



Violence, bullying and academic achievement: A study of 15-year-old adolescents and their school environment

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study investigated academic achievement among adolescents exposed to violence, sexual abuse and bullying. Moreover, we sought to determine the individual and contextual influence of the adolescents' school environment in terms of bullying, classmate relationships and teacher support on academic achievement. Finally, we wished to assess whether school-level influence is different for the adolescents exposed to violence and sexual abuse versus the adolescents not exposed to these forms of abuse.

Methods: This is a cross-sectional study of a sample of 7,343 adolescents between the ages of 15 and 16 from 56 schools in Oslo, Norway. We investigated associations between violence, sexual abuse, bullying, classmate relationships, teacher support and academic achievement. Linear regression was used to investigate associations on the individual level. Multilevel analyses were conducted to test for school level differences while controlling for both individual and contextual factors.

Results: On the individual level, all combinations of violence and sexual abuse categories were significantly associated with lower grades. This was also true for bullying, while teacher support resulted in better grades. At the school level, the analysis showed that students in schools with higher levels of bullying performed worse academically. Each unit of increment in bullying in school corresponded to an average 0.98 point decrease in grades ($p < .01$) when we controlled for sociodemographic characteristics. The association remained significant when the model was tested separately for the nonbullied students, with a small reduction in the coefficient value ($-.84, p < .01$). No overall significance was found for the interaction between the school environment and adolescent exposure to violence, indicating that the school environment affects all students.

Conclusion: Factors on both levels can contribute to reduced grades. This stresses the need to investigate individual and contextual factors simultaneously when examining academic achievement. Our results indicated that students attending schools with higher levels of bullying may show poorer school performance. This was true for all students regardless of previous exposure to violence and sexual abuse. This emphasizes the need for preventive efforts that focus not only on vulnerable groups, but on all students and the school context.

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Introduction

Exposure to bullying, physical violence and sexual abuse may result in an array of negative outcomes, such as poor mental health, physical health and lower sense of well-being (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Killen, 2009; Massie & Szajnberg, 2006; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2012; Olweus, 1994, 1997; Rigby, 2000). This study will focus on potential negative consequences of bullying, violence and sexual abuse in terms of academic achievement. Adolescents' academic achievements are of great importance for prospective school choices and consequently a long term career. Previous research has found that bullied and abused children or adolescents perform worse in school compared with their nonabused peers (Crozier & Barth, 2005; Hoffman-Plotkin & Twentyman, 1984; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997; Perez & Widom, 1994; Rethon, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2011; Slade & Wissow, 2007; Veltman & Browne, 2001).

Social learning theory, developmental theory and the traumagenic perspectives are some of the theories applied to explain this relationship (Leiter & Johnsen, 1994). Summarizing these theories, abuse may result in lack of support at home, disruptive behavior at school, poor self-esteem and low self-efficacy which in turn can affect the individual's academic performance.

Recently it has been debated whether peer victimization and bullying should be perceived as parts of the same phenomenon. Some researchers argue that bullying should be understood as a sub-category of peer victimization, while others argue it should be understood as a separate phenomenon and not part of a broader definition of peer victimization (Finkelhor, Turner, & Hamby, 2012; Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Ormrod, 2011). In our study, we focused on exploring the relationship between bullying in a school setting in relation to physical and sexual victimization that predominantly occur outside of school, although realizing the possible overlap between them.

Negative consequences of physical violence and sexual abuse may differ depending on both the specific type of abuse and exposure to single- versus multiple traumatization (Arata, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Bowers, & O'Brien, 2007; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Killen, 2009). Earlier studies have focused on abuse as one category or on singular subtypes of abuse and their subsequent outcomes (Crozier & Barth, 2005; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997). More recently, researchers have explored the potential impact of multiple types of abuse and their combinations (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Lau et al., 2005; Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2008). Less focus has been placed on how different combinations of individual exposure are related to school climate.

The ecology of adolescents and their individual experiences may therefore be important to identify when investigating academic performance (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). The school in which adolescents spend the majority of their time is a critical arena of social support and academic development. Research has shown how safe and healthy school environments contribute to improved academic performance (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997). Students who feel supported by their teachers experience an increased sense of belonging, more engagement, have fewer behavior problems and perform better academically in school (Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, & Zhen Li, 2010; Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010). Peer support may also improve psychological well-being, self-esteem, academic goals and social adjustment to school (Wentzel, 1998). Conversely, an unhealthy school environment may have a negative impact on a student's academic performance (Killen, 2009; Veltman & Browne, 2001). High levels of bullying in school, for example, can be an indicator of such an unhealthy environment. A cross-national study conducted in 40 countries reported that one in four students were involved in bullying behaviors, illustrating the high prevalence of bullying in schools (Craig et al., 2009). Moreover, research at the individual level has documented that bullied students are more likely to perform worse in school compared with students who are not bullied (Juvonen, Yueyan Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Rethon et al., 2011).

Few studies on bullying have investigated the influence of school-level factors on individual academic performance. Research has indicated that school-level factors may explain 10% of the variance in individual grades (Seilstrøm & Bremberg, 2006). Konishi et al. (2010) conducted one of the few multilevel studies in this area and found that school-level bullying was associated with lower grades. This stresses the need to simultaneously investigate individual and contextual influences on students' academic achievement.

For victims of abuse, the social environment becomes especially important because it may serve as a protective factor against some of the negative consequences of the abuse and potentially affect the adolescent's development in a positive way (Killen, 2009; Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). On the other hand, a negative school climate may contribute to a negative personal development (Killen, 2009). Little is known about the interplay between the individual burden of abuse experiences and the social climate at school.

The aim of this study was to assess the importance of individual exposure to abuse, school related bullying experiences and the school environment in relation to academic achievement. First, we investigated whether adolescents exposed to bullying, violence or sexual abuse perform worse academically than their nonexposed peers. Second, we estimated the associations between academic achievement and individual and contextual levels of bullying, classmate relationships and teacher support. Finally, we examined the interaction between individual abuse experiences and school climate as predictors for academic achievement.

The section on youths in the Oslo Health Study (HUBRO) offered a unique opportunity to investigate these relationships in a study of a large cohort of adolescents living in Oslo.

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