Applying a social learning theoretical framework to music therapy as a prevention and intervention for bullies and victims of bullying

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a growing worldwide problem largely affecting school-aged youth and, to date, there is no music therapy literature specific to bullying. As a result, there is no guidance for applying theoretical frameworks or for developing music therapy interventions for bullies and victims of bullying. After synthesizing the literature and determining the characteristics and behaviors of bullies and victims, the authors applied social learning theory as a framework to conceptualize the behaviors and cognitions of bullies and victims and to design age appropriate music therapy interventions. Based from concepts of social learning theory and existing music therapy research with adolescents, the authors provide suggestions of music therapy interventions for both bullies and victims. It seems that a social learning theory approach to music therapy interventions might represent an appropriate approach to frame treatments for both bullies and the victims of bullying. Prevention and intervention efforts at various age and developmental levels using music therapy may be more engaging, motivating, and effective than prevention and intervention efforts without music. The proposed interventions may be a helpful initiator for music therapists working with school-aged populations on the issues of bullying.

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Review of literature

Bullying is a growing worldwide problem largely affecting school-aged youth. According to the 2009 Indicators of School Crime and Safety survey, one-third of teenagers have reported being bullied at school (Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2012). Bullying is often linked to negative events such as teen suicides and school shootings. Bullies and victims can be various ages and demographics (Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007). Youth in minority groups with regard to race, religion, and sexual orientation may be at a higher risk of being bullied (Goldman, 2012). Bullying may also result in pathological behaviors including social problems, aggression, and externalizing behavior problems (Kim, Leventhal, Koh, Hubbard, & Boyce, 2006).

Rodkin (2010) noted that bullying is a type of unequal and damaging relationship. Olweus (1993) defined bullying as a repeated act of intimidation or attack involving an imbalance of power with the intention to intimidate or cause harm to the victim. While Olweus' operational definition of bullying may be helpful, it should be noted that bullying can also involve relational aggression including name calling, physical aggression, intentional exclusion, spreading rumors, damage to physical property, teasing, and threatening to cause harm to another. Solberg et al. (2007) noted that as there are students who represent a third subgroup and fulfill the dual role of bully and victim (bully-victims), neither bullies nor victims are homogenous groups. Bully-victims typically tend to have the highest level of adjustment difficulties among all children involved in bullying, showing symptoms of both internalizing and externalizing problems (Nansel et al., 2001). Other authors have identified several types of bullies in the literature, including aggressive bullies, passive bullies, and bully-victims (Kansas Safe Schools Resource Center, 2012). Scholars have also described several types of victims, including passive victims, provocative victims, and bully-victims. In a longitudinal study partially funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, researchers found that victims of bullying and bully-victims had elevated rates of childhood and young adult psychiatric disorders (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013). Given the negative implications for youth involved in bullying either as bullies, victims, or bully-victims, schools have become important environments for teaching and learning appropriate social behaviors (Goldman, 2012).

Due to the plethora of diverse behaviors that might be considered bullying, challenges can arise when schools, teachers, and administrators decide upon operational definitions of bullying, when bullying occurs, how to discipline bullies, and how to provide appropriate treatment for victims. Interventions focusing solely on victims' needs often do not address the bullies' needs while

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interventions focusing on bullies' needs typically do not address victims' needs. Despite the differences in definitions and interventions, there is some consistency in the literature regarding characteristics of bullies and victims and their actions.

Characteristics of bullies and victims

Researchers have found a number of characteristics that are common to bullies and victims, which may be helpful for determining applicable theoretical frameworks and designing preventions and interventions. According to Swearer's (2010) review of bullying literature, individual risk factors unique to victims include students in any minority group (religious, ethnic, sexual orientation, disability). Conversely, bullies may be more socially connected and are more often boys than girls. Additionally, boys tend to be more active aggressors while girls tend to be more passive aggressors (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullies and victims may share risk factors such as low academic achievement, poor social skills, low socioeconomic status, and family discord.

Carney, Hazier, and Higgins (2002) surveyed 251 teachers and counselors in an attempt to identify common characteristics in bullies and victims. The most prevalent victim characteristics included: younger, physically smaller and weaker than peers, blaming themselves for their problems, and having over-involved family members. The most prevalent bullying actions included controlling others via verbal threats and physical actions, chronically repeating aggressive behaviors, and being quicker to display anger. The authors noted that previous researchers had indicated that bullies tend to have characteristics such as "more family problems, poor parent role models, suffering physical and emotional abuse at home and inappropriately perceiving hostile intent in the actions of others" (Carney et al., 2002, p. 97). Additionally, bullies and victims shared the following characteristics: vulnerable, socially isolated, poor self-concept, and ineffective social skills. Given these similarities, interventions could be designed that address the needs of both groups simultaneously.

Rodkin (2010), who noted that bullying is a type of unequal and damaging relationship, and that bullies break down into two types: those who are socially connected and often manipulative, and those who are marginalized and bully out of retaliation. It is possible that this marginalized bully group may be included in Solberg et al. (2007) bully-victim group. Individuals who are victimized at home and bully at school may be part of the bully-victim group as well. Thus, authors describing effective prevention techniques for these populations suggested that it "will require a solid understanding of the social and environmental factors that facilitate and inhibit bullying and peer aggression" (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2100). Understanding the social factors that contribute to bullying is an important element in a school setting, wherein social learning mechanisms, including modeling and imitation, often function as common teaching techniques. Given the prevalence of bullying as a social problem, the purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual framework that music therapists can utilize to design and implement effective interventions for both bullies and victims.

Social learning theory as conceptual framework to address bullying

Bandura developed social learning theory in the 1960s and asserted that behaviors are produced and maintained by the interaction between a person and his or her environment (Bandura, 1977). In turn, psychological functioning is a result of the "continuous reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants" and "...virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experiences occur on a vicarious basis by observing other people's behavior and its consequences for them" (p. 12). This model emphasized humans' capacity for self-directed behavior change (Wilson, 2011) and vicarious learning given the role of cognitive function in behavior. Thus, although social experiences may continuously shape behaviors, people are able to change both their cognitions and behaviors. Bullies and victims of bullying, specifically, are able to learn appropriate social behaviors by changing their thoughts concerning the behaviors.

According to Bandura (1977), both vicarious reinforcement and vicarious punishment can affect observers' behaviors. In school contexts, teachers often enforce rules by rewarding acceptable behaviors and punishing unacceptable behaviors. While this model may be effective with many students for a variety of concepts, it may not be effective in the case of bullying. Providing clear consequences, reinforcing desired behaviors, and expecting inappropriate behaviors to cease may not necessarily extinguish bullying behaviors. Interventions designed to extinguish bullying behaviors may be more effective if negative behaviors are clearly communicated and replacement or alternative behaviors are demonstrated (Olweus, 1993). Jones, Doces, Swearer, and Collier (2013) suggested school personnel implement programs that include classroom curricula to teach students: what bullying is, how to recognize bullying, rules and consequences, bystander strategies, reporting strategies, and opportunities for practicing these skills. By practicing these new skills, teachers can reinforce students' positive behaviors and begin to change negative behavioral patterns.

From an operant perspective, bullies have learned behaviors from someone or somewhere and may even be overlooked as victims of bullying themselves. The bullies' behaviors have somehow been reinforced thus maintaining the bullying behaviors (Allen, 2010b). As social learning theorists predict that children will often imitate learned behaviors, punishing bullies may lead to additional negative behaviors. Reid, Monsen, and Rivers (2004) reviewed several studies wherein researchers found punitive responses to bullies were not effective in changing behaviors, as punishments tended to reinforce negative behaviors with additional negative behaviors. Thus, it seems that creative and novel programs are required for the prevention and intervention of bullying behaviors.

Psychological and educational interventions for bully prevention and intervention

In a paper guiding school personnel on selecting an effective bullying prevention and intervention program, researchers suggested implementing programs that focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) to teach youth the skills necessary to form successful interpersonal relationships and handle conflict (Jones et al., 2013). According to the authors, the most effective SEL programs teach youth the following skills: self-regulation, perspective taking, emotion management, problem solving, communication skills, and friendship skills. By coalescing elements of Bandura's theory with SEL, interventionists can teach bullies and victims how to successfully manage their emotions and communicate with others. Researchers have investigated anti-bullying strategies from various perspectives. While some researchers have explored the effects of whole-school approaches from an educational conceptualization, others have gathered students' perspectives and studied the psychological effects of bullying. To date, researchers examining whole-school anti-bullying programs have primarily focused on interventions that raise awareness in staff, parents, and students to improve the school environment, interventions that support bullies and victims separately, and preventative school-based educational approaches (Reid et al., 2004). These programs are consistent with social learning theory in that they rely on producing a cultural shift