-Adams, 2002, p. 361).

Classroom-level interventions establish classroom rules against bullying, regular class meetings to discuss bullying at school and meetings with all parents (Olweus, 1993). Olweus (1993) asserts,

“A posted statement of rights of individuals and groups in the school promotes a fear free working and learning environment. A school upholds a strong statement promoting positive social relationships and opposing bullying, along with a description of how the school deals with bullying incidents. School rules must aim at both direct bullying, that is, relatively open attacks on the victim and indirect bullying [low-level violence], social isolation and exclusion from the peer group.”

### Ecological Theory in a School Setting

While studying a social-ecological perspective on bullying prevention, Demaray and Malecki (2004) cited Swearer and Doll (2001) who wrote that according to ecological perspective, problems related to bullying stem from an interaction between the child and their environments (p. 211). Demaray and Malecki state,

“Within the ecological model, the environments that may influence bullying behavior are broad, including the family, school, and community settings. One important contextual factor of these environments is social support [peers, teachers, and parents]. Because social support is related to positive outcomes for students that possess it and negative outcomes for students who lack it, understanding how this aspect of the environment is related to bully and victim problems is important” (p. 211).

The Comer Process approaches child development with the understanding that the child learns from direct exposure to stimulating and challenging experiences and that the most meaningful learning stems from adult mediation (Ben-Avie, Corbin, Haynes, Howley, Negron, Squires 1996, p. 44). School climate that interferes with successful teaching and learning disrupts the emergence of student-teacher relations and the students' interpersonal relations, which are essential for adult mediation and student

collaboration (Ben-Avie et al., 1996, p. 45). Ben-Avie et al. (1996) suggests that when we focus on social processes, relationships between students and teachers become the vehicle for instruction (p. 46).

Children learn by observing how their peers are disciplined, by overhearing how the adults in the building interact with one another, through contact with written and other cultural products, and especially, through significant adults who take an interest (Ben-Avie, Comer, Haynes, Joyner, 1996). Efklides et al. (2005) cites Berliner (2001) who identifies three features that are central components to (context-sensitive) adaptive expertise, a characteristic of many experienced expert teachers.

1. Flexibility –the ability to accommodate flexibly to individual characteristics and needs.
2. Sensitivity—the ability to sense and to respond to “online” changes in each particular learner’s cognitions, motivations, affects, and moods.
3. Responsiveness—the ability to respond systematically, coherently, and as immediately as possible to learner’s cognitive efforts, and motivational, affective, and social responses. (Berliner, 2001; Salonen, Vauras, Volet, 2003).

While studying adolescent perceptions of relevant social problems, Elizabeth Erwin (2002) found that intergenerational respect was one of five themes relevant to social problems at school identified by students (p. 27). Erwin (2002) wrote:

“Teens were particularly vocal about their relationships with authority figures, including parents, teachers, counselors, bosses, coaches, and other significant adults. In all these relationships, critical attributes of respect were active listening, acceptance, caring, and sensitivity. Youngsters were sensitive to any hypocrisy and expected adults to be genuine about their own faults. Being shown respect in these ways was consistently linked with high self-esteem and self-confidence. Youngsters who were validated by

adults tended to report more positive social experiences and experienced fewer negative outcomes” (p. 27).

Erwin (2002) says that solving social problems is a complex cognitive-emotional-behavioral process (p. 24). Development of social problem solving skills is a milestone of adolescence. Adolescence is an era in which problem solving, handling intense emotions, and balancing conflicting expectations are a routine part of life (Erwin, 2002, p. 24). Learning social and emotional skills is similar to learning other academic skills in that the effect of initial learning is enhanced over time to address the increasingly complex situations children face regarding academics, social relationships, citizenship, and health (Elias, Fredericks, Greenberg, Utne O’Brien, Weissberg, Zins, 2003). The Fetzer group first introduced the term social and emotional learning (SEL) as a conceptual framework to address both the needs of young people and the fragmentation that typically characterizes the response of schools to those needs (Elias et al., 1997).

#### Student for Peace – A Lesson for Social Workers

Students for Peace, a multi-component violence prevention intervention aimed at reducing aggressive behaviors among students of eight middle schools in the Houston area involved some 9000 students. The study conveyed that the intervention proved ineffective, but suggested the evaluation was not sensitive enough to detect positive changes (Frankowski, Kelder, McAlister, Murray, Orpinas, Zhang, 2000). Frankowski et al. (2000) stated that informal reports from teachers, administrators and police officers indicated numerous positive changes in students and teachers, although “positive changes” were not captured in the results. Perhaps including the strengths of the intervention, in this case, positive changes in staff and students, might have yielded

substantial findings of the program's value to the community it was meant to serve, or perhaps a lesson in how to better serve it.

The authors of the Students for Peace study suggested that successes were noted through informal narratives in the community. Based on this researcher's evaluation of the Students for Peace study, it would be useful to monitor an intervention program with an analytic focus on narrative responses of school staff. Thus, the focus of this thesis explores staff perceptions of students and interpersonal connections that result from a school-wide intervention. This qualitative study gets inside the process dimension of program evaluation to explore the intersection of a program's goals and a school's goals for improving school climate.

#### Challenge Day, the Intervention

Challenge Day is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization headquartered in Northern California, that has presented its youth program in public schools or treatment settings of 39 states since 1987. Reaching "hundreds of thousands of young people," Challenge Day promotes violence prevention efforts that draw upon protective factors of a school community ([www.challengeday.org](http://www.challengeday.org)). Challenge Day's stated philosophy,

"We believe that young people are not isolated due to a lack of people around them, but rather due to a lack of connection with those people. Our programs tear down the walls of separation, create connection and support among participants, and inspire people to live in an environment of compassion, acceptance and respect.

All Challenge Day programs aim to demonstrate the power of acceptance and love. By promoting self-acceptance and respect for others, our programs help to ignite participants' passions and inspire them to take their positions as positive leaders of change" (<http://www.challengeday.org/find-out-more/school-programs.html>).

Challenge Day believes its work is consistent with several operationalized concepts of Positive Youth Development defined by the Department of Health and Human Services (<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/PositiveYouthDev99/chapter2.htm>). As an assets-focused, “non-categorical” program that centers on supporting youth before problem behaviors occur, Challenge Day targets many of the defined components PYD (<http://www.challengeday.org/see-the-results/CDSStudentSurveyData.pdf>). According to an active study being conducted by the non-profit, Challenge Day promotes the following theoretical foundation and desired outcomes:

- Promotes Bonding – Challenge Day programs promote bonding with adults, positive peers, school staff, and other community leaders. This is accomplished by creating an environment of perceived emotional safety and through small and large group activities that encourage open sharing of histories and emotions.
- Emotional Competence – Challenge Day programs enhance skills for identifying, acknowledging and accepting emotions in self and others through exercises, which encourage empathy and healthy emotional expression.
- Moral Competence – Through the exploration of social oppression, youth increase their understanding of social justice and have increased empathy for its manifestations. By encouraging teens to explore issues of sexism, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression, Challenge Day programs help youth increase their capacity for empathy, ethical decision-making, and social justice.
- Fosters Belief in the Future – During the Challenge Day program, internal locus of control and personal accountability are enhanced leading to optimism for a healthy, productive future, and a paradigm shift from pessimism to hope and possibility.

Fosters Pro-social Norms and Encourage Pro-Social Involvement (combining this and the one before it)-- As Challenge Day strives to “make kindness cool” participants adopt social norms and standards for positive, healthy social interactions. They are encouraged to create actions that can have a positive impact on their peers, school, and community.

## Program Implementation

While studying the effectiveness of Challenge Day programs in promoting positive changes in school climate, student attitudes and student behaviors, educator Richard Reo (2005) explained the how the intervention is implemented on a school campus,

“The daylong ‘Challenge Day’ [youth] program consists of a series of games, activities, group discussions, icebreakers, and trust-building activities. The program is designed so that parents, teachers, administrators, other school staff, and community members participate fully with high school and [/or] middle school youth throughout the day. The activities are geared toward creating new levels of respect and communication among all participants by tearing down walls of separation and creating connection and support among participants (Challenge Day Programs Website, 2005). Through Challenge Day, students’ eyes are opened to the possibility of creating a school environment in which compassion and acceptance replace indifference and alienation. For many students, Challenge Day marks the first day in a very long time in which they have not felt alone.

Although the format remains the same, every Challenge Day is different because the day’s participants are strongly encouraged and given several opportunities to discuss personal issues and feelings that shape their lives. The Challenge Day trainers model sharing by opening up to the large group and sharing experiences and feelings that have affected them greatly. All participants then communicate in pairs and small groups [about] their own personal feelings that they may typically keep bottled up inside. This sharing allows participants to connect in a meaningful way.

Perhaps the most powerful experience during Challenge Day for many students and adults occurs during the second half of the day. During this activity, which is called the Power Shuffle, participants’ eyes are opened to the oppression and pain that is part of the daily lives of people in their school and community, and they begin to build empathy and feel compassion for others that previously was not there. Following the Power Shuffle, the opportunity for individuals to speak to the large group brings many to apologize for hurts they may have caused in the past. At this point it is common for individual participants to issue challenges to the entire group to commit to reversing the common practices of oppression, bullying, and teasing in their school” (p. 16).

## Program Results

The Challenge Day website highlighted the results of independent studies on the effectiveness of the intervention within five school districts across the United States:



*Bangor High School, Bangor, MI*

“Ninth grade students at Bangor High School in Bangor, Michigan were administered a Likert-type survey prior to and following implementation of Challenge Day programs with the freshman class. Results indicated improvements in six of eight items associated with improved school climate, with the largest gains being percentages of students reporting that they:

- confront peers making hurtful comments or choices,
- get along with others from different backgrounds,
- stop gossip when they hear it,
- witness less or no teasing at school.

Improvements also occurred in seven of nine items associated with students feeling welcomed at school, with the largest areas of improvement being the percentage of students reporting that they (a) get along with their teachers, and (b) receive great citizenship marks. Disciplinary incidents related to bullying, teasing, and violence decreased by 24.1% following the implementation of Challenge Day programs” (<http://www.challengeday.org/see-the-results/schools.html#bangor>).

*Natrona County Schools, Casper, WY*

“For the past three successive school years, Natrona County Schools have reported that use of the Challenge Day programs significantly contributed to their ability to reduce suspension rates. Here are a few excerpts of their report:

In order to determine reasons for the down trend [in suspensions] we need to look at consistently applied prevention and early intervention efforts ... We can identify three programs that may be helping to move suspension data downward; however, analysis indicates that The Challenge Day Program is the leading prevention/ intervention strategy.

The focus of the Challenge Day program is literally to change the hearts of participants because only then can they begin to change their behavior. It works.

Use of The Challenge Day prevention/early intervention retreat is clearly the program leading to fewer suspensions and more academic time on task in NCSD #1. There is additional data indicating the effectiveness of The Challenge Day approach that is being collected and analyzed at this time” (<http://www.challengeday.org/see-the-results/schools.html#bangor>).

*Waipahu High School, Waipahu, HI*

“In the time we (Challenge Day) have been at Waipahu High School, their statistics have shown that suspensions have gone down from 701 in 2000 to 587 in 2002” (<http://www.challengeday.org/see-the-results/schools.html#bangor>).

*Bret Harte High School, Angels Camp, CA*

“At Bret Harte High School, 123 students participated in Day One. Of those, 113 completed a pre-event survey for a response rate of 91%. Fifty-one students completed a post-event survey for a response rate of 45%. Twenty-eight students were also interviewed a week after the event. There is a lot to this survey; however, here are a few of the highlights from the 23-page PowerPoint report they created:

- 78% decrease in those who reported feeling unsafe.
- After Day 1, ALL students felt there was an adult at school who would listen to them!
- 50% of students mentioned an increase in sense of connection, openness, friendliness and knowing people.
- 17% mentioned less teasing, bullying and fewer students being picked on” (<http://www.challengeday.org/see-the-results/schools.html#bangor>).

*Tavernier, FL*

“Quoted in the Key Largo Times, leadership class teacher Cheryl Cooke said, ‘Since we started, there has been a 67 percent drop in disciplinary incidents. That, in itself, should speak for the program and what we have done.’

The data comes from the Monroe County High School Safety and Environment Report, which log crime and violence incidents at the county's three high schools. ‘During the 2002-03 school year at Coral Shores, the number of reported incidents was 20, down from 70 just two years earlier,’ the article said. ‘Monroe County Safe School Coordinator Mike Henriquez attributes part of that change to Challenge Day and the leadership class’” (<http://www.challengeday.org/see-the-results/schools.html#bangor>).

## Summary

In conclusion, the review of literature reflects current social problems youth face, evaluates reactionary tactics, discusses how interpersonal relationships promote social progress and facilitate learning, and presents theoretical literature that helps us understand the need for school reform. The research does not explore how school staff integrates school-wide intervention processes to improve school climate. This study presents a role school social workers can play in education to strengthen social

bonds with students and school staff through school-wide interventions. This study aims to offer greater insight into the relevant social stressors experienced by adolescents, which enables school social workers and school staff to develop a more effective, individualized plan of care. Getting inside the process dimension of program evaluation to explore the intersection of a program's goals and a school's goals for improving school climate, the study attempts to offer data that will allow for a broader discussion of a prevention and intervention programs involving school staff that includes social workers.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine high school teachers and administrators perceptions of interpersonal relationships with their students as a result of a school-wide intervention called Challenge Day. I chose this site because this school has been hosting Challenge Day interventions for the past three years, so the practices and principles of the workshop were familiar to staff; therefore, interviews yielded a rich body of knowledge of interpersonal life with young people.

#### Research Design

The study utilized a flexible method research design with open-ended questions, as I was interested to discover phenomena, in this case, the emergent relationship, in a way that remained close to the experience of the research participants (Anastas, 1999, p. 57). I collected information based on the teachers' own words in order to understand the personal meaning and beliefs behind their responses. A qualitative design allowed participants to comment, explain, and share experiences and attitudes about students and colleagues.

#### Sample

The public school selected for the study was located in East Texas, a rural community outside a large city. The sample consisted of five school administrators and one teacher, five females and one male with an average age of 45 years old. Most of the administrators were former teachers who had over 10 years of experience in the classroom. Participants were all Caucasian, which was not surprising as the community in which the high school is located is 85.69% white (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>

wiki/xxxxxxx,\_Texas). The sample was selected based on the criteria of full attendance of at least one Challenge Day youth workshop.

### Data Collection

Challenge Day youth workshops are currently held in approximately 25 states and Canada. The researcher focused on a Texas school closest to the researcher's internship residence. The researcher contacted the principal and one of the vice principals of the high school in December 2006 to discuss the possibility of conducting this study in their school. It was decided that the vice principal would oversee the study as the principal was often off campus or involved in daily school activities.

In order to protect the confidentiality of the teacher and administrator body, the vice principal requested to screen qualifying participants based her knowledge of the inclusion criteria and actual Challenge Day participants. The vice principal disseminated informational letters, consent forms with requested contact information and self-addressed stamped envelopes provided by the researcher. Over the course of six weeks, the researcher received seven signed consent forms, one without relevant contact information. The vice principal attempted several times to contact the teacher who didn't provide contact information with the consent form, but unfortunately the teacher did not respond, so the seventh participant could not be interviewed. The vice principal did not approve the researcher's request to obtain the teacher's contact information from the school even though the researcher obtained teacher's signed consent to participate in the study. It must be stated that maintaining privacy of school staff is a high priority for administrators.

The researcher conducted six digitally recorded telephone interviews that lasted 40-60 minutes. The instrument used in this study was a qualitative questionnaire that explored reasons for hosting a Challenge Day youth workshop, the workshop's impact and issues encountered post-workshop (See Appendix A). The participants were asked not to disclose the interview questions to other school staff. During the interview, the researcher gathered demographics.

Note: All digitally recorded material will be maintained in confidence for three years, and then destroyed in compliance with Federal Guidelines.

### Data Analysis

The material was gathered from six telephone-recorded interviews that were transcribed by the researcher. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher omitted identifiable information from the transcriptions. The researcher assigned letters to all interviews and only the researcher and the research advisor had access to the data. The narrative material was summarized for the purpose of dissemination. The data was organized into themes based on reported feelings/attitudes and behavioral adjustments, then incorporated into the findings. The researcher made every attempt to capture the emotion and the content of the participant's comments. From a qualitative point of view, the researcher was interested in the importance of ideas rather than the frequency of ideas alone that should determine the importance of a theme.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This research sought to identify school staff perceptions of interpersonal relationships with high school students as a result of participating in Challenge Day. This study explored protective factors that enhance school climate unique to the identified academic community. Grassroots efforts of this kind provide relevant indicators for school social workers who seek to integrate strategies for reducing risk factors through collaborative programming (i.e., interventions that tailor programming to the identified needs of the community).

In 2006, 97% of freshman class at an anonymous high school in Texas participated in a six-hour experiential workshop called Challenge Day. In two prior years, other grade levels at the same high school participated in the same workshop, although the rates of participation are unknown to this researcher. Each workshop in 2006, as well as prior years, consisted of approximately 100 participants, which included at least one adult volunteer participant for every five high school students. Volunteers consisted of teachers, administrators, parents, community activists, etc. Two Challenge Day leaders, one male and one female, facilitated the Challenge Day workshop.

Interviews revealed the principal sought to bring the Challenge Day youth program to his campus in order to further his own vision of sustaining a “welcoming home” away from home for students. Testimony also revealed school administrators and teachers alike aligned with the principal’s vision of a “family” atmosphere in their school setting. The study’s findings explored staff responses regarding the impact of Challenge Day, a school-wide intervention, whose vision is for every child to live in a world where they

feel safe, loved and celebrated.

The body of participants in this study consisted of only school staff, five administrators and one teacher. Feedback was organized into themes based on identified feelings/attitudes and behavioral adjustments. Identified behavioral adjustments were included starting with Question 2. The following lists were placed in random order. Discussion and illustrative quotes follow each table.

Table 1

*Why did your school initially choose to host a Challenge Day workshop?*

*Staff Goals for Students Pre-Workshop*

---

Feelings and Attitudes

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1. Create a sense of unity, teamwork, and group cohesion
  2. Practice appreciation of diversity
  3. Expand awareness and understanding of student's personal/relational challenges
  4. Build relationships/community that promote sharing and openness
  5. Bridge racial/economic/social divides
  6. Follow initiative of school principal to promote student achievement and positive social interaction in a family atmosphere
  7. Improve ability to relate to others
  8. Reduce discipline problems and taking advantage of each other
- 

In table 1, study participants expounded on their expectations of Challenge Day based on their knowledge about the youth program and identified needs and goals of their school community.



A study participant iterated how the high school used Challenge Day to support its aims,

“Challenge Day promotes unity and a family atmosphere, which are principles of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Academy. The goal of Academy is to create a culture change one grade at a time in the high school. It’s a school within a school that creates a sense of teamwork amongst teachers and cohesion amongst students.”

Another participant explained an understanding of the principal’s motivation for hosting a Challenge Day,

“Our principal read about Challenge Day before he brought it here. He is the type of man who is all ‘for’ the students, who wants to see them do well, better their relationships with each other in any way he can do that. He thought Challenge Day was a great opportunity for our students.”

Another participant identified concerns about a common social problem on campus: student cliques that create social divides,

“It (Challenge Day) was brought here to help kids understand each other - to help them break down barriers...to bring kids together who don’t normally associate with one another...kids from different races or kids in band who may not associate with kids in sports.”

Table 2

*Why has your school chosen to continue hosting CD workshops?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Maintain strong connection between student body and staff	1. Reduction of fights 2. Reduced aggression

- 
- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 2. Impactful program, but enthusiasm fades    | 3. Reinforce campus practices |
| 3. Emphasize similarities of people           | and principles of “family”    |
| 4. Create school atmosphere of honesty,       | environment                   |
| relatedness, belonging, authenticity,         |                               |
| sympathy, forgiveness, helpfulness            |                               |
| 5. Convey message that students are not alone |                               |
| 6. Build teacher awareness of student         |                               |
| social/personal problems                      |                               |
| 7. Unlock hidden student potential            |                               |
- 

In table 2, study participants explored personal realizations, observed changes in behavior, and reported enhanced awareness of the social conditions in their school community post Challenge Day.

A participant made a connection between awareness and acceptance,

“Some of these kids don’t come from functional families, so we want to provide a family that demonstrates we care and understand that people are going to make mistakes. We offer forgiveness and help when someone is in need. We have to realize that students go through a lot even before they go to school. If you are not aware of student problems, it’s harder to accept (problematic) behavior.”

A participant expressed observations of mutuality among students,

“We see the impact here on campus when the kids get back from Challenge Day. It’s a phenomenal program for students to learn about each other and realize everybody is the same. Everyone has skeletons in their closet and you realize you are not alone. They

‘tear down their walls’ by showing emotion and being honest with (themselves) and others.”

A participant reported on specific changes in risk behavior,

“We see that it benefits students. It changes how students relate to each other. There are fewer fights; students get along better with each other. There is less aggression between students.”

A participant expressed hopefulness for the future of his students,

“The program is impactful but the enthusiasm fades after awhile – so we review what we learned. We feel like there is a lot of hidden potential in kids. The future is unlimited for our school if we can get kids to take care and assist one another, not hold each other back.”

Table 3

*What impact has the Challenge Day had on staff relationships with students?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Increased awareness of students’ personal, social and familial struggles	1. Change in teaching philosophy
2. Ability to see student as a whole person (skills, interests, personal style, goals, values)	2. Systemic changes (students and teachers views of each other)
3. Ability to relate to students (divorce, self-esteem problems)	3. Increased teacher involvement with parents (perseverance)
4. Teacher self perceptions: tolerant, flexible patient, helpful, sympathetic, accepting of	4. Teach with sensitivity
differences, understanding, less critical	5. Use Challenge Day program tools to increase effectiveness in
	classroom management

- 
5. Developed staff insight/ability to read students
  6. Utilize personal disclosure to build relationship with students
  6. Stronger belief of student investment in schoolwork
  7. Understand the role loneliness in teen depression and acting out behavior
- 

In table 3, participants demonstrated relational practices that nurture students' social, emotional and moral development. These practices are consistent with the school's mission, priorities and culture.

A participant expressed the value of caring about students as individuals, "In the past, I had 30 students in this room instead of people with their own personalities, their own way of doing things, their own lives. Challenge Day has drawn teachers and students together. I get involved in their lives."

A participant emphasized how students develop a lack of motivation to learn and how this insight has impacted the school's teaching philosophy,

"In Challenge Day, we found out about familial abuse, alcoholism in students' lives. Kids have experienced difficulty that teachers can't relate to. This realization about student problems has resulted in tolerance and patience for those individuals. There has been a change in the teaching philosophy. Teachers accept late work because teachers realize students may not be able to complete homework because of what's happening at home. Teachers believe that students care about their work and are doing the best they can. They are less critical of performance and more supportive. ...Teachers go the extra mile to contact parents about a student's lack of homework completion and

poor class participation. They keep calling parents who don't respond immediately. They just don't give up on the students or the parents."

A participant recognized that the students' childhood experiences mirror teachers' experiences,

"At Challenge Day you become aware of children's difficulties at home. Teachers can also relate to students' problems, divorce in the home and self-esteem issues."

Another participant also related to students,

"I know that I am not alone. These kids went through the same things I did. These days students have the opportunity to ask teachers and counselors for help and can trust them. I didn't feel like I could go to teachers, faculty members, or other students with any problems I was having as a kid. It was a phenomenal experience for me to see kids get help. I wish I had support at school when I was younger."

A participant discussed a strengthened ability to handle interpersonal situations effectively,

"Things happened to kids outside of school that teachers were not aware of. In Challenge Day, we learned personal stories about students. I found out that I had a student who had a mother that died of cancer her 8<sup>th</sup> grade year. As a freshman, she was very quiet. I just assumed it was her personality. But after talking to her I realized that a lot of her shyness had to do with her grief. I learned that her father was not in the picture and when her mother died, she had to go into foster care. When you know something like that about a kid, it changes the way you relate to them. When she came into my class, it was no longer about the grade. It was about making sure that she was okay – that

she got what she needed from me at least. If she needed to talk or cry or go to the counselor then I would help her get that support. I think she needed someone to care because she didn't have family support. She was not open or outgoing and not likely to tell other teachers about her situation. Challenge Day was her outlet to get her feelings out. In my class, I teach a lot about personal responsibility and getting your work done. With this student, I didn't impose on her because I think she had bigger fish to fry. Challenge Day didn't change the way I relate to her; I just came away with a better understanding of her and she of me."

Table 4

*Did the workshop impact awareness of student social problems (e.g. bullying, loneliness, teasing, isolation)?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Exposed family problems	1. Teachers actively notice student
2. Increased awareness of students' feelings of isolation and loneliness	social problems (bullying, teasing)
3. Understand the impact of familial problems and economic hardship of student performance	2. Emphasis on child rearing: personal involvement; teach manners, respect, personal
4. Attentive and open to learn about students' personal lives	responsibility
5. Understand the role of a "family" atmosphere in school bonding	
6. Questioning teachers' initiative to act	

In table 4, study participants identified familial, social and economic pressures that today's school children face and the school's response to addressing those risk factors.

A participant expressed awareness of antagonistic social behaviors among students,

“Challenge Day made staff aware of students that were being bullied. It also made staff aware that kids didn't have anyone to talk to at school or at home.”

A participant discussed the social and economic disparities of the school community,

“Teachers also notice socioeconomic factors among students and the contrasts...there are difference between teachers and students. People from high-income homes don't know that there are students who don't have anyone at home when they get there because their parent(s) might be working. They don't know some parents don't speak the language. Now because of Challenge Day, everyone understands the challenges some kids go through.”

A participant conveyed uncertainty about teachers' willingness to get involved,

“Teachers do have awareness of Challenge Day's philosophy of 'Notice, Choose,' but I am not sure about the 'Act' part of Challenge Day. I am not sure if they acted upon their new awareness of problems.”

A participant focused on students' familial pressures,

“Kids have problems at home -- drinking, drugs, incarceration of family members. The enormity of problem was exposed. Teachers were open to learn about students' lives.”

Another participant expressed new insights about a teacher’s role in students’ lives,

“The staff is more attentive to students who act out or feel alone. Teachers who allowed themselves to be real in front of students developed a relationship with those students. Staff believes they are not just teaching, but are also raising kids. There is a change from traditional teaching to more personal involvement. Teachers are now interested in teaching manners, respect and personal responsibility. School has become their family when they are away from home.”

Table 5

*Has the Challenge Day program impacted how staff intervenes in student conflict?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Focus on students’ strengths in assessment of behavior problems	1. Faster reporting of behavioral problems 2. Faster resolution
2. Wholistic picture of students (value of social, emotional aspects of individuals)	3. Teacher collaboration 4. Student advocacy
3. Informed teachers who relate effectively to students	5. Use of common language in conflict resolution

The table 5, study participants described a focus on assessment and collaborative teacher intervention, which are inherent to maintaining safety on campus.

A participant explained the use of empathetic language in conflict resolution,



“Students are encouraged to refer to Challenge Day language to problem solve. If someone hurt someone else’s feelings, teachers use that common language to talk about issues that affect student’s feelings and concerns.”

A participant explained that behavior indicates there may be a deeper issue to address,

“I have noticed that teachers want to discuss problems instead of sending students directly to the office to be disciplined. Teachers want to know what’s really going on; they ask questions to try to get to the root of the problem. If a kid is acting out by bullying, or trying to pick a fight, teachers figure there must be a reason for it. I personally would want to know what’s really going on to find out if there is a problem happening in a child’s life so I can help solve it or help them.”

A participant emphasized a strengths-based approach in assessing acting out behavior,

“I am in a discipline role and I try to look out for the kids who I know are having a tough time. Staff is taking more things into consideration than what is on the surface, looking at more details of a student’s circumstances. I try to work more (collaboratively) with teachers to solve student problems. ...I know a student who was really a problem last year, yet this year he totally turned around. His coach said he was really applying himself in football and then one day he fought with another student. I look at this situation with more sensitivity and see that he is applying himself in sports; I don’t just see him as a (problem kid). I pulled the coach aside and encouraged him to be gentle with this kid because he is really trying.”

A participant described how teamwork keeps teachers informed,

“Teachers work in teams to deal with students’ problems that arise outside of school. After Challenge Day, teachers noticed more problems that arose at home, when they perhaps ignored those problems in the past.”

Table 6

*As a result of Challenge Day, do you or other staff members intervene as agents of change when behavioral problems arise among students?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Create inclusive environment 2. Focus on assessment of risk factors 3. Emphasis on positive, cooperative interactions, rather than punitive outcome	1. Shift to more flexible, supportive disciplinary style 2. Modeling/ Walk the talk 3. Use of emotional intelligence (remorse and empathy) in conflict resolution/disciplinary interactions

In table 6, study participants identified pro-social norms that encourage positive, healthy social interactions.

A participant described fairness and flexibility during a disciplinary interaction, “We reinforce what they learned in Challenge Day so they don’t forget it. The students respond very well those references. They get very emotional; you can see it in their faces. They want forgiveness when they do something wrong. They have remorse and are more patient with one another. ...There was a young lady in my office the other day for violating the dress code. She was wearing something that might get her labeled something she wouldn’t want to be called. We talked about it and she realized she didn’t

want to represent herself in that way, but said she didn't have any other clothes, so I made sure she got them. Instead of suspending her, we problem solved together. She was a real sweetheart.”

A participant described how connection springs from individual action on the part of instructors,

“The Challenge Day workshop helps remind me what kids go through outside of school, so when they come to my class to take a test I am more informed how they are really doing. ...There is no give and take with the tests I administer. There are deadlines and you have to pass the test to graduate. It helps me to know what struggles a student may be having. I know that their score is not a lack of effort from the child. So I talk through personal issues with the child and encourage them to overcome their problems if they want a diploma.”

Two participants described how modeling improves student behavior,

“There is an expectation to demonstrate a ‘family’ philosophy among the teacher body. We believe if teachers treat each other with respect and interact cordially, then students will reciprocate. We also don't talk about each other in front of students. Our intention is to set an example for how we want students to treat us and each other.”

“Our teachers act very positively toward students. They shake students' hands when they enter the classroom. Challenge Day fosters that kind of positive interaction.”

Table 7

*Challenge Day is designed to foster interpersonal connection between students. In terms of interpersonal connection between staff and students, has the workshop been helpful in building those relationship alliances?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Create environment of inclusion, support, trust, love	1. Mutual disclosure
2. Desire to foster and maintain relationship	2. Physical affection
3. Focus on getting to the root of the problems, rather than on acting out behavior	3. Decrease in externalizing behavior
4. Increased ability to relate to students as individuals	4. Use of intervention, group process journaling, speaking out as ways to build self-awareness, self-control and self-expression

In table 7, study participants presented the generalization of thoughts, feelings and intentions toward interpersonal bonds that are fostered in Challenge Day and spread to the school community.

A participant expressed how non-verbal communication such as physical touch provides emotional comfort and fulfills a social role function in caring,

“It’s our culture to hug each other, something a family would do. After Challenge Day, students who I got to know in my small group came up and hugged me. Normally teenagers don’t do that with teachers, but here we are a big hugging family. Teachers initiate hugs as well as students. In the Commons during lunch, I give my principal a hug and he gives me one back. The kids see this interaction which I believe sends a message

that we are here for support; we are here to love and help each other as much as possible.”

A participant discussed the function of disclosure in building invested relationships,

“You can choose to share personal information with kids and they can choose to share with you. Anytime you know personal information that you didn’t know before, a deeper connection occurs. Challenge Day has that practice built into it. ...I participated in Challenge Day and learned that some kids are shy among their peers. When I see those kids I go out of my way to make contact with them. I want them to know I remember them.”

A participant described healing processes that help students identify and deal with intense emotions in a healthy manner,

“In Challenge Day, I heard students talk about being abused. As a teacher, when you actually hear a student talk about a personal experience of abuse, it’s a very different experience than just knowing abuse exists in the world. ...If you’ve been abused mentally, physically or sexually, it stays with you your whole life. I think the process of journaling, being in support groups and speaking out gives kids an outlet to deal with their abuse. I want my students to have those tools. If you are able to voice your problems then you can learn to deal with them instead of coping alone.”

Table 8

*Do you feel more emotionally connected to students as a result of the Challenge Day program?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Respect, empathy for adults	1. Practice of disclosure in relationship
2. Self perceptions of teachers: receptive, understanding, supportive, helpful	relationship building
3. Emotionally guarded with softening demeanor toward students	
4. Mutuality	
5. Developed student insight	
6. Focus on group cohesion	

In table 8, study participants reflected on physical and emotional safety, trusting relationships among students and staff, and closeness felt within a supportive community,

A participant described staff behavior that indicated approachability and signaled availability in communication,

“Without this program, students would not have come to me about their abuse because they would have never heard I went through it, too. I told the group at Challenge Day that I had gone through a lot of the things they went through. I told them we have an awesome school and a principal who wants to help them. I said that if they are experiencing sexual, mental or physical abuse at home, then share with an adult (at school). Students and I have been writing back and forth since then. I think it makes a

huge impact to be able to communicate personally with kids about things that usually go (unsaid) like abuse.”

A participant remarked on subtle changes in teacher disposition,

“Teachers who are having a hard time with students are encouraged to attend Challenge Day. When they attend, you see changes in the way they relate to students and their parents. Those teachers may have a tough exterior, but their demeanor softens around children after Challenge Day.”

Participants proposed a basic tenant for teaching,

“Good teachers want emotional connection with students.”

“Challenge Day encourages you to share yourself with others; it promotes emotional connection. In Challenge Day there were five kids in my small group who I didn’t know personally. To this day when I see those students in the hallway I feel like we know each other. If you are not emotionally connected to students you are probably in the wrong line of work as a teacher.”

A participant described how personal disclosure fostered empathy in others,

“My son was in Challenge Day with me. He wasn’t as emotional as I was about the workshop, but I think he benefited from it. I think the workshop was helpful for his relationships with teachers. He now knows that teachers have a lot to contend with in class in terms of discipline problems. Students including my son heard personal stories from teachers; they learned what teachers go through and, as a result, are more respectful of teachers. I think the students’ behavior has improved in the classroom. Before Challenge Day, students were clueless about teachers’ feelings and didn’t know they had to put up with difficult behavior like acting up in the classroom.”

Table 9

*Were practices implemented to foster ongoing interpersonal connection among staff and students after the Challenge Day workshop?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Courage, respect, shock  2. Improvement needed among teacher body to organize and keep spirit alive	1. Public appreciations/acknowledgements serve as reinforcement of Challenge Day to emphasize student strengths and progress  2. Interventions localized in the classroom

In table 9, study participants reported follow-up processes that maintain school connection as well as identified an area for growth.

Participants discussed follow-up experiences,

“We held two assemblies in the fall and one in the spring for the entire freshmen class. The intention of the assembly was to acknowledge students’ (strengths) and progress. We practiced activities that were learned in Challenge Day to reinforce the principles of the program. Teachers and administrators participated as well.”

“At an assembly, I heard a principal of the ninth grade Academy told the group his son was killed by a drunk driver. I never knew that! It took a lot of guts to get up there and say that. Sharing personal stories is a common practice at Challenge Day.”

A participant shared about an area for growth,

“There were teachers who chose to integrate Challenge Day into their classroom. As a staff, I am not sure we did so. We met briefly as a teacher body to discuss what happened at Challenge Day. I think maybe more could have been done to figure out a



way to keep the spirit alive. I knew I would put Challenge Day into practice in the classroom and expect my students to participate, but I never put a lot of thought into what we would do together as a staff.”

Table 10

*What challenges do you and other staff face with students after the workshop?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Same problems with new awareness	1. Old habits, patterns return
2. Other students who haven't participated can't relate, which makes it difficult to sustain the Challenge Day philosophy	2. Kids report more problems after CD, problems that were there before Challenge Day but not openly discussed
3. Difficulty keeping Challenge Day fresh in people's minds; enthusiasm fades	3. Some students make it harder to focus on academics, those vulnerable
4. Maintaining sensitivity, inclusion, cohesion among different social groups	youth who are needy for attention
5. Labeling and cliques	4. Kids ignore each other
6. Uncertainty how to deal with children's acting out behavior (truancy, rudeness) that correlates to poverty, lack of supportive home environment	

In table 10, participants reported challenges they face in the school community post Challenge Day.

Participants reported,

“We still have problems of cliques and labeling of students groups. Kids who don’t belong to athletics are treated like ‘losers.’ Kids stick with their group and avoid others. Our challenge is to keep those groups from ignoring each other. I don’t think we have a big bullying problem on campus, but teasing and putdowns are things we teachers would all like to see eliminated. We want to promote inclusion, sensitivity to people’s feelings. If students understood the impact they have on other people, our school could go a long way in fulfilling its mission.”

“I have heard that some students take advantage of other teachers by making it harder to focus on academics after Challenge Day. Those are the students who need it most, yet as teachers, emotional support is only part of our role. We also have to teach.”

“For some, old habits return. It’s easy to fall back into old patterns when other students at school have not done Challenge Day. The biggest challenge we face after Challenge Day is keeping the event fresh in their minds.”

“It’s difficult to maintain the level of enthusiasm that is created in Challenge Day. In the halls, you see teachers and students hugging, smiling, high-fiving. You wish everyday was the day after Challenge Day. I like those days because as a staff member, you sit back and watch the kids who you never thought would speak to one another give each other high-fives and hugs. They even take time to pick up trash and throw it away!”

“The biggest social problem we face relates to poverty. Our low-income kids have more problems with drugs and alcohol than other groups. They tend to be rude to teachers, experience more truancy and don’t complete their homework compared to other groups. I think those students who come from low-income families don’t have parental

support and guidance they need. I think those kids act out in school because they don't have support at home."

"We have the same problems we did before Challenge Day, just a new awareness of them. After Challenge Day, you know what you have to do and you know you can reach the kids because they were reached during Challenge Day."

Table 11

*How did you personally benefit from Challenge Day?*

Feelings and Attitudes	Behavioral Adjustments
1. Helpful for new teachers who transition to this high school culture	1. Use CD language as teaching tool in classroom to build relationship
2. Developed insight	and problem solve
3. Better assessment ability of risk factors	2. Use of validation
4. Sense of social progress, endless possibilities, inspiration	
5. Ability to identify with others and use common language to foster relationship ties	
6. Confirmation of good works	
7. Personal value in teacher role	
8. Increased awareness of psychosocial stressors (exposure to substance abuse, lack of parental involvement, <u>previous victimization</u> )	

In table 11, participants reflect on skills that are crucial to creating and maintaining a positive working and teaching environment.

Participants reported,

“Being new to the school, it helped me be more aware of the kids and the school culture. I am more aware of how much the principal cares for kids. He attended every Challenge Day we hosted for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Academy, which spanned five days. I am more appreciative of this working environment. There is a lot of teamwork here.”

“It opened my eyes to a better understanding of why kids come to school upset. You learn the reality of different problems that happen to students, things you can’t relate to like living in a car, having a poor family or being on drugs. You learn that there are problems besides your own. I have more compassion for students who have those kinds of problems as well as having an increased compassion for all of my students.”

“I learned a lot about students, which is the benefit in itself. I refer to how Challenge Day leaders talked to students and use the same language of encouragement and (validation). I encourage my students to be themselves, not an image they might think someone else wants to see.”

“Seeing the kids in a non-school setting, I got to see what’s possible between students. I’d say that 99% of our freshmen class was full participants in the activities. I witnessed how students can treat each other when supported to do so. ...Challenge Day reinforced some things I already believed as a teacher. We need to pay attention to what’s happening in students’ lives. Challenge Day reassured me that everything I was trying to do in the classroom was important. ...For some teachers, Challenge Day was eye opening, but for me it was confirming. It makes me feel like going back in there to

fight the good fight. It makes me feel good to know I'm trying to do the right thing even if other people don't latch onto the idea. In short, I can rest assured that what we did made the world a little better place."

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The findings identified needs and recommendations of an academic community as assessed by part of the leadership body within its high school. The school community in this study explored achievement of stated goals for the intervention and additional areas for growth post workshop.

The narrative suggested that school bullying was not a predominant social problem on this school campus. Per the frequency in the literature, the researcher expected participants to more often address poor social conditions (bullying, teasing, taunting) after participating in Challenge Day, but this group reflected more often on new insights about students' familial economic hardship and lack of support in the form of abusive or neglectful parenting. Staff's reports of a deepened awareness of students' familial life reinforced the school's mission to provide a "family" atmosphere for children, especially since participants seemed to agree that vulnerable students weren't getting adequate parenting at home.

Awareness of familial challenges seemed to strengthen staff outreach to parents rather than deter staff. It would seem that bearing witness to personal testimony from students during the Challenge Day intervention provided a new perspective of students, which altered the staff's role in the students' family and school life. The results of the intervention were consistent with the school's mission, values and priorities, which increases the likelihood of the intervention's success.

The findings show that school staff perceptions of "problem" or "distressed" students shifted in response to students' disclosure of personal testimony and authentic

emotions. In this case, personal disclosure built a foundation for interpersonal connection and fostered strong relationship bonds that facilitate a positive learning and social environment. The study is consistent with the literature's general assertion that teachers' interpersonal skills are essential to creating a positive classroom environment and working climate.

While studying social interaction in the learning process, Efklides et al. (2005) cited Reis et al. (2000), "There is growing evidence that interpersonal patterning encompasses not only cognitive coordinations, but also social control and role-taking processes, as well as affective and perhaps even motivational processes" (p. 203). Consistent with Bertliner's (2001) features that are central components to expert teaching, the study demonstrated that participants:

- Increased their capacity for flexibility in disciplinary interactions as well as altered teaching styles as they came to understand and adapt to students' individual personalities and emotional needs.
- Gained skills to assess students' level of motivation to learn and participate in academics based on an understanding of psychosocial stressors (largely familial).
- Developed sensitivity to students' affect and moods that inform preparedness for the rigors of an academic setting.
- Responded to students' social problems and academic struggles with eagerness, immediacy, and developed insight.

The study presented a range of ways that participants integrated Challenge Day material with the school's philosophy of a family atmosphere. Because teachers communicate in many ways, they will naturally develop different types of relationships.

### Implications of Study for Research and Social Work

One of the limitations of the study was the low number of participants (six), which means the results of this study make it difficult to be generalized to other studies. Also, all the participants were Caucasian, which means the findings cannot be generalized to other studies. The study required dependence on the vice principal to screen participants, which made sensitivity to gender and ethnic diversity non-feasible. Ideally, the researcher should conduct the screening process in order to obtain a well-represented sample.

The reason for low participation is discussed as follows. While the vice principal was initially confident that at least 12 people would participate in the study, the results showed only half of that number actually agreed to be interviewed. If the researcher were on campus to collect signatures as well as interview participants, providing a consistent presence at the school, perhaps the researcher could have recruited a higher number of participants for this study. This condition should be noted for future studies.

The researcher was also challenged by proximity of the school site, some three hours from the internship site as well as limitations of time and availability of busy school administrators and teachers. The distance reinforced reliance on the vice principal to screen participants and disseminate information.

A final limitation to this study includes the researcher's relationship with the examined program. As a former staff person for Challenge Day and proponent of its programs, it is possible that the researcher's intimate knowledge of the Challenge Day youth program affected the study's results. As a former school social work intern, "studying the familiar" has its risks, primarily the observer's proximity to the material,



“being too close to the subject matter” (Padgett, 1998, p. 26). However, selecting the familiar can deepen one’s knowledge. Padgett (1998) also wrote “For social workers, opportunities to study the familiar come from human service agencies where they are employed and from the clients they serve” (p. 27). This is all quite natural for clinically applied disciplines where the pursuit of knowledge meshes with the goal of improving practice (Padgett, 1998).

The findings of this study are especially relevant for school social workers, as they are likely to be called upon to deal with the effects of ongoing disciplinary problems and school social conditions. Due to increasing school safety concerns, violence, poverty, racial and class divides, it would benefit school social workers to participate in training programs that emphasize grassroots community building to improve school climate.

It would be prudent for school social workers to effectively assess areas of need based on school staff’s perspective of their community’s predominant strengths as well as its predominant problems in order to identify a fitting intervention. Findings from this study can be used to help identify the needs and recommendations of school communities who struggle with social problems and want to foster large-scale change on campus through the implementation of school-wide interventions.

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## Appendix A

### **Interview Questions**

1. Why did your school initially choose to host a Challenge Day youth workshop?
2. Why has your school chosen to continue hosting Challenge Day youth workshops?
3. What impact has this workshop has had on staff relationships with students?
4. Did the workshop impact staff awareness of student social problems (e.g., loneliness, teasing, isolation, bullying)?
5. Has the program impacted how staff intervenes in student conflict?
6. As a result of the intervention, do you or other staff members intervene as agents of change when behavioral problems arise among students?
7. The Challenge Day program is designed to foster interpersonal connection between students. In terms of interpersonal dynamics between staff and students, has the workshop been helpful in building relationship alliances?
8. Do you feel more emotionally connected to students as a result of the program?
9. Were practices implemented to foster ongoing interpersonal connection among staff and students after the Challenge Day workshop?
10. What challenges did you and other staff face with students after the workshop?
11. How did you personally benefit from Challenge Day?

## Appendix B

### **Informed Consent Form**

Dear Interview Participant,

My name is Stacy McMillan. I am a graduate student studying Clinical Social Work at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. I am also a former staff member of the non-profit organization Challenge Day. In August 2006, I moved home to San Antonio, Texas, where I am completing my second social work internship of the MSW. I was thrilled to hear that your school has hosted Challenge Day workshops and decided to focus my thesis topic on interpersonal relationships between school staff and students who have completed a Challenge Day.

I am conducting a study of the perceptions of staff interpersonal relationships with students as a result of participating in Challenge Day. Your perspective and experience in this school-wide intervention are important and valuable to the further development of research in the field of clinical social work. This study is being completed in partial completion of the Master's of Social Work at Smith College in Northampton, MA, and for future presentation and publication on this topic.

#### **Nature of Participation**

You are being asked to participate as someone who has completed at least one Challenge Day youth workshop. If you meet this selection criteria, I ask that you participate in a one-hour phone interview and a possible follow up call.

Demographic data will be collected at the beginning of the interview. You will also be asked to describe your involvement and participation in Challenge Day, your race, gender, age, grade level and role on staff.

#### **Follow-up**

Within two weeks of the interview I will contact you via email and ask if there are additional comments or reflections that you would like to add to the content of this topic.

#### **Risks**

This study is intended to be low risk for the participant. The interview questions may bring up deeper feelings about your students. If at any time during the interview you do not want to answer a question, you have the right to refuse to do so. I will honor that request without repercussions to you.

#### **Benefits**

You may gain new insight into your work in public schools settings that will be useful for your direct work with school staff or students you are serving. It is my hope that this study will help mental health care providers as well as other professionals better understand interpersonal between teachers and students.

**Confidentiality**

The interview will be digitally recorded via phone and transcribed to a Word doc. Privacy will be protected by assigning numeric code to each participant and by removing all names and locations from the transcripts. Information will be reported in scientific papers and publications in the aggregate only, with some illustrations and quotations that will not be linked with identifying data about you or any participant. Tapes and transcripts will be kept in confidence by the researchers for three years, consistent with Federal regulations. Thereafter, they will be destroyed. Subjects in the study will only be from XXX High School.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw before the study begins. You may stop your participation at any point during the interview. There is not penalty for withdrawal from the study. The final date for withdrawal is prior to the beginning of the actual interview. You may contact me at the email or phone listed below for questions or concerns about this study, before, or after the interview.

There will not be financial benefits to participating in this study.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the above information; that you have had an opportunity to ask questions about the study, your participation and your rights, and that you agree to participate in the study.



\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw from the study, please contact:  
*Please keep a copy of this form for your records.*

Researcher’s Contact:  
Stacy McMillan  
XXXX Rd.  
San Antonio, Texas XXXXX

\* The name of the high school has been deleted to protect the confidentiality of both the participants and the school.

Appendix C

January 6, 2007

Dear Stacy,

You have done a careful job in making your revisions and all is now in order. We are happy to give final approval to your project pending our receipt of a copy of a letter of permission from the school where you will be doing your research. Just send the letter to Laurie Wyman for your permanent file.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your study. The focus group is a very interesting way to get lively information and we hope that all goes well and that the teachers are ready to really discuss the important issues.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee  
CC: Colette Duciaume-Wright, Research Advisor