BULLYING IN SCHOOLS: AN OVERVIEW *

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Abstract

Researchers from the National Center for School Engagement conducted a quantitative study to examine the impact of bullying on student engagement, attendance, and achievement and two qualitative studies to explore instructional, interpersonal, and structural factors at school that affect the connection between bullying and school attendance. The researchers found that a caring school community, in which students are challenged academically and supported by the adults, can serve as a powerful antidote to the process by which victimization distances students from learning and contributes to myriad other problems, including truancy and academic failure.

Due to financial considerations, OJJDP elected not to proceed with publication of the remaining titles in the Bullying in Schools series. For further information about this research, refer to the final grant report at http://www.ncjrs.gov/app/publications/abstract.aspx?ID=256074.

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INTRODUCTION

The harmful effects of bullying cannot be overstated. Reports of bullying in the 1990s show that, in extreme cases, victims may face shooting or severe beatings and may even turn to suicide (Rigby and Slee 1999). These reports have triggered public action, such that more than 20 states currently have laws that require schools to provide education and services directed toward the prevention and cessation of bullying.

A well-known meta-analysis of school-based anti-bullying programs, conducted by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, found that these programs result in a 17-23% reduction in bullying (Ttofi, Farrington, and Baldry 2008). Ttofi and colleagues report that anti-bullying programs are less effective in the United States than in Europe in reducing the incidence and prevalence of bullying in schools that operate the bullying reduction programs. In response, the current study investigates how American schools can support victimized children and encourage them to graduate and thrive.

To determine the causes of bullying in schools and to inform the development of effective intervention strategies, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention funded a series of studies in 2007 at the National Center for School Engagement. The research focused on the connection between different types and frequencies of bullying, truancy, and student achievement, and whether students' engagement in school mediates these factors.

The researchers completed three studies. The first was a quantitative analysis of students that would support the development of a predictive model to explain the relationships among bullying (referred to in the study as peer victimization), school attendance, school engagement, and academic achievement. The second study was a qualitative study in which researchers interviewed victims about their experiences to gain insight into how bullying in school affects attendance. The third study was a qualitative analysis of teachers' experiences in working to ameliorate the impact of bullying in schools.

In this bulletin, the authors compare the results of these studies with the results of the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention report (Ttofi, Farrington, and Baldry 2008), which is currently viewed as one of the most comprehensive studies on anti-bullying programs worldwide. Ttofi and her colleagues conducted a meta-analysis– *Effectiveness of Programmes to Reduce School Bullying: A Systematic Review* –that reviewed evaluations of 59 school-based anti-bullying programs in various countries, including the United States. In addition to their comparisons with the Swedish study, the authors recommend strategies and programs to combat bullying in schools that are based on the findings from the three studies described here and a literature review.

STUDY OVERVIEW AND MAIN FINDINGS

Following is an overview of each study and findings from the overall research project.

Quantitative Study: School Engagement is a Protective Factor for Victims

This study examined how different types of peer victimization (i.e., bullying) impact school attendance. The underlying premise of this study was that truancy serves as a gateway to numerous negative outcomes for today's youth –dropping out of school, using drugs, engaging in criminal activity, and more.

The authors conducted a short-term longitudinal study in which they surveyed 1,000 students in the fall and the spring of their sixth-grade year. The survey participants answered two sets of questions: one set pertained to whether the students were behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally engaged in school; a second set pertained to whether students experienced specific kinds of bullying by

their peers. The authors used structural equation modeling (a statistical technique to estimate cause-and-effect relationships between various factors) to determine the connections between being victimized, being engaged in school, school attendance, and school achievement (measured by grade point average).

Although prior research suggests that student victimization has a significant impact on attendance (Banks 1997; Fried and Fried 1996; Hoover and Oliver 1996), the findings from this study suggest that these relationships are weak, at least for the sixth-grade student sample used for data analysis. The study, however, is limited because it is a quantitative analysis that examined only sixth-grade students in a suburban Denver school district. In this study, although bullying does not directly relate to truancy or to school achievement, the authors observed a statistically significant relationship between bullying and school attendance when mediated by the factor of school engagement. In other words, if 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 will be less affected.

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

Researchers conducted two qualitative studies to determine what factors cause some bullied students to remain in school and cause others to drop out or become delinquent.

The first qualitative study examined what keeps bullied students engaged in school and away from negative behaviors such as truancy and criminal activity. The authors employed a retrospective study that randomly surveyed two groups of youth about their experiences with bullying in grade school. The survey sample consisted of:

- A group of 35 high-achieving, advanced placement students in a suburban high school.
- A group of 65 young men incarcerated for a variety of crimes.

Researchers interviewed participants from both groups with the highest cumulative scores on the bullying scale about their victimization, their general experiences with school, and what they perceived as having brought them to this point in their lives. The researchers then analyzed the transcripts.

The data describe how schools help and hurt victims and what schools should do to support victimized students. Schools help bullying victims by engaging them in academics and/or in extracurricular activities and by providing them with caring adults who support them and model positive behavior. Schools hurt bullied students when they change the school structure –from more engaging learning environments at the elementary level to less engaging environments at the middle and high school levels. These changes tend to distance the students from caring adults, dilute effective behavioral supervision, and change instruction from a differentiated, interactive pedagogy focused on individual student needs to a mass instructional pattern of 50-minute periods with six different teachers who teach 150 students per day.

A changing school structure often results in a failure to intervene in bullying (or to assist or support victims) when it first occurs. These changes may also make victims feel even more isolated from the rest of the school community. This happens because the large numbers of students in secondary schools can create an impersonal climate of anonymity that provides no time in the daily schedule for students to connect with adults and other students in the kinds of social interactions that would foster opportunities for them to discuss their victimization experiences.

The interview data also highlighted what victims need from their schools–

- A place of refuge where they can feel safe, appreciated, and challenged in a constructive way.
- Responsible adults who can support and sustain them and provide them examples of appropriate behavior.
- A sense of future possibility to persuade them that staying in school, despite the bullying, promises better things to come.

These factors allow bullied students to overcome the effects of bullying. In contrast, the study participants agreed that superficial anti-bullying programs, grafted onto existing curriculums to fulfill a school district's responsibility to address bullying concerns, are an ineffective way to combat bullying.

Second Qualitative Study: What Teachers Say About Bullying in Their Schools

The third study involved the adults to whom bullying victims look to support and sustain them in the school setting– the teachers. In this study, 11 teachers of kindergarten through 12th-grade students shared their observations about bullying in the school setting and described their opinions on what schools do to mitigate or exacerbate its effects.

As part of their graduate-level coursework, the teachers submitted papers proposing an intervention plan or a research design to address bullying within their schools. They presented these plans in focus groups and through structured interviews with a researcher who worked to capture the essence of their ideas. According to the teachers, most students observe power differences and negative, domineering behaviors in the outside world, in the media, or at home. Students emulate these behaviors in the school setting and use their power to intimidate others by physical or verbal means. This abuse of power can be exploited on victims in the form of bullying. The sense of isolation that many students feel at school only increases their vulnerability to being bullied by their more powerful peers.

A music teacher explained how power differences between students in school can lead to bullying, suggesting that students feel the need to "find something in their life at which they feel superior." She said, "When students do not have something in their lives that makes

them feel good, I think they turn to more negative ways to feel that sense of power, like bullying, drugs, and/or gangs." Students observe how people misuse their power to dominate situations in the outside world, so they use bullying to seek a personal sense of power in their own lives.

The teachers suggested that the antidote to these problems is to foster a sense of community in school. To create community, teachers recommended that students should be taught how to care. First, students should be engaged in schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and planning for their futures as a means to teach them how to care for themselves. Second, students should be taught how to care for others. Teachers should model caring behavior, and schools should offer opportunities for students to mentor other students. Finally, students should be taught how to care for their community. Community service projects are an excellent way to teach students how to care for the world around them. An added benefit of such projects is that they often remove students from existing classroom-based power relationships and place them in unfamiliar environments where all students feel vulnerable. These mutually supportive collaborations may allow bullies and victims to see themselves and their classmates in a new light.[1]

The teachers also described two ways in which caring and community building are hindered. The first involved school administrators who "sweep bullying under the rug" (i.e., ignoring it or downplaying its significance). The second involved school districts' attempts to address bullying issues by requiring educators to teach a prefabricated curriculum. The teachers viewed these approaches as ineffective substitutes for much-needed district and administration support and professional development.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the studies outlined above can best be understood when contrasted with the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention's report. The report, titled *Effectiveness of Programmes to Reduce School Bullying: A Systematic Review*, can be considered noteworthy because of the sample size and the rigorous study-selection procedures employed.

Swedish researchers Ttofi and colleagues conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of existing evaluations of anti-bullying programs. The study included only evaluations that compared experimental and control groups and relied on student self-reports for data; the researchers excluded evaluations that did not meet these criteria.

Ttofi and colleagues reported that the programs reduced bullying overall and were most effective for older children. They recommend that the programs target children age 11 and older. They suggest that the following actions encouraged program success: educating parents, communicating with parents, improving playground supervision, showing educational videos, and providing effective disciplinary methods, classroom rules, and classroom management.

Although the authors of this bulletin generally agree with Ttofi and colleagues' findings, the Swedish researchers operate from the assumption –one that many in the fields of bullying prevention and the social sciences share– that a problem can be most effectively addressed when its parameters can be cleanly measured and when experimental and control comparisons are clear. The "important" design elements of the programs covered in the Swedish report focused on variables, including management, rules, supervision, parent training, conferences, showing videos, and self-reports from older children– all factors that can be measured scientifically.

THE PERVASIVENESS OF BULLYING: DINNER WITH DIGNITARIES

A "Stop Bullying Summit" was convened in Denver, CO, in June 2006. The night before the summit, the sponsoring organizations (The Colorado Trust, Creating Caring Communities, and The Partnership for Families & Children) hosted a dinner that brought together 40 academicians and practitioners (teachers, school administrators, law enforcement, and bullying-prevention specialists) for a discussion about issues of note. The moderator asked the attendees a series of questions to kick off the discussion.

The first question asked how many of the attendees had gone to grade school. All attendees raised their hands. The next query asked how many went to college– again, the response was overwhelming. When asked about graduate degrees, all but a handful responded in the affirmative.

Then, the moderator proffered a definition of bullying that many researchers accept (Smith et al. 2002):

- Intentional harm-doing, which can take a number of forms, including:
  - Physical victimization (contact or mean gestures).
  - Verbal victimization (name-calling or taunts).
  - Indirect victimization (such as intentional exclusion from a group).
  - Cyberbullying.
- Carried out repeatedly over time.
- Within an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power.

The moderator then asked how many attendees bullied others or faced bullying when they were in grade school.

Out of this well-educated, highly accomplished group of adults, nearly everyone raised his or her hand. Bullying is a common experience for all people and not simply for "high-risk" populations typically identified among low-income disenfranchised groups.

The authors of this bulletin provide a more complex picture of bullying and its correlates. Bullying is a complicated issue that is neither consistently defined in schools nor easily quantified. Therefore, although researchers can learn much from the scientific meta-analyses (like the Swedish study), they can also learn from qualitative research and case studies that do not lend themselves to traditional experimental design research. For example, interest in anti-bullying efforts grew out of school shootings (such as Columbine) and suicides. Events of this sort would not be statistically significant in any quantitative study of school bullying. If statistical studies cannot accurately account for serious events, identify the needs of young children who may not recognize certain events as bullying, or report the effects of programs with elements that are not easily quantifiable, they need to be supplemented with qualitative studies that can add important context to the more optimal ways to reduce victimization in schools.

For anti-bullying programs to provide long-term outcomes –not simply decrease victim numbers but help victims remain crime free as adults– researchers must look beyond narrow programs that produce statistically significant numbers, toward broader (and possibly less measurable) efforts that make a difference in the lives of the victims. Likewise, schools must continue to reach out to all bullying victims, using methods catered to the community's specialized needs, not just programs that conform to a measurable standard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors make the following recommendations for anti-bullying programs in the United States. These recommendations are based on their findings and an extensive literature review:[2]

- Increase student engagement.
- Model caring behavior for students.
- Offer mentoring programs.
- Provide students with opportunities for service learning as a means of improving school engagement.
- Address the difficult transition between elementary and middle school (from a single classroom teacher to teams of teachers with periods and class changes in a large school) (Lohaus et al. 2004).

Increase Student Engagement

Bullied children who remain engaged in school attend class more frequently and achieve more. Challenging academics, extracurricular activities, understanding teachers and coaches, and a focus on the future help keep victimized children engaged in their education (Bausell 2011). Schools, administrations, and districts that wish to stave off the negative effects of bullying must redouble their efforts to engage each student in school. Typical school engagement strategies include (Karcher 2005):

- Providing school-based mentorship options for students.
- Providing a caring adult for every student through an advisory program or similar arrangement.
- Carefully monitoring attendance, calling home each time a student is absent, and allowing students the ability to make up missed work with support from a teacher.
- Adopting and implementing the National School Climate Standards from the National School Climate Council (2010).
- Promoting and fostering parent and community engagement, including afterschool and summer programs.

Model Caring Behavior

Human relationships populate students' lives outside the school setting: in their parents' workplaces, in families, in video games, on TV, and in the movies. In contrast, school provides a controlled environment where children can experience caring adults who can exercise power in a non-abusive, mentoring way. These adults can demonstrate that leadership, not abuse, is the appropriate way to use their positions of authority constructively. Schools should offer training programs on how to model appropriate caring and leadership behavior for teachers and administrators. This training should be consistent with the school engagement strategies mentioned above and incorporated into licensure programs and continuing professional development activities.

Offer Mentoring Programs

Of the students interviewed for this study, those who felt that they had one or more adults to turn to tended to do well, even during the worst bullying. When those individuals did not exist or disappeared, the lives of the victimized children took a downward turn. Some looked elsewhere for support and, in certain cases, gangs became the most viable option. The authors recommend that schools make mentoring part of the job description of every adult in the school. (A sole school counselor with an excessive student load cannot provide effective mentorship.) Each student should know the specific adult in school to whom he or she can go for support, regardless of the issue, and that adult should be open and available. Substantial literature and research support for school-based mentoring exists (Cavell and Smith 2005; Herrera et al. 2007; King et al. 2002; Tierney, Grossman, and Resch 1995).

Students should also be given opportunities to mentor and lead other students to help them understand power-based relationships between students, faculty, or others.

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[1] For more information about community service and other afterschool programs that may help prevent bullying, visit http://www.stopbullying.gov/community/tip_sheets/youth_programs.pdf.

[2] For more background information on these recommendations, see *Bullying in Schools: A Critical Analysis of the Literature*, in this series.

This allows them to practice being in a position of strength and to learn to use that authority in caring, productive, and enriching ways. Such opportunities can occur in the classroom, in cooperative learning situations, or as part of community service programs. Karcher (2005) comments on the effect of peer mentoring for students in summarizing the research on cross-age mentoring, suggesting that "small single-site randomized studies have revealed consistently positive findings." He reports that the outcomes of these studies are consistent with adult-to-youth mentoring programs in school, suggesting that peer mentoring may improve youth's school connectedness, attitudes toward peers, self-efficacy, academic achievement, social skills, and behavior problems.

Provide Opportunities for Community Service

Community service provides an optimum venue for mentoring to occur. It allows students to break out of the hierarchical student relationships within the classroom, demonstrate new strengths, collaborate, mentor others, and show leadership in ways that the classroom does not afford. Teachers report that such service helps community building and counteracts the isolation and pain of bullying.

Address the Difficult Transition between Elementary and Middle School

For many youth, the transition from elementary to middle school is rough. Youth report that they lost a bond with their single classroom teacher, their class sizes ballooned, the instruction became more lecture and test based and less interactive, and they spent more time in hallways and other unsupervised places. The opportunities for isolation, alienation, and disengagement increased, and any school-based havens from being bullied disappeared. The authors recommend that schools explore the possibility of facilitating this difficult transition, for example, by creating K-8 schools or other transition programs to better acclimate students to the new educational environment.

Start Prevention Programs Early

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention report demonstrates that current programs targeting older students provide a larger decrease in bullying than programs for younger children. However, the authors of this bulletin caution schools not to interpret those findings as evidence to limit anti-bullying efforts to older students. The youth interviewed in the OJJDP-funded studies reported here all experienced traumatic, victimizing behavior in school when they were very young. They reported thinking that they were weak, worthless, somehow at fault, and always at risk. One study participant confessed that he started bringing weapons to school and joined a gang at the age of eight in an effort to protect himself. An anti-bullying program aimed at older children would have completely missed this student. Another young study participant pled for early intervention:

> *When they see [bullying] in the first, second, and third, fourth grade, even in fifth grade, they need to stop it; otherwise, it will just keep going and evolve into something more dangerous. They need to catch it [early] and try to stop it or they're going to, like, ruin someone's life.*

The teachers who took part in the second qualitative study agreed with this sentiment. Participating early elementary teachers described the effectiveness of mentoring activities between regular students and special education students and discussed how these activities increase collaboration and reduce abuse among classmates. The authors recommend that schools provide teachers and administrators with the training to recognize bullying and handle incidents, especially in the early grades. Schools may wish to begin by adopting and

LIFE BEYOND VICTIMIZATION: ANNA* THE SURVIVOR

The following account illustrates the concepts discussed in this bulletin. The authors attended a brown-bag luncheon that was sponsored by a nonprofit foundation, where a high school girl, Anna, was one of the speakers. Family life had been difficult for Anna; she had faced abuse and endured the death of loved ones. She grew up with a single parent. Anna told the attendees the tale of the demeaning bullying that she suffered at the hands of her peers throughout middle and high school. She was ostracized, restricted to only certain bathroom stalls to avoid "contaminating" the others, slurred and degraded in hallway graffiti, and pushed or shoved on her way to school. The bullying was constant and unrelenting. She recounted that she felt driven, on occasion, to demonstrate that she was not entirely powerless, so she bullied those weaker than herself–hoping she would thereby escape her own victimization. She pondered suicide and wanted to harm her tormentors. Anna found little help from the adults in her school. Teachers and counselors ignored her situation unless Anna directly asked them to address it. Even then, they carelessly made her private travails public, which only made matters worse. Her mother tried to help, but the school staff would not listen to her.

Even so, Anna told us, she was able to turn her life around. She confided in a Girl Scout leader, who began to take a continuing interest in her. Her mother supported her at home. She found two friends–a disabled girl, who was also a victim of bullying, and a popular girl, who saw Anna for the valuable person she was. Anna also pushed herself to get involved in school activities such as the student council, the prom committee, and grassroots bullying-prevention efforts. She began to stand up for herself and for others, and as she gained confidence, the victimization subsided. Today, Anna is a survivor who is doing quite well for herself. She has become confident and assertive and has engaged in school more. She is on track for graduation.

**Name has been changed to protect the minor's identity*.

implementing the National School Climate Standards (National School Climate Council 2010). Specific ideas for handling bullying incidents can be found in resource books for school staff, such as the Bully Proofing Your School series (Bonds and Stoker 2000; Garrity et al. 1994) and the Handbook of Bullying in Schools (Jimerson, Swearer, and Espelage 2010).

Resist the Temptation to Use Prefabricated Curriculums

Too many teachers in the second qualitative study related stories of how busy administrators, hoping to eradicate bullying with minimal effort, handed canned anti-bullying materials to teachers and provided no training on how to implement anti-bullying programs. Anti-bullying programs should combine skill-building approaches with consistent school-wide policies and practices that involve students, parents, and the community in setting social norms. As a result of their studies, the authors suggest that engaging students in schoolwork, using the engagement strategies suggested above, will help avoid and reduce victimization and bullying.

CONCLUSION

Research has shown that bullying is a complex social and emotional phenomenon that affects victims in many different ways. The authors began this study with the hypothesis that bullying and truancy were directly related. However, evidence showed that bullying is not simply a matter of correlates among variables. Complex problems cannot be solved with simple, formulaic solutions. Rather, results showed that victimization can distance students from learning. Schools can overcome this negative effect if they adopt strategies that engage students in their work, creating positive learning environments that produce academic achievement.

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