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Peer Victimization in Schools:

A Set of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies of the Connections Among Peer Victimization, School Engagement, Truancy, School Achievement, and Other Outcomes

Executive Summary

By

Ken Seeley, EdD
Martin L. Tombari, PhD
Laurie J. Bennett, JD, PhD
And
Jason B. Dunkle, PhD

National Center for School Engagement

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An initiative of The Partnership for Families & Children
450 Lincoln Street, Suite 100, Denver, CO 80203
303/837-8466
www.schoolengagement.org

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Summary and Discussion of the Studies

These authors designed and completed three studies to explore the connections among the variables of bullying/peer victimization, school engagement and the school outcomes of attendance and achievement. We also addressed some of the limitations in previous research efforts dealing with these topics. Study 1 was a quantitative study whose purpose was to develop a predictive/causal model that would explain the relationships among peer victimization, school attendance, school engagement and school achievement. In this study we used direct measures of school attendance and achievement and a previously validated measure of school engagement. Study 2 was a qualitative study of the school experiences of bullied children. From this study we planned to gain insight into school instructional, interpersonal, and structural factors that affect the victimization-attendance connection. Study 3 was also a qualitative study of teachers' experiences with efforts to ameliorate the impact of school victimization.

The Quantitative Study: School Engagement Mediates Between Being a Victim And Being a Truant

The underlying premise of the quantitative study was that school truancy serves as a gateway to numerous negative outcomes for today's youth: dropping out of school, onset of drug use, engaging in criminal activity, and the like. Our conversations with youth in a truancy diversion program (see Appendix B) posited some connection between students being truant, and their experiencing victimization or bullying from their peers in school. The existing research literature suggested that such a connection may be less than direct – it could be difficult to establish that bullying somehow directly "causes"

truancy – but that an indirect connection, mediated by one or more other factors, might be shown to exist. A short-term longitudinal study was undertaken, in which 1000 students were surveyed in the fall and the spring of their 6th grade year. Two sets of questions were asked: one set pertaining to whether the students were engaged in school (behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally), and a second set pertaining to whether students were subject to actions by their peers that fall within the definition of bullying. Using structural equation modeling, the data collected were analyzed to determine the connections, if any, between being victimized, being engaged in school, and the outcomes reflected in school records of attendance and achievement (measured by grade point average).

What was learned from this analyzed data set was this: while bullying does not directly relate to truancy or to school achievement, a statistically significant relationship can be shown where the effects of bullying; victimization; can be mediated by the factor of school engagement. In other words, being bullied may not be a direct cause of truancy or low school achievement. If, however, bullying results in the victim becoming less engaged in school, that victim is more likely to cease attending and achieving; if the victim can remain or become engaged in school, his or her attendance and achievement are less likely to be effected.

If, as the quantitative study appears to show, school engagement acts as a protective factor between being bullied and being truant, what has to happen for that engagement to occur? What does school engagement actually mean, under these circumstances? Why do some students manage to be engaged in school, and then thrive after bullying, while others cannot seem to connect to school?

The First Qualitative Study: Schools Can Mitigate the Ill Effects of Bullying

The qualitative study delved more deeply into what it is that keeps bullied students engaged in school and away from succumbing to negative outcomes such as truancy and criminal activity. A retrospective study was employed, using extreme sampling techniques: one group of young, high-achieving advanced placement (AP) students in a suburban high school and a second group of young men incarcerated for a variety of crimes were surveyed to determine whether they had been bullied by their peers in grade school. Those with the highest cumulative scores on the bullying scale from each group were interviewed in depth about their having been bullied, their experiences with school generally, and what they perceive as having brought them to this particular point in their lives. The interview protocol was designed and the interview transcripts were analyzed using three different conceptual frameworks: the dimensions of the school itself (*e.g.*, its curriculum and pedagogy, structure, community, administration, and overall intentions/aims), the relationships between school and society (in particular, the bullying observed by the study participants to occur in society), and the interplay between public and private concerns in bullying situations (specifically, the public school's difficulties grappling with bullying as it arises within largely private relationships between and among its students).

What we learned from the rich and moving stories told by these young people breaks down into two categories: what schools currently do that helps and hurts bullied students, and what schools could (and, we suggest, should) give to victimized students that they deeply need. Schools help bullied kids by engaging them academically and/or in extracurricular activities; and by providing them with caring adults who support them

and model positive behavior. Schools hurt bullied students by changing the school structures from more engaging learning environments at the elementary level to less engaging environments at middle school and high school levels. These changes tend to distance the students from caring adults, dilute effective behavioral supervision, and change instruction from a differentiated and interactive pedagogy focused on individual student needs. In bullying and victimization at school, these structural changes result in a failure to intervene in bullying (or to assist or support its victims) early on when it first occurs; and by making victims feel even more isolated from the rest of the school community. Also emerging from the interview data were three things that bullied students need from their schools: 1) a safe place of refuge and belonging (where they can feel both safe, appreciated, and challenged in a constructive way); 2) responsible adults who can support and sustain them, and provide them examples of appropriate behavior to follow; and 3) a sense of future possibilities beyond the immediate dangers from the bullying that surrounds them, so as to persuade them that staying in school despite those dangers promises better things to come. In other words, schools should be providing a safe and nurturing learning environment, adults who show they care, and a path to a productive adulthood. This allows bullied students to overcome bullying effects. What the students generally agreed does <u>not</u> work to help them survive their victimization intact are superficial anti-bullying programs, engrafted on to existing curricula almost as an after-thought, which might afford lip service to school districts' responsibilities for addressing bullying concerns, but are usually ineffective and viewed by students as "tedious" or "lame."

The above-described findings led these researchers to want to hear from another group besides the students who suffer from bullying: the adults to whom the victims look to support and sustain them in the school setting. An opportunity arose to obtain insights from teachers who deal with bullied students, and a third, smaller study resulted.

The Teacher Study: Cure the Woes of Bullying through Caring and Community

During the course of putting this report together, one of its authors taught a graduate seminar to masters and doctoral students on Bullying and Qualitative Research. The students were all teachers at various levels in diverse K-12 classrooms. At the end of the seminar, the teacher/graduate students were assigned to submit short papers proposing either an intervention plan or a research design addressing bullying within their schools. Their papers turned out to be a rich source of data on these teachers observations and opinions about how bullying should be (and often is not being) handled in their schools' classrooms, cafeterias and corridors.

The strand of the standard bullying definition relating to power imbalances deeply resonated with these teachers. To them, the power inequities in the school setting, which observed by students in the outside world of family and friends and then emulated in the classroom, are key to bullying being sustained. The sense of isolation that many students feel at school only increases their vulnerability to bullying by their more powerful peers.

The antidote to problems of power and isolation, in the view of these teachers, is found in fostering a sense of community in school. To create community, teachers advocated the teaching of caring. First, students should be taught how to care for themselves. To accomplish this, the teachers argued for engaging kids in the stuff of school – school work, extra-curricular activities, and planning for a productive future so

that students can be fully engaged with their whole selves in their present. Second, students should be taught how to care for others. The best ways for this to occur are through teachers modeling caring behavior, and offering school-based opportunities for students to mentor other students. Finally, students should be taught how to care for their community. Community service projects, both inside and outside the school itself, provide an excellent path for teaching students how to care for the world around them. An added benefit from such projects is that they often remove students, albeit briefly, from existing, classroom-based power relationships into new unfamiliar environments where all students feel vulnerable, and in which mutually supportive collaborations can ensue allowing bullies and victims alike to see themselves and their classmates in a new light.

The teachers described two ways in which caring and community-building are frustrated. The first involved school administrators who "sweep bullying under the rug" – ignoring it or downplaying its significance – in order to maintain reputations or to avoid confrontations. The second involved what the teachers labeled "bullying-in-a-box" or "bullying-in-a-binder:" These are attempts by school districts and building leaders to address bullying issues by handing teachers some pre-fabricated anti-bullying curriculum (in a box or a binder) and directing them to teach its components in addition to the regular curriculum. The teachers viewed these types of anti-bullying interventions as a distracting and ineffective substitute for substantive leadership/district support for what is really needed to combat bullying: a caring school community in which individual students are meaningfully challenged and supported by the adults around them and each other.

What We Can Do About What We Have Learned: Study Implications and Suggestions

The implications from the above-described studies can best be understood when contrasted with a recently published report, prepared for the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, entitled "Effectiveness of Programmes to Reduce School Bullying: A Systematic Review" (Ttofi, Farrington & Baldry, 2008). This meta-analytical report reviewed evaluations of 59 school-based anti-bullying programs in various countries, including the United States. The only evaluations included in the study were those "comparing an experimental group who received the intervention with a control group who did not" (p. 6). It also excluded evaluations relying on measures other than student self-reports, largely of their perceptions of the level of bullying before and after the program interventions took place (or, with control groups, of their perceptions of the level of bullying at two points in time).

The report found that "overall, school-based anti-bullying programmes are effective in reducing bullying and victimization" (p. 6), and that the following program elements were most important (pp. 6-7):

- parent training
- information for parents
- school conferences
- disciplinary methods
- improved playground supervision
- classroom rules
- classroom management
- cooperative group work
- work with peers
- videos

The report found that "the programmes worked better with older children" (p. 7) and recommended that anti-bullying programs should therefore "be targeted on children aged

eleven or older, rather than on younger children" (p. 72). The report also cautioned that such programs "were less effective in the USA" than in other countries studied (such as Sweden and Norway).

Essentially, the Swedish report argues for discrete programs (such that effects can be cleanly tested), parental involvement, a focus on older children (from whom reliable self-reports are more easily obtained than from younger children), and an emphasis on rules, discipline, and supervision. When these elements are operative, bullying numbers go down in a measurable way.

How the Swedish Findings Connect to the Findings in this Report

The Swedish report operates from an assumption – shared by many in the field of bullying prevention and in the social sciences generally – that a problem can be most effectively addressed when its parameters can be cleanly measured and where experimental and control comparisons are clear. These "evidence-based" programs can only be established if the operable factors and variances can be sufficiently narrowed so that they can be measured to produce the evidence. A program failing to meet such strict conditions is probably suspect. Thus, the important design "elements" of the different school-based programs covered in the Swedish report focused heavily on management, rules, supervision, parental training and conferences, the showing of videos, and the self-reports of older children: all things that can be measured using the scientific basis of experimental design as the quality standard..

From our studies we have learned, instead, that bullying is a messy thing, not clear or easily limited at all. It is not that the learning from the three studies comprising this report disagrees with the meta-analysis of the Swedish findings. This report provides

new evidence for a fuller picture of the complexity of bullying and victimization and their correlates. Obviously parental involvement is a good thing. Increased supervision, improved classroom management and more even-handed discipline were referenced by students and teachers alike as necessary school improvements. But bullying itself, however, rooted as it is in the power inequities of our society and the out-of-school experiences and observations of every child attending school, is not as simply and easily eradicated through discrete and measurable school-based programs as the Swedish report might suggest.

If one of the reasons that we care about school bullying is its ultimate outcomes – not just whether raw bullying numbers decrease, but whether the ever-present victims of bullying go on to college or to crime – then we must look beyond narrow programs that produce statistically significant numbers, and toward broader (and, unfortunately, less easily measurable) efforts striking at the heart of the victimization experience of these students. What can a child who is repeatedly and severely harassed by others do to overcome this experience in order to continue to attend school, graduate, and ultimately thrive? If a school cannot eliminate bullying altogether – and even the "best" programs in the Swedish report are associated with a decrease in victimization of 23% at most (Ttofi et al., 2008, p. 7), leaving 77% of the bullying presumably in place – what can the schools do to help and support that victimized child?

Recommendations

Based upon the findings of the three studies of this report, and the extensive literature review, we make the following recommendations:

1. Focus on engagement. Schools and their leadership should redouble their efforts to reach each child through heightened focus on schools' primary

educational mission – to create the conditions for learning for all students-and thereby help the bullied children in their midst become productive adults.

2. Model caring behavior. Teachers and administrators need to be trained in how to model appropriate caring in the school community and this should be developed and made part of teacher and principal licensure programs and continuing professional development curricula.

3. Offer mentoring programs. Mentorship of specific students should be made part of the job description of every adult working in the school setting. Students should be given opportunities to mentor and lead other students – in the classroom, in cooperative learning situations, and/or as part of service learning programs.

4. Provide opportunities for community service, in and out of school. Schools should take the initiative to involve students in community service both in and out of school as an integral part of building school community and counteracting the isolation and pain of bullying.

5. Re-examine the transitions in the school structure. Schools should seriously explore the possibility of eliminating or at least facilitating the transition from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school, by eliminating transitions such as creating K-8 schools or develop transition programs with a range of services from universal to intensive so as to better acclimate students to this abrupt shift in their educational environments.

6. Start early, with the young ones. Schools should direct resources towards recognizing and intervening in school bullying in the early grades, including teacher and administrator training in how to recognize the difference between bullying and playful banter.

7. Resist the temptation of "bullying-in-a-box." Schools should avoid narrow, quick-fix anti-bullying programs, and instead focus on sincerely engaging students in the real work of school: by providing them with challenging work to do, by giving them adults who support them and model caring behavior, and by pointing the way to the future possibilities of productive adulthood.

Conclusions and Comments

Bullying and victimization of students in schools have received a great deal of deserved attention. The more we learn about creating safe and civil learning environments the more we understand that from the student's perspective it is a complex social-emotional phenomenon that plays out differently on an individual level. We began

this study thinking that we would find direct relationships between bullying and truancy and delinquency. What we found and reported above in brief form, we believe is more important than just correlates among variables. The power of victimization to distance students from learning can be overcome by schools adopting intentional student engagement strategies to create positive learning environments that produce academic achievement.

The full report provides great detail on how we got to these recommendations and conclusions. The literature review is timely and extensive to help program designers and researchers understand where we are and far we need to go. The quantitative study using Structural Equation Modeling provides evidence among the key factors that point to the power of engagement for victims of bullying, and the lack of causative relationships between bullying and truancy. The qualitative studies look at different perspectives on the problem to help explain some of the "whys" behind the quantitative data and the findings reported in the literature. The report is designed to be used as reference material as well as a comprehensive view of the problem to inform those seeking program designs or researchers finding interesting new topics to study.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research conducted by CFFC about youth out of the educational mainstream. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions, expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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