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A schoolwide approach to promoting student bystander behavior in response to the use of the word "retard"

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ABSTRACT

Background and aims: The use of the word *retard* ("the r-word") among adolescents sheds light on societal views about individuals with intellectual disability and the need to address the colloquial use of this word and its underlying stigma. Schools provide an important platform for intervening to promote social change among youth. The present study examined the impact of a schoolwide social inclusion program on students' bystander behavior against the use of the r-word.

Methods and procedures: 1233 students from 5 high schools were surveyed about the prevalence of the r-word in their school, the contexts in which it is used, and their bystander behavior in response to the word. Approximately 40% of surveyed students participated in an R-word Campaign, Unified Sports team, and/or Unified Club as part of the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) program.

Outcomes and results: Students' prosocialness, the context in which the r-word was used, and participation in UCS activities significantly predicted active bystander behavior in response to the r-word.

Conclusions and implications: By empowering students to be active bystanders against the use of the r-word in school, school-based interventions provide a promising avenue for addressing both the use of the r-word and its underlying stigma.

What this paper adds

The word *retard* ("the r-word") is a slang invective commonly heard in our society. The widespread use of the word perpetuates stigma of people with intellectual disability as stupid, incapable, and as a devalued and undesirable group. Research into the use of the r-word is limited, but a few previous studies have established that the r-word is frequently used among adolescents, and have examined students' bystander behavior in response to the word. Even more limited is the research examining how schools, as one of the main socializing agents of our youth, might actively address the use of the r-word and promote active bystander behavior among students. The present study revisits adolescents' use of and response to the r-word and builds upon the extant literature by examining the impact of a schoolwide social inclusion program on student bystander behavior in response to the r-word. The findings reveal that students in schools implementing the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program are less likely to hear the r-word used in

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their school, and that participating in this program has a significant impact on students' bystander behavior in response to the r-word, above and beyond personal characteristics that have been identified as having an impact on bystander behavior in previous studies. This study and its findings have important implications for how schools might address the colloquial use of the r-word among adolescents, as well as the stigma that underlies the use of this word.

1. Introduction

The adolescent lexicon provides a unique window into how society views and values different groups of people. This is evident in the continued use of the word *retard* ("the r-word") among adolescents, which sheds light on societal views about individuals with intellectual disability (ID). While adolescents rarely admit to using the r-word, a study conducted a decade ago found that nearly 100% of youth had *heard* the r-word used, most commonly by their peers, and more recent research suggests that adolescents' use of the r-word has not abated (Albert, Jacobs, & Siperstein, 2016; Birth, 2017; Siperstein, Pociask, & Collins, 2010).

Adolescents' use of the r-word is almost never directed toward individuals with ID; rather, the r-word is frequently used by adolescents as an insult toward individuals without ID (Albert et al., 2016; Birth, 2017; Siperstein et al., 2010). On the rare occasions when the r-word *is* used toward individuals with ID, adolescents are much more likely to intervene and tell the perpetrator to stop using the word than when the r-word is used toward individuals without ID (Albert et al., 2016). Clearly, adolescents know this term is derogatory and warrants intervention when it is directed toward individuals with ID. However, the fact that adolescents do not intervene when the word is used toward individuals without ID demonstrates that adolescents do not understand that the r-word perpetuates the devaluation of individuals with ID, even when they are not physically present to hear the word used. When the r-word is used as an insult toward anyone, it promotes the idea that ID is undesirable and something individuals should not want to be associated with.

In recognition of the stigmatizing nature of the r-word, actions are increasingly being taken to eliminate the use of the word in both federal legal language and clinical language in the Unified States. The past decade has seen Rosa's Law enact a change in terminology from "mental retardation" to "intellectual disability" in all federal language (Degeneffe & Terciano, 2011), the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and the American Psychiatric Association revise their clinical terminology from "mental retardation" to "intellectual disability" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Schalock et al., 2010), and the United States Supreme Court use the term "intellectual disability" for the first time in a legal decision (Hall v. Florida, 2014). While this shift in language is encouraging, recent research indicates that such changes in federal and clinical language do not translate to changes in attitudes toward the use of the r-word or stigmatizing beliefs about ID among the general public (Lyle & Simplican, 2015). Clearly, addressing colloquial use of the r-word requires more than a "top-down" change in terminology, and other avenues may be more effective in changing public opinion about the use of the r-word and the stigma associated with individuals with ID.

As one of the primary socializing institutions for our youth, schools provide an important platform for intervening to promote social change. Thus, examining school-based interventions designed to address problems in adolescence may provide valuable insight into the types of interventions that could be effective in reducing the use of the r-word. Bullying interventions may be particularly relevant, as the r-word is often used with the intention of demeaning others (Johanson-Sebera & Wilkins, 2010) and thus could be considered a form of verbal bullying.

Recent literature about bullying in schools has focused on the power that student bystanders have to reduce bullying. Bystanders are present in the large majority of bullying situations (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999) and make up the majority of students involved in a bullying situation (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Therefore, empowering student bystanders to take action against bullying has the potential to make a significant difference. Bystanders can respond to bullying in a variety of ways: they can actively intervene to stop the bully, encourage the bully or join in, or remain passive (O'Connell et al., 1999; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004). Unfortunately, the majority of student bystanders remain passive in response to bullying (O'Connell et al., 1999; Oh & Hazler, 2009). However, certain personal characteristics, such as gender, age, and prosocialness, have been found to impact students' likelihood of taking an active bystander role (Aboud & Miller, 2007; Albert et al., 2016; Barchia & Bussey, 2011; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Siperstein et al., 2010); and when students do intervene, they can often successfully put an end to the bullying situation at hand (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). By taking an active bystander role, students may even be able to have a long-term impact in reducing the frequency of bullying in their school community (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011).

Given the potential influence of bystanders in bullying situations, researchers have begun to investigate whether school-based anti-bullying programs can effectively promote active bystander behavior and reduce school bullying. Meta-analyses suggest that school-based anti-bullying interventions can in fact successfully encourage students to take action against bullying, promoting behaviors such as direct intervention, seeking a teacher's help, or supporting victims of bullying (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). However, some programs are more successful than others, and the success of any given program may depend on the specific approach that the program takes, as well as the school in which it is being implemented (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010).

Some common approaches of programs that aim to reduce bullying and increase bystander intervention include targeting the entire student body through school assemblies, student-made video presentations, speeches about respect, and school-wide kick off events (Allen, 2010; Limber, 2011) while other approaches target smaller groups through educational initiatives like establishing classroom rules, engaging classrooms in bullying discussions, cooperative group work, and virtual learning (Kärnä et al., 2011; Limber, 2011). Programs involving multiple elements – thus providing students with more opportunities to engage in the program at varying levels of intensity – have been found to be more effective in reducing bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011); and programs utilizing a combination of school-wide and targeted educational initiatives may be particularly effective (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Whether anti-bullying interventions that focus on bystander behavior utilize large presentations or small group activities, the person leading these activities and presenting information to students is important to the success of the intervention. A peer-led approach may be particularly effective for interventions aimed at adolescents, as youth at this stage of development may be more responsive to and likely to be influenced by their fellow peers than by adults (Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005). Adolescents likely find their peers more engaging than they might find adults presenting the same information, because their peers can better relate content to their life experiences. Indeed, one study found that while youth-led and adult-led programs resulted in similar improvement in attitudes toward and knowledge about aggression, youth-led programs resulted in a broader sense of acceptance and respect within the school (Connolly et al., 2015).

In addition to utilizing strategies that have been effective in addressing bullying among adolescents, a successful intervention addressing adolescents' use of the r-word must consider the unique history of shifting terminology surrounding ID. This history suggests that interventions aimed only at changing adolescents' language—eliminating the use of the r-word—may not be effective in changing attitudes and reducing stigma. Even if the r-word is eliminated from use, other terms will likely emerge to replace it if the underlying stigma is not addressed, much like the r-word emerged to replace previous terms such as "moron" and "idiot." Therefore, a successful intervention must both directly address the use of the r-word *and* the stigma that underlies it. Early research has shown that positive intergroup contact in conjunction with working toward a common goal can challenge negative stereotypes and views of outgroups, and produce a lasting understanding and change in attitudes (Allport, 1954; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). This approach has been successful in reducing stigma and promoting positive attitudes toward students with ID across school levels (Jacques, Wilton, & Townsend, 1998; Johnson, Rynders, Johnson, Schmidt, & Haider, 1979; Piercy, Wilton, & Townsend, 2002). Through intergroup contact, it is possible to reduce stigma toward marginalized groups, which is an important facet of combatting the stigmatizing use of the r-word.

The present study examined the impact of a school-based intervention, the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) program, on bystander behavior in response to the r-word. The UCS program aims to promote the social inclusion of students with ID in schools and incorporates many of the features of successful school-based interventions previously discussed, such as multiple elements, a school-wide component, small group initiatives that promote intergroup contact, and youth-led activities. As described by Siperstein, Summerill, Jacobs, and Stokes (2017), the UCS program incorporates Unified Sports, Unified Clubs, and Whole School Awareness events as "interrelated activities that occur within the normative contexts of the school," thereby bringing students with and without ID together across a range of activities throughout the school year (see Siperstein et al., 2017 for a more detailed description of UCS program activities). The present study focused on three activities within the UCS program: Unified Sports, Unified Club, and the R-word Campaign (a Whole School Awareness event).

The R-word Campaign directly addresses student use of the r-word by asking students to make a pledge not to use this invective. As described by Albert et al. (2016),

> the purpose of this campaign is three-fold: to promote respect and acceptance of individuals with ID, to educate youth about the negative impacts of using the r-word, and to encourage youth to take action when they hear others use the r-word.

The implementation of this activity varies across schools, but most often involves pledge drives, school-wide assemblies, videos, and classroom discussions. These activities are often planned and led by students with the support of teachers and school staff. Through these youth-led educational activities, the R-word Campaign is likely able to reach adolescents, and the combination of multiple activities such as school-wide assemblies and classroom discussions is a cornerstone of effective anti-bullying programming (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007).

Another core activity of the UCS program is Unified Sports. In this activity, students with and without ID practice and compete together on inclusive sports teams, providing students with the opportunity to form equitable peer relationships and build teamwork skills, which have been found to be effective strategies for reducing stigma toward marginalized groups (Allport, 1954; Sherif et al., 1961; Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2007).

Finally, the Unified Club, much like Unified Sports, provides students with and without ID the opportunity to engage in meaningful relationships. These school-based extracurricular clubs allow students with and without ID to come together to socialize, learn leadership skills, and plan inclusive events—often including the R-word Campaign—for their school. Through these clubs, students with and without ID are able to work together toward a common goal, a particularly effective way of addressing prejudice toward outgroups (Allport, 1954), and gain knowledge about ID and the r-word through educating their peers.

The UCS program, through these three core activities, offers students many opportunities to learn about the harmfulness of the r-word and work with peers with ID toward the common goal of reducing its use. The present study sought to revisit adolescents' use of the r-word and the personal factors (gender, grade, prosocialness) and contextual factors (situation in which the word is used, who is using the word) that may impact their bystander behavior in response to its use. Most importantly, this study sought to examine the impact of participation in each of the three UCS program activities on adolescents' bystander behavior in response to hearing peers use the r-word in their schools.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Students from five high schools in three states in three different geographical regions of the country participated in a survey in the spring of 2016. The five schools were involved in an ongoing study of the UCS program, and were selected based on their

Table 1
Student demographics.

Variable	N/n	%
Overall	1233	
Gender		
Male	564	46%
Female	657	54%
Grade		
9th	286	23%
10th	340	28%
11th	276	23%
12th	312	26%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	794	77%
Hispanic	352	30%
Black	162	16%
Other	161	16%

implementation of UCS program activities. Across the five high schools, a total of 1233 students (54% female; ages 13 to 19) participated in the survey, with 23% in 9th grade, 28% in 10th grade, 23% in 11th grade, and 26% in 12th grade. See Table 1 for additional demographic information about these students.

2.2. Procedures

The survey was administered to students at the end of the school year, after all UCS program activities were implemented. At the time of the survey, schools had been implementing the UCS program for either one or two years. A representative sample of 20%–25% of the student body at each school was obtained through a random selection of whole classrooms. The overall number of classrooms selected to participate varied depending on the average class size and the size of the student body at each school. Passive parental consent forms were distributed to students in the selected classrooms and the survey was administered during regularly scheduled class time in the format of a paper and pencil Scantron® questionnaire. School staff were provided with instructions on both survey administration and the handling and mailing of surveys.

2.3. Program description and implementation

Each school had a designated staff member who directed the implementation of the UCS program with the help of other school community members. Because of the different structures, policies, and student populations at each school, schools adapted the program activities to best fit their needs. The UCS program activities implemented in each school were open to all students in the school and participation was voluntary. Although there were some variations in how the activities were implemented, all five high schools implemented the R-word Campaign. Three of the five schools implemented the Campaign for a week or longer, while two of the schools implemented a one-day event. Some common events and activities in the schools' R-word Campaigns included pledge drives, advertising in different classes and clubs (e.g., video, banner signing), and selling or giving away shirts and bracelets.

In addition to the R-word Campaign, all five schools implemented Unified Sports during the school year. On average, two sports were offered at each school, the most common of which were Unified basketball, football, bocce, and soccer. The average team size was 18 students (ranging from 16 to 20), and students with and without ID were equally represented (8 and 10 per team, respectively).

Four of the five schools also had a Unified Club that planned inclusive activities for the school. Some of the most common inclusive school activities were planning and implementing the R-word Campaign, participating in community service, and fundraising. The average club size was 21 students (ranging from 18 to 23), and there was a slightly lower representation of students with ID than students without ID (8 and 13 per club, respectively).

2.4. Measures

2.4.1. Student prosocialness scale

Students' empathic and helping responses were measured using a nine-item scale modified from the 16-item *Prosocialness Scale for Adults* (Caprara, Steca, Zelli, & Capanna, 2005). The scale was revised for use with high school students. Caprara et al. (2005) found that six of the items on the original scale contributed less to the scale than the other items, so these six items were removed. One additional item was removed because it was not relevant to a high school population. Students responded to statements such as "I try to help others," and "I try to console those who are sad" on a five-point scale (1 = *never true*, 5 = *always true*). The scale was sum-scored with possible scores ranging from 9 to 45, with higher scores indicating greater prosocialness. This nine-item scale displayed strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$).

2.4.2. R-word questionnaire

The questionnaire pertaining to the prevalence of and response to the r-word (Albert et al., 2016; Siperstein et al., 2010) was revised for the current study. To measure the prevalence of the r-word in the school, students were asked, "During this school year, did you hear someone in your school use the word 'retard' or 'retarded'?" Follow-up questions measured the frequency with which the r-word was used toward different targets (i.e., about a student with ID, a student without ID, an object, a situation, or themselves); students responded on a three-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *a few times*, 3 = *many times*) for each of the targets. The rest of the questions focused on the most recent time students heard the r-word. Students were asked who used the word (i.e., a friend, another student, a teacher, or another adult at school), the target of the word, why the word was used (i.e., to insult someone or something, to make a joke, to express anger or frustration, or to describe someone or something as stupid), and whether or not they thought it was harmless to use the word in that particular situation. Two final questions focused on bystander behavior. The first question asked students what they did when they most recently heard the r-word (i.e., did nothing, joined in and used the word too, laughed, told others to stop using the word, or told a teacher or adult about the use of the word), and the second asked students what they thought most other students would do in a similar situation.

2.4.3. Student involvement in Unified Champion Schools program questionnaire

To measure student participation in the UCS program, students were asked a series of questions about their involvement in the R-word Campaign and other Whole School Awareness activities, Unified Sports, and Unified Club in the current or past school year. If students reported being involved in any activity (dichotomous "yes/no" questions) they then answered follow-up questions about the nature and duration of their participation.

2.5. Analytic strategy

As a first step, the present study sought to characterize the prevalence of the r-word in high schools and how adolescents are using the word as well as students' perceptions of the different uses of the word. Next, the study examined the relationship between student responses, how students felt their peers would respond, and the different ways the r-word was used. As a final step, this study used multilevel logistic regression modeling to determine the effect of student characteristics, context of using the r-word, and participation in UCS program activities on bystander behavior when hearing the r-word.

3. Results

3.1. Prevalence and use of the R-word

More than half of students (57%) reported hearing the r-word used at school at some point during the school year, with nearly all of these students (93%) hearing the word directed toward students without ID, and in stark contrast, less than a third of students (29%) hearing the word directed toward a student with ID. When students who reported hearing the r-word used at school were asked about the most recent time they heard the word used, it was most often toward another student (39%) or an object or situation (49%). When the r-word was directed toward another student, it was most often used as a joke (46%) or an insult (41%). When the r-word was directed at an object or situation, it was most often used to express anger or frustration (62%). The association between how the r-word was used and who/what it was directed toward was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 128.56$, $p < .001$). See Table 2 for how students used the r-word.

Further, these different uses of the r-word left distinct impressions upon students. Most students (60%) believed the use of the r-word was harmless when it was used to express anger or frustration toward an object or situation, while only one-third of students (37%) believed the use of the r-word was harmless when directed toward another student as an insult. The association between how the r-word was used and how it was perceived (i.e., harmless or harmful) was also significant ($\chi^2 = 11.95$, $p < .01$).

3.2. Student responses to the use of the R-word

Next, the study examined students' bystander behavior related to the most recent time they heard the r-word in their schools. Students were more likely to stand up to the use of the r-word when it was used to insult someone/describe someone as stupid (35%) or to express anger/frustration (23%). In contrast, when the r-word was used to make a joke, students were more likely to join in/laugh (34%). Overall, however, the most common student response to hearing the r-word, no matter the situation, was "doing nothing" (47%–68%). The association between students' bystander behavior and how the r-word was used was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 55.57$, $p < .001$), suggesting that students respond differently to the r-word across different contexts. See Table 3 for student

Table 2
How the r-word was used toward different targets.

	Insult/describe someone as stupid	Make a joke	Express anger/frustration
About a student (n = 224)	41%	46%	13%
About an object or situation (n = 290)	24%	14%	62%

Table 3
Bystander response to how the r-word was used in different contexts.

	Told the person to stop	Did nothing	Joined in/ laughed
Insult/describe someone as stupid (n = 187)	35%	52%	13%
Make a joke (n = 176)	19%	47%	34%
Express anger/frustration (n = 215)	23%	68%	8%

responses to the r-word.

The study also examined student responses compared to how they thought their peers would respond under the same circumstances. The students who did not take action against the use of the word were inclined to feel their peers would do the same, as most students who joined in/laughed or who did nothing felt their peers would have done the same (61% and 77%, respectively). In contrast, of the students who did take action, only 23% believed their peers would do the same.

3.3. Model predicting student bystander behavior

As a final step, this study examined the impact of student participation in the three UCS program activities (Unified Sports, Unified Club, R-word Campaign) on bystander behavior when hearing the r-word. In other words, were UCS program participants more likely than other students to take action against the use of the r-word?

The analysis proceeded in a stepwise fashion. Model 1 included all demographic factors, as well as student prosocialness and how the r-word was used. Models 2 through 4 added predictors one-by-one for participation in the R-word Campaign, Unified Sports, and Unified Club activities, respectively, with Model 4 including all predictors of interest. Both bystander behavior questions were coded as binaries ("doing something" vs. "not doing something" after hearing the r-word used). Table 4 displays the results of these analytic models. Together, these analyses reveal the importance of student characteristics, the context in which the r-word was used, and participation in the UCS program for predicting bystander behavior after hearing the r-word. Exponentiated logit coefficients, or odds ratios (OR), are presented for ease of interpretation.

Table 4
Logistic regression analysis concerning whether students "did something" after hearing the r-word (N = 543).

	Model 1 *OR* (SE)	*Model 2* *OR* (SE)	*Model 3* *OR* (SE)	*Model 4* *OR* (SE)
Gender (Female)	1.53 (0.35)	1.47 (0.34)	1.49 (0.35)	1.51 (0.36)
Grade (10th)	1.39 (0.45)	1.41 (0.46)	1.41 (0.46)	1.38 (0.45)
Grade (11th)	1.85 (0.61)	1.93* (0.64)	1.92 (0.64)	1.74 (0.59)
Grade (12th)	1.87* (0.56)	1.82* (0.55)	1.81 (0.55)	1.65 (0.51)
Black	0.95 (0.43)	1.01 (0.44)	1.00 (0.44)	1.01 (0.44)
Hispanic	0.76 (0.24)	0.80 (0.25)	0.80 (0.25)	0.81 (0.26)
Other Race/Ethnicity	0.91 (0.35)	0.99 (0.38)	0.98 (0.37)	1.07 (0.41)
Prosocialness	1.10*** (0.02)	1.09*** (0.02)	1.09*** (0.02)	1.09*** (0.02)
How word was used (To insult or describe as stupid)	1.82* (0.46)	1.81* (0.46)	1.79* (0.45)	1.83* (0.47)
How word was used (To make a joke)	0.86 (0.24)	0.87 (0.25)	0.87 (0.25)	0.87 (0.25)
Participation in R-word Campaign	–	1.84** (0.41)	1.80** (0.41)	1.64* (0.38)
Participation in Unified Sports	–	–	1.22 (0.49)	1.08 (0.44)
Participation in Unified Club	–	–	–	3.89** (1.84)

Note: All control variables were measured at the beginning of the year; the outcome and predictors of interest were measured at the end of year follow-up. Reference group for "How word was used" is *To express anger or frustration*.

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

In Model 1, two student characteristics were significant predictors of bystander behavior. First, grade played a role in bystander behavior among high-schoolers. Students in 12th grade were 87% more likely to "do something" after hearing the r-word than 9th graders were (OR = 1.87, $p < .05$). This finding was also robust in Model 2, but was attenuated to non-significance in Models 3 (OR = 1.81, $p > .05$) and 4 (OR = 1.65, $p > .05$) by the inclusion of participation variables, such as Unified Sports and Unified Club. This is likely due to differences in participation by grade, which were particularly apparent for Unified Club. The second student characteristic, prosocialness, was strongly predictive of bystander behavior (OR = 1.10, $p < .001$); for every additional point on the 36-point *Student Prosocialness Scale* there was a 10% increase in the likelihood of "doing something" after hearing the r-word, meaning that students who were more prosocial were much more likely to stand up and take action when hearing the r-word used than were students who were less prosocial. This finding was robust across all models, including Model 4 (OR = 1.09, $p < .001$). As concerns other student characteristics, neither gender nor race were significantly associated with bystander behavior.

In addition to student characteristics, the context in which the r-word was used was significantly associated with bystander behavior, as was suggested by the earlier chi-square statistics. Students who reported that the r-word was used to insult someone or describe someone or something as stupid were 82% more likely to "do something" than students who reported that the r-word was used to express anger or frustration (OR = 1.82, $p < .05$). There was no significant difference in bystander behavior for students who reported that the r-word was used to make a joke compared with students who reported that the r-word was used to express anger or frustration (OR = .86, $p > .05$). Supplemental analyses (not shown) revealed that students who reported that the r-word was used to insult someone or describe someone or something as stupid were also significantly more likely to "do something" than students who reported that the r-word was used as a joke (OR = 2.12, $p < .01$). These differences were also robust across all models, including Model 4 (OR = 1.83, $p < .05$), illustrating the importance of context for bystander behavior.

Model 2 added the predictor for student participation in the R-word Campaign, which was significant. Students who participated in the R-word Campaign were nearly twice as likely as non-participants to "do something" when they heard the r-word used, taking into account students' characteristics and the context of how the r-word was used (OR = 1.84, $p < .01$). This suggests that involvement in just one aspect of the UCS program, a school-wide campaign to stop the use of the r-word, can make high-schoolers more likely to engage in active bystander behaviors when they hear the r-word used by fellow students.

Model 3 added the predictor for student participation in Unified Sports, which was not significant. That is, students who participated in Unified Sports were no more or less likely than non-participants to "do something" when hearing the r-word.

Model 4 added the final predictor of interest, participation in the Unified Club. Unified Club participants were nearly four times as likely as non-participants to "do something" when they heard the r-word used, accounting for students' characteristics, the context of how the r-word was used, and participation in the R-word Campaign and Unified Sports (OR = 3.89, $p < .01$). This finding suggests that involvement in a more intensive UCS program activity such as Unified Club can have a major impact on high school students' likelihood of engaging in active bystander behavior when confronted with fellow students using the r-word. The coefficient for R-word Campaign participation was slightly attenuated but remained a significant positive predictor of bystander behavior (OR = 1.64, $p < .05$). This indicates that the impact of R-word Campaign participation on bystander behavior is driven in part, but not in whole, by participants' other characteristics (e.g., demographics, prosocialness, or involvement in other UCS program activities such as Unified Club).

4. Discussion

Even in schools that have made a commitment to social inclusion by implementing the UCS program, the adolescent lexicon still includes the invective "retard." Across the five schools in this study, just over half of adolescents heard the r-word used in the past school year. While there is clearly still work to be done, when compared to prevalence rates reported in previous studies with closer to 100% of students reporting hearing the r-word (Birth, 2017; Siperstein et al., 2010), the prevalence rate in the present study suggests some progress in reducing the use of the r-word among adolescents.

While the r-word is rarely directed at individuals with ID, it continues to be used frequently by adolescents as an insult or joke toward individuals without ID, or as an expression of anger or frustration toward an object or situation. The use of the r-word toward peers without ID not only seeks to demean them by creating an association between their behaviors and that of an individual with ID, but also acts to perpetuate the devaluation of individuals with ID (Albert et al., 2016). Although adolescents seem to understand that the r-word can be demeaning when used to insult another person, they do not seem to understand the second piece—that the r-word perpetuates stigma and negative attitudes toward individuals with ID. Even when the r-word is used as a joke or as an expression of anger or frustration, even when it is not directly aimed at anyone, it reinforces negative associations with ID and strengthens negative stereotypes. This indirect effect of using the r-word might be more difficult for adolescents to recognize and understand.

Furthermore, when students do intervene to stop the use of the r-word, they intervene almost exclusively in situations when the word is used as a direct insult, and rarely when it is used as a joke or to express anger or frustration. This suggests that adolescents feel the r-word is harmful and warrants intervention when there is a clear target who is directly hurt by the word, but not in broader contexts in which there is no clear and direct target. This widespread inaction when the r-word is used in any way other than as a direct insult again demonstrates that students do not understand the more indirect impact that the use of the r-word has in perpetuating stigma.

Taking action, no matter the context, is determined in part by students' personal characteristics. One personal characteristic that has been found to impact student bystander behavior is prosocialness (Albert et al., 2016). Prosocialness has been defined as a proclivity toward voluntary behavior that benefits others, and is made up of three components: empathy, concern for others, and adherence to social norms (Jensen, Vaish, Schmidt, Ford, & Moore, 2014). In the present study, prosocialness was a significant

predictor of student bystander behavior, with students who were more prosocial being more likely to intervene to stop the use of the r-word. While gender is also often found to predict student bystander behavior, with females being more likely to intervene than males (O'Connell et al., 1999; Oh & Hazler, 2009; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukialnen, 1996) gender was not a significant predictor in the present study. This is likely because prosocialness accounts for the gender difference, as females have been found to be more empathic and prosocial than males (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley, & Shea, 1991).

While past research has focused primarily on the empathy component of prosocialness as a predictor of student bystander behavior (Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009), a few recent studies have also found that perceived school norms surrounding bullying predict student bystander behavior (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2013; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). The present study suggests that social norms may play a role in student bystander behavior in the use of the r-word as well. Findings reveal that the large majority of students who do not intervene in the use of the r-word—those who join in or laugh, or do nothing—feel that their peers would do the same. Interestingly, only one-quarter of students who do intervene feel their peers would do the same. As such, perceived social norms may provide an excuse for some adolescents to support their own inaction in response to the use of the r-word, and may make students who do take action feel as though they are behaving against social norms by doing so.

Beyond context, personal characteristics, and social norms, it is clearly possible to effectively promote bystander behavior in adolescents through a school-based intervention program. In particular, students who participated in the R-word Campaign and Unified Club were significantly more likely to intervene when they heard the r-word, with Unified Club participation having the strongest impact. In fact, students who participated in a Unified Club were nearly four times more likely to intervene than their non-participating peers. Particularly promising is the finding that participation in these activities had an impact above and beyond context and students' personal characteristics. This suggests that involvement in these program activities does not merely reflect students' preexisting level of prosocialness, but rather that these UCS program activities have a unique impact in promoting active bystander behavior.

The Unified Club has several features that likely contribute to its success in promoting active bystander behavior. While these clubs involve smaller numbers of students within each school, they provide valuable opportunities that school-wide activities like the R-word Campaign cannot. Namely, Unified Clubs, in supporting the other UCS activities, provide opportunities for students with and without ID to socially interact, get to know one another, and work together toward common goals, which past research has shown is particularly important for reducing stigma toward marginalized groups (Allport, 1954; Sherif et al., 1961; Siperstein et al., 2007). Additionally, these clubs are often peer-led and emphasize student leadership—another common characteristic of successful school-based intervention programs (Connolly et al., 2015). In fact, the students who participate in the Unified Club are generally the students who plan and organize activities like the R-word Campaign for the school. It makes sense that participation in this activity has the largest impact on student bystander behavior, as the students who participate in Unified Club are the students who are most actively involved in promoting inclusion in their school and who have taken on the task of educating their peers about issues such as student use of the r-word. These are the student leaders delivering the message of inclusion to other students in the school and modeling appropriate behavior for their peers. These are also the students with the most opportunity to socially interact and get to know students with ID on a personal level, which may provide them with a deeper understanding of their peers with ID and how they are impacted by the use of the r-word.

The R-word Campaign also has several features that likely contribute to its positive impact on bystander behavior in the use of the r-word. First, it is a school-wide campaign that generally involves a large proportion of the student body within a school, thus providing an opportunity to both spread awareness and change student attitudes and behaviors on a large scale. Similar school-wide programming has been found to be effective in school-based interventions for bullying (Allen, 2010; Limber, 2011; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Second, these campaigns are often peer-led. Thus, the message of the campaign is being delivered and promoted by fellow students, rather than by adult authority figures such as teachers and administrators who students may be less willing to listen to. The message of the R-word Campaign is likely better received when delivered by peers (Libby et al., 2005). Seeing that other students care about this issue and are standing up to make change in their school may empower other students to do the same and may impact social norms at large, making it more difficult for students to justify their inaction in response to the use of the r-word. These campaigns often involve the public signing of a pledge not to use the r-word, an activity that utilizes peer influence in a positive way, as students who see their peers signing the pledge may be more likely to sign it themselves. Finally, R-word Campaigns often provide direct education about the impact of the r-word through educational videos or classroom activities. Similar educational activities have been effective in other school-based interventions for bullying (Kärnä et al., 2011).

Taken together, the UCS program utilizes a school-wide, peer-led approach and provides a variety of opportunities for students to become involved in program activities—all characteristics that have been found to be effective in empowering students to be active bystanders against bullying, and are clearly effective in promoting bystander behavior against the use of the r-word as well. While a few other interventions have been developed to combat the derogatory language commonly used in verbal bullying (terms related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and mental health), such programs have typically been brief and unidimensional, and very few studies have examined the effectiveness of such programs (Pinfold et al., 2003; Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). By incorporating both school-wide and small-group activities, the UCS program allows for programming that reaches across the student body but also has some depth, allowing some students the opportunity to socialize, get to know, and work directly with their peers with ID toward a common goal.

While these activities are effective in promoting bystander behavior among participating students, not all students in schools implementing the UCS program participate in these activities. Typically, the R-word Campaign, though open to all students, draws participation from about one-third of the student body, and even fewer students (around 10%) participate in Unified Clubs (Siperstein et al., 2017). As such, the number of students impacted by the program is relatively small, and for those students who are positively

impacted, they mostly take on an active bystander role when the r-word is used to insult someone or describe someone as stupid. Nonetheless, the finding that participation in these activities can encourage students to intervene in the use of the r-word demonstrates the promise of school-based interventions in reducing stigma toward individuals with ID. Further, students who participate in these activities may serve as positive role models to their peers, raising awareness about the harm of the r-word even among students who do not participate. If even a small number of students are willing to take a stand against the use of the r-word, this can serve as a step toward changing the culture of an entire school.

4.1. Limitations

The present study is not without limitations. The relatively small number of students that participate in Unified Sports at each school could have limited the ability to detect small effects of participation in this activity on student bystander behavior in the use of the r-word. Additionally, the present study relied on student self-report, which has been noted as a limitation in previous studies due to the potential impact of social desirability bias (Albert et al., 2016; Siperstein et al., 2010). Students are unlikely to endorse using the r-word, even if they have used the word, as this might reflect unfavorably on their character. Knowing that students may not respond accurately when asked about their own use of the r-word, the present study asked about others' use of the word. This study did, however, rely on self-reported bystander behavior in response to the r-word, which could be similarly impacted by social desirability bias. Nonetheless, more than half of students in this study endorsed bystander behavior that may be seen as socially *un*desirable (doing nothing or joining in/laughing). A final limitation is that this study did not collect information on socioeconomic status, which may have impacted students' ability to participate in UCS activities.

4.2. Implications

There is a clear need to foster a deeper understanding among adolescents about the stigmatizing nature of the r-word and its function in perpetuating the devaluation of individuals with ID, even in contexts in which no one seems to be directly hurt by the word. Moving forward, it will be important to identify the specific characteristics, the "active ingredients," of school-based interventions that are effective in increasing student understanding of the devaluation connoted by the r-word, regardless of the context in which the word is used; and thus encourage students to intervene *every* time the word is used, not just when it is used directly as an insult toward a peer.

It is possible, if not probable, that in the coming years the r-word will become just another term to denote "dumb" behavior, taking its place among words like "moron" and "idiot" which once classified persons with ID, but are used today with no awareness of this connection to ID. It is probable too that new terms classifying persons with ID will take the place of the r-word in adolescents' vocabulary of invectives; there will be new "r-words," so long as the underlying stigma remains. Because of this, addressing the stigma attached to the r-word, not just the word at face value, is vital to moving toward a more inclusive society that does not devalue individuals with ID.

While the r-word is just a word, the power of language should not be overlooked. Language creates possibilities for and places limits on how we think about the world around us. Language shapes our attitudes, promotes certain ways of thinking, and acts to uphold cultural norms and social constructs (Degeneffe & Terciano, 2011; McKay et al., 2015). Thus, the continued use of the r-word shapes the way we think about individuals with ID, and it does so in negative ways. The words that come to take the r-word's place will have the same power, and will continue to allow negative attitudes to be expressed and the stigma surrounding ID to persist. The underlying stigma must be addressed, if we are to end this cycle of negative language.

"Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me." The earliest record of this old adage dates back over 150 years, from the March 1862 edition of The Christian Recorder (Courage, 1862). In the complex social world of adolescence today, words *do* cause harm, and the r-word is one of these words. "Courage—True and False" provides additional wisdom:

> True courage consists in doing what is right, despite the jeers and sneers of our companions. Show me the boy or girl that has the courage to say, No! and I will show you a boy or girl that will succeed in the world. (p. 48)

By describing true courage as saying "No!" this quote serves as a reminder that sometimes doing what is right, such as creating positive change in one's school, requires going against current social norms, and courageously standing up to one's peers. So, how can schools engage students to solve the problem of the r-word? School-based intervention programs are a promising avenue for addressing both the r-word and its underlying stigma. The UCS program helps empower students to take action against the use of the r-word and may also cultivate in them the courage to promote a more inclusive culture and change the norms of their school as a whole.

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