



Analyzing sub-population profiles and risk factors for school bullying



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 October 2012

Received in revised form 19 March 2013

Accepted 20 March 2013

Available online 27 March 2013

Keywords:

School bullying

Bullying prevention

Risk factor analysis

Peer effects

School mental health

ABSTRACT

Drawing from a local sample of 1822 7th and 8th grade students, this study used Latent Class Analysis (LCA) and Latent Class Regression Analysis (LCRA) to identify sub-population profiles and risk factors for school bullying. Four sub-population profiles of school bullying risk were yielded from this approach. These profiles included students who presented little need for formal services as well as students who manifested needs for wrap-around support. Importantly, additional regression analyses related student membership in particular risk profile groups to the support they receive from peers, teachers, and parents. Several significant practice implications for bullying prevention and Response-to-Intervention (RTI) frameworks accompany the findings. Above all, school bullying interventions should be implemented with prudence because even the best intended ones carry the potential for harm.

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1. Introduction

School bullying is receiving increased attention in social and educational research, practice, and policy circles—and for good reason. When children are victimized by school bullying, sub-optimal outcomes often occur. These undesirable outcomes include academic difficulties (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010), psychological problems (Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001), and social relationship challenges (Graham, Bellmore, & Juvonen, 2003; Ladd, 2003). In the most severe instances, the untoward effects of bullying may contribute to suicidal ideation and student deaths (Mayer & Furlong, 2010; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010).

For these reasons, preventing bullying and its harmful correlates is an urgent priority. Of particular need are empirically-driven models that are action-oriented (Swearer et al., 2010). Action-oriented models help inform data-driven interventions that social workers, educators, and other professionals can use to address bullying in their own school communities (see also, Moss, 2012).

This paper is structured accordingly. It advances an empirical model of four bullying-related “risk profiles,” i.e., data-driven descriptions of identifiable student sub-populations. When examined individually and

collectively, the four risk profiles advanced in this paper offer practitioners and policy makers a more holistic and action-oriented view of school bullying than what is typically modeled in extant research. These risk profile findings are then augmented by an analysis of their relationship to the support students receive from their teachers, parents, and peers. This enriched understanding of bullying and its contextual influences paves the way for more targeted, comprehensive, and data-informed school-community interventions.

In light of this purpose, the article begins with a description of the community in which data were collected, together with a brief characterization of the interventions used by social workers and other school-community leaders to prevent school bullying and enhance students' social-emotional well-being. Then, two kinds of research studies are reviewed. Descriptive research on school bullying (e.g., research on its operational features and prevalence) is presented first. Then, examples of research on the concomitant correlates, consequences, and risk factors for school bullying are summarized. This literature review sets the stage for this study's design, findings, and conclusions.

1.1. School-community and programmatic context

Data from this study are drawn from a sample of 1822 7th and 8th grade students attending 10 middle schools in 10 school districts in New York State. Each of the students surveyed in this study attends a school that is involved in a county-wide, federally-funded Safe and Healthy Schools Grant for which the author is the primary evaluator. These schools serve students from urban, suburban, and rural backgrounds.

Abbreviations: LCA, Latent Class Analysis; LCRA, Latent Class Regression Analysis; CFA, Confirmatory Factor Analysis; NR, No Risk Profile Group; BV, Bully Victim Profile Group; PV, Perpetrator Victim Profile Group; MR, Multiple Risk Profile Group.

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The Safe and Healthy Schools Grant developed for this community includes multiple partnerships. The effort is led principally by a central school district agency known in New York as a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The local BOCES serves as the lead fiscal and administrative agent. This leadership is accompanied by social work and education services provided by Binghamton University, as well as a host of social work services and early intervention programs provided by the Youth Services Division of a local hospital. All services are provided in close collaboration with participating school districts.

According to program documents, all grant services are guided by the currently-popular Response-To-Intervention (RTI) services framework (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008). As a part of this RTI framework, all program services are developed in relation to a “three tiered” approach to service delivery. This service delivery approach endeavors to provide “universal” educational support and assistance (Tier 1) to about 80% of the student population; more intensive, small group interventions (Tier 2) to about 15% of students; and the most intensive services and supports (Tier 3) to 5% of the student population.

Five primary program services constitute this community's particular RTI service model. These service elements are: (a) A school-wide Olweus bullying-prevention team, with technical support provided by the University's educational services team (e.g., Olweus, 2004); (b) weekly individual and group-focused services provided by master's level social work interns who are out-stationed at the school and supervised by grant-funded MSW's; (c) weekly evidence-based program services, such as Families and School Together (FAST), provided by social workers who staff the Youth Services Division of a local hospital; and (d) conventional pupil support services provided by school social workers and school guidance staff.

At the time data were collected, the initiative under study had just finished the third of four years of funding. Sixty percent of the participating schools had trained school-based Olweus Bullying-Prevention teams and were implementing them according to the program's standards and training protocols. Two-thirds of the participating schools were receiving social work services from MSW interns and project-funded MSW's. Each district was receiving evidence-based youth and family services from the local hospital. All participating schools were using their school social worker to refer students to project services.

Although each school developed and implemented their RTI model somewhat differently, the program universally prioritized those services and supports which could increase student awareness of bullying and minimize its harmful effects. Importantly, as program implementation progressed, most of the participating schools did more than just try to increase student awareness of bullying; they also encouraged students to *intervene* (e.g., to stop it directly or to seek assistance from a teacher or other adult) when bullying occurred. This encouragement was provided by school personnel through formal Tier 1 social work-led presentations, as well as through more informal measures, such as the posting of “stop bullying signs” that can be seen throughout the hallways of each participating school.

These particular grant-related features provide an important opportunity for conducting practice and policy relevant research, since efforts to prevent bullying may to be modified “mid-stream” to accommodate students' heightened awareness of bullying and its consequences. This study capitalizes on this need and opportunity, with particular attention toward informing the design and development of more effective bullying prevention programs and policies.

2. Literature review

School bullying is considered manifest when a person uses their physical, mental, or social resources to gain control over and harm a less powerful individual. Harm includes hitting, kicking, shoving, teasing, demeaning, excluding, or pursuing any other unwanted social or physical advance (Pontzer, 2009). All such acts are expressions of

power imbalances, ones which allow the advantaged person to psychologically influence and/or control others.

Beyond this general definition, researchers vary in the way they have characterized bullying-related behaviors and events. For instance, some researchers emphasize distinctions between *direct* (e.g., verbal and physical aggression) and *indirect* (e.g., spreading rumors) forms of bullying (Hong, 2009; Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006). Others, such as Smokowski and Kopasz (2005), classify variations in bullying behavior according to the different *types of aggression* exhibited by perpetrators. These bullying types include *Physical* (e.g., physically aggressive acts), *Verbal* (e.g., using words to hurt or humiliate others), *Relational* (e.g., use of social influence to promote social exclusion), *Reactive* (e.g., instigating conflicts under the guise of self-defense), and *Cyber* (e.g., using cell phones, texting, and social media to harm others).

Researchers have also analyzed bullying according to student involvement and/or experience with it (e.g., Mishna, Koury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Dacuik, 2012; Olweus, 2004). In this “status group” approach (Cook et al., 2010, pg. 66) researchers have identified three primary profiles of bullying experience: (a) Students who have been victimized by bullying, (b) students who have perpetrated bullying but are not victims of it; and (c) students who have experiences as both victims and perpetrators. A fourth category of students, namely students who report no prior bullying-related experiences, remains peripheral in much of the current research conversation (Cook et al., 2010).

2.1. Progression and prevalence of bullying-related experience

School bullying is generally thought to start in elementary school and peak during the middle school years. Although bullying and bullying-related victimization may extend well into high school, college, and adulthood (Fitzpatrick, Dulin, & Piko, 2007; Pontzer, 2009), research suggests that the prevalence of bullying behaviors steadily declines following the middle school years (Pontzer, 2009). This is one reason why extant research typically recommends that bullying-related intervention and prevention efforts target elementary and middle school-aged children and youth (Olweus, 2004).

Research to date yields mixed findings regarding the overall prevalence of bullying in schools. For instance, in a study of 558 middle school students in the Midwest, Bosworth, Espelage, and Simon (1999) found that nearly 80% of their sample had been bullied. Other studies using national samples have shown more modest reports of bullying-related victimization, where nearly 60% of sampled students were affected (Wang, Iannotti, Luk, & Nansel, 2010). Within this strata of students, verbal victimization has been found most common among adolescents (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009), while cyber-bullying is reported with the lowest frequency (Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007).

In addition to victimization experiences, some researchers indicate that bullies (i.e., perpetrators) can represent anywhere from 10 to 30% of the student population, with significant variations in perpetrator prevalence found between studies and schools (Cook et al., 2010). Among perpetrators, studies have identified relational bullying (30%) as the most common type of perpetrator behavior (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). Students who exhibit “all types” of bullying behavior (physical, verbal, relational, and cyber) are thought to represent less than 11% of the national student population (ibid.).

2.2. Proximal correlates and consequences of bullying behavior

Beyond the immediate physical, social, and psychological harm associated with bullying, research closely associates other negative outcomes with victim and perpetrator experiences. For instance, studies have shown that victims and perpetrators of bullying often experience

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