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Bullying, Students with Disabilities, and Recommendations for Prevention of Bullying

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Bullying is a widespread complex social problem on school grounds in the United States. Due to their vulnerability, students with disabilities are easy targets for bullying. This article discusses bullying from the perspectives of student engagement, bullying and student engagement, bullying and school leadership, school culture, students with disabilities, recommendations for prevention of bullying behaviors, and reduction of bullying for students who have disabilities or chronic medical conditions. The authors describe three examples of bullying of students with disabilities. Bullying against students with disabilities needs to be a part of school prevention programs. Recommendations are made for rehabilitation counselors, outlining strategies for prevention.

Background

Fifteen years ago, the U.S. Department of Education (2000) reported that every seven minutes, a child is bullied and every 26 seconds, a student gives up on school, contributing to the more than 1.2 million students annually dropping out of high school. Approximately one-third of all public high school students and one-half of all minority students fail to graduate with their class every year. The United States ranked 18th in high school graduation rates (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010). This data was the impetus for an increased focus on dropouts and graduation rates by school districts nationwide. The U.S. Department National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reported an increase in the graduation rate in 2013-14 to 82%. Graduation rates were lowest for Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students at 76%, 73%, and 70% respectively. Some states reported lower graduation rates for minority students in the 50 and 60 percentile ranges.

The dropout rate decreased significantly over the last 15 years, and in 2014 was reported as 6.5%. Again, the dropout rates for minority youth were significantly higher for Black and Hispanic youth at 7.4% and 10.6% respectively. Nearly 34% of states graduate less than 70% of Hispanic, Black, and low income students. Thirty-three states graduate less than 70% of their students with disabilities, while six of those states graduated less than 50% of students with disabilities. As a result of national evidence-based education reforms, the nation has made considerable progress in graduating more students and reducing dropouts, but pervasive gaps and trends continue to exist and the dropout problem persists, in particular, for low income, minority, Limited English Proficient (LEP), and students with disabilities (Balfanz et al., 2014).

The consequences of dropping out have detrimental effects on the future of young students. Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, in poor health, living in poverty or on public assistance, and becoming single parents of children who also drop out of school (Balfanz et al., 2010). Dropouts are more than eight times more likely to serve time in jail or prison than are high school graduates, four times less likely to volunteer in their communities, half as likely to vote, and represent only three percent of actively engaged citizens in the United States. The negative long-term consequences of dropping out have a direct impact on quality of life and society.

Student dropout has been linked to bullying (Hutzell & Payne, 2012). Bullying is a learned behavior of abuse where the abuser exerts power to take control of the abused individual. Like many other types of abuse, it comes in many forms, involves various aspects of people's lives, and impacts abused individuals' loss of productivity in school and unknown psychological distress. Most bullies have an aggressive personality and a strong desire to be in charge; they

lack empathy and remorse, as well as enjoy gossiping and spreading rumors to maliciously exclude their victim(s) from the group. They often intimidate and humiliate their "preys" in person and/or through the use of social media. In general, male bullies are more likely to engage in observable bullying tactics, such as physical aggression, while female bullies are more likely to use less observable tactics, such as intimidation and encouraging others to stay away from a certain student (McNamara, 2013).

Olweus (1994) defined bullying as unwanted, intentional, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance that is often repeated over time. A second definition of bullying is "any aggressive behavior of a more powerful person or group toward a less powerful person" (Hong, Neely, & Lund, 2015, p. 157). Traditional bullying behaviors range from teasing, name calling, taunting, stealing and damaging victim's personal belongings, to pushing, shoving, intimidation, threatening with or without a weapon, physical aggression, and shaming the victims where some resulted in suicide. Cyberbullying is the use of technology to inflict harm on others. Examples include technological devices such as computers, cellphones, and social media like Facebook, messaging, YouTube, and Twitter. Although all the offenses take place outside of the school setting, the impact is felt in school (McNamara, 2013).

Bullying of students is a significant factor in students dropping out of school (Hutzell & Payne, 2012). Dropping out of school is a process of slow disengagement and is identifiable as early as elementary school. Warning signs include poor attendance, disruptive behavior, and failing grades in middle and early high school (Balfanz et al., 2010). These early warning signs of student disengagement are indicative of risk of dropping out of school, and early warning signs of possible bullying victimization. In particular, attendance is often a key barometer of a student's connection with school. The effects of bullying and the early warning signs of student dropout are similar: academic failure, disciplinary problems, at risk behaviors, social and psychological issues, poor attendance, and student disengagement. It is a contributing factor of student disengagement leading to school dropout.

Student Engagement

Student engagement has been widely studied in educational research and is a term used to measure a student's relationship to school. Finn (1989) was among the first to define school engagement as the extent to which a student is invested in school and participates in school-related activities. Common terms in health and education literature include school engagement, school attachment, school bonding, school climate, school involvement, teacher support, and school connectedness (Libbey, 2004). For the purpose of this article, the term school engagement refers to a student's relationship or connection to school. While there are many terms used to describe student engagement, there are several consistent themes that relate to student engagement: sense of belonging and being a part of a school, whether or not students like school, level of teacher supportiveness and caring, presence of good friends in school, engagement in current and future academic progress, fair and effective discipline, and participation in extracurricular activities.

Student engagement has been found to be highly associated with student learning outcomes. Student engagement has repeatedly demonstrated to be a robust predictor of achievement and behavior in schools. Libbey (2004) reported that "young people who feel connected to school, that they belong, and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly, do better" (p. 282). In addition, student engagement has been found to be linked to multiple educational outcomes such as achievement, attendance, behavior, and dropout/completion. Researchers have identified that effective interventions to promote student engagement also enhances the probability of high school completion (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Zeydyk, 2014).

Bullying, Student Engagement, and School Leadership

Bullying and peer aggression generally have long-term negative effects on the student's level of engagement in school. It has been found to affect engagement in school, attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Additionally, it has been linked to the dropout rate of students (Gastic, 2008). In their national survey study of over 11,000 secondary students, Hutzell and Payne (2012) found an association between bullying victimization and avoidance behaviors in school. Students bullied at school would skip school to avoid the bully prone location. The development of avoidance behaviors in students involved in bullying has an impact on their level of connectedness to school.

Bullying has an impact on a student's overall adjustment to school, which affects their level of engagement. Research has shown that victims of bullying exhibit poor social and emotional adjustment, lower social skills and abilities to make friends, poor relationships with classmates, and experience higher levels of anxiety and loneliness (Harris & Petrie, 2002; Zeedyk, 2014). Further, students who perceive high levels of bullying in their schools may become less engaged in school and, consequently, be less motivated to learn. This disengagement contributes to problems with school attendance, including truancy and dropout (Klein, Cornell, & Konold, 2012). Bullying is an es-

sential topic for all school leaders. Becoming aware and comprehending the phenomenon of bullying is essential for school leaders to effectively foster an anti-bullying culture. Victimization and bullying have become a central concern for all participants of the educational community. Harris and Petrie (2002) found that bullying was a major problem and reported that bullying is a crucial issue for school leaders to consider. In 2006, 43% of middle school administrators and 21% of elementary administrators reported dealing with daily or weekly incidents of bullying in their schools (Noelle, Guerino, Dinkes, & Chandler, 2007). The federal government recognized that there were plenty of bullying and intervention programs. What is missing is leadership in raising awareness and describing what to do about bullying. Principal awareness of the problem leads to administration involvement. Awareness and involvement reduces bullying. A reduction in bullying is likely to produce an improved school experience for children and youth. Making bullying prevention a priority helps ensure the well-being of youth.

Bullying Reduction and School Culture

School bullying is a complex issue that calls for a comprehensive approach based on the needs of the school culture (Hong et al., 2015). Using conflict resolution or mediation strategies to address issues of bullying may undermine effective bullying intervention. These strategies may exacerbate the bullying situation in that they fail to take into consideration the fact that bullying is not the result of simple conflict; rather, it involves the exploitation of a serious imbalance of physical and social power. Furthermore, group treatment strategies for bullying are counterproductive in that group members may serve as role models and reinforce bullying behaviors (Limber, Flerx, Nation, & Melton, 1998). Instead, bullying is a multi-faceted, systemic problem that demands long term, comprehensive, and coordinated school-wide interventions.

Evidence-based interventions should be used to effectively address the serious issue of bullying at schools. Many strategies and interventions that are commonly used by schools, such as zero tolerance policies, have proven ineffective. The concept of zero tolerance is a strategy that continues to be utilized despite evidence of ineffective outcomes. Zero tolerance policies are based on the premise that schools will accept no amount of violence or threats of violence to deter any incidents from occurring (Borum, Cornell, Modgeleski, & Jimerson, 2010).

However, the consensus is that zero-tolerance policies do not work and actually may cause more harm than good. Evidence shows that zero tolerance polices fail to address the underlying issues of the behavior. Research has shown that harsh penalties are rarely given for severe offenses, but rather for lesser incidents. These policies have been highly criticized for resulting in disproportionate discipline of minorities (Borum et al., 2010). Overall, zero-tolerance policies are unsupported by research to be effective in preventing or reducing bullying.

Leadership involving a whole school strategy as an intervention has been found to be most effective in addressing problems of school bullying. Anti-bullying activities need to address all factors surrounding the problem. A central tenet of bullying prevention efforts is that bullying is a school-wide problem involving bystanders, as well as aggressors and their victims. Sherer and Nickerson (2010) discussed bullying prevention and intervention strategies that need to take place in five categories - systems-level interventions, school staff and parent involvement, educational approaches with students, student involvement, and interventions with bullies and victims.

A school wide anti-bullying policy provides the framework that guides the school actions to address problems with bullying. These types of policies have been widely accepted by anti-bullying programs internationally and have been shown to be effective (Hanewinkel, 2004). However, these frameworks have been used less consistently in American schools. Sherer and Nickerson (2010) found that, in American schools, a variety of strategies are used to address bullying, but most occur at the individual bully and victim level as opposed to more system-wide interventions. Specifically, seven out of ten most frequently implemented strategies were individual interventions with bullies and victims such as talking, counseling, avoiding contact with bully and victims, and disciplining students who bully. Additionally, the least frequently used strategies were found to be system-level interventions, without effective leadership. What is suggested is the use of an anti-bullying committee, taking surveys, involving students in prevention, direct intervention, and the use of resources and training for nonteaching staff.

The most positive methods of bullying reduction involve a whole-school approach. Within this approach, successful strategies include assessing the problem, planning school conference days, providing better supervision, forming bully prevention committees, encouraging parent teacher meetings, establishing classroom rules against bullying, classroom meetings about bullying, requiring talks between bullies and victims, and scheduling talks with involved parents. Klein et al. (2012) showed the significance of the school climate as a protective factor in preventing both bullying and student risk behavior. The school-wide approach is predicated on the idea that bullying can best be reduced by changing the school climate while specifically addressing the culture of

bullying that encourages peer aggression. Having an experienced professional take a leadership role is instrumental to success.

Providing support services at the school site is a needed component in addressing problems of bullying. The Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence (2012) addressed the need for improved mental health services in schools. The report discussed the pivotal role of access to mental health services for youth and adults who show signs of psychological distress, depression, anxiety, withdrawal, anger, and aggression, with support for victims' families. Glew, Fan, Katon, and Rivara (2008) found that associations between involvement and academic achievement, psychological distress, and the belief that it is not wrong to take a weapon (knife or gun) to school reinforce the notion that school environment is interrelated with mental health and school success. Further, Hoover and Oliver (1996) discussed the role of involving school counselors in a more significant way. Support services should be available at schools to provide academic support and resources to bully victims, especially those with inconsistent or irregular attendance and/or problem behaviors. Support services and health practitioners evaluating students exhibiting psychological and psychosomatic symptoms should consider bullying and the student's school environment as potential causes.

School climate has been studied as a factor to be considered in addressing school bullying. It is necessary to identify important aspects of school climate that can either facilitate or impair student engagement in school. Student perceptions of the extent of bullying at school are consistently associated with the levels of school engagement at both the individual student and the school-wide levels (Mehta, Cornell, Fan & Gregory, 2013). These researchers argued for school-wide prevention and intervention efforts that are designed to improve the school climate and associated experiences for all students.

School leadership is the most critical component in fostering an anti-bullying culture, and will determine the systems and structures in place at a school. There are many strategies that can be used to address and prevent bullying at schools. Strategies and evidence-based programs that emphasize the interrelated impact of family, school culture, and communities need to be practical.

Bulling and Students with Disabilities

Children with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied, and with greater frequency. About 60% of students with disabilities report having been harassed regularly compared with 25% of all students (PACER'S National Bullying Prevention Center, 2012). Disability harassment was defined by PACER'S National Bullying Prevention Center as unwelcome conduct (verbal abuse, name-calling, epithets, or slurs), graphic or written statements, threats, physical assault, or other conduct that may be physically threatening, harmful, or humiliating. PACER indicated that the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) specified that bullying may be considered harassment when it is based on a student's race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or religion. Disability is considered to be a civil rights issue, and people with disabilities are protected by legal statutes, such as the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

In the context of disability, children with disabilities and chronic medical conditions are likely to be more frequent targets of peer victimization, especially by peers who have higher social status and greater social power (Rose, Espelage, Aragon, & Elliot, 2011; Zeedyk, 2014). It has been shown that students with both visible and non-visible disabilities are more often victimized and bullied than students who do not have disabilities. In fact, "bullying and victimization are often a direct result of a student's disability" (Young, Ne'eman, & Gelser, 2011, p. 2). A student on the autism spectrum is likely to have repetitive activities, stereotyped motions, and resistance to change in daily routines that are easy targets of mocking and taunting the victim repeatedly (McNamara, 2013).

Little's study (2002) on students with Asperger's Syndrome found that 94%, as reported by their mothers, had been victimized by classmates and others. Up to 75% of these individuals underwent emotional bullying. The types of victimization reported by Little included emotional bullying (75%), gang attacks (10%), and nonsexual attacks to the genitals (15%). Students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD) often face bullying two to three times a month. Students with all types of disabilities face higher percentages of peer rejection, which places them at greater risk for bullying and victimization by other students. "Persons with autism spectrum disorder have a particularly high incidence rate of becoming victims of bullying" (Hong et al., 2015, p. 158).

Raskauskas and Modell (2011) reviewed multiple past studies on students with disabilities and bullying and found that over 50% of students with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, speech-language disabilities, or autism reported abuses from school peers. These abuses were frequent and included teasing, harassment, and physical attacks. These researchers also found that studies noted 55% of students with mild learning disabilities and 78% of students with moderate learning disabilities described repeated acts of being bullied. In comparison, their peers without disabilities reporting being bullied significantly less.

Holzbauer (2008) interviewed special education teachers in a large public school district. These teachers re-

ported on direct observations of harassment occurring to their students. "The most frequent reported types that occurred many times, in rank order, included epithets, slurs, mimicking, mockery, and staring. Overall, 96.7% of the participants reported that they observed more than one incident of this school-related disability harassment conduct" (p. 162). This researcher noted that these reported incidents in special education had a low priority for both policy makers and administrators.

Weber (2007) provided examples of harassment of students with disabilities by their peers in school. Three of these are cited below:

> MP, with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, was a student in 8th grade. According to him and supported by his parents, MP experienced ruthless and persistent bullying by other students. A paraprofessional working with him described the occurrences to the school administration. MP was called druggie, fag, wierdo, mental kid, special, squealer, idiot, among other names. They shoved his head into the drinking fountain, picked him up by the throat, slammed him into lockers, threw him to the floor, shoved, scratched, spat on, and cut him. His mom complained and the school did nothing (p. 37).
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> DG was a student with a development disability and dyslexia. He was thrown to the ground, body 'slammed', physically beaten by being held down and hit on the head and back with his own binder, subjected to disability-related slurs, and his school books were thrown into the garbage. This bullying occurred five to eight times in the school cafeteria. On the school bus, he was called a retard and other students started a fist fight with him. Another took his planner while two other students taunted and hit him while on the bus. The school was informed of this several times. The district took no effective action; school representatives told DG's mother to simply keep him out of school. DG developed depression and suicidal ideation (pp. 38–39).
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> RL, a student with a physical disability, was continually bullied and harassed, as was his mother. This lead to RL having increased absenteeism. Ultimately, this child committed suicide with no warning that this might occur (p. 39).

The case examples above illustrate the importance of adult intervention in addressing instances of bullying. When providing intervention, the individual must be both assertive and calm. If during an incident, one stands between the bully and the target, blocking eye contact between the two. Try to safeguard the target, if all possible. Express strong disapproval of bullying. Address the bully directly. Start with verbal warning, label the behavior as bullying, and refer to the school's anti-bullying rules and policies. Report the incident as required, and maintain a log of bullying incidents on campus. Deal with all bullying incidents consistently. It is essential for school faculty, staff, and paraprofessionals to learn about bullying and the schools' policies on bullying, including consequences for bullies and supports for students being bullied (McNamara, 2013).

As noted by Orange (2014), "anxiety due to depression may cause an individual to withdraw and, as a result, lead to depression and loneliness" (p. 289). Further, this situation can become problematic for the person to recognize his or her role within the school and society. Livneh and Antonak (2012) reported that individuals with chronic illnesses and disabilities normally face an increase in the frequency and severity of stressful occurrences. They need to cope with daily threats, including to one's life and well-being. The sense of self (self-identity) may be negated in interactions with others who treat the person as "disabled first. The person can lose a sense of his or her real identity; self-esteem may be diminished, with the individual showing signs of erosion and negative self-perceptions following these encounters.

Harassment and bullying may have an effect on all the following areas, which are already affected by having a chronic condition or disability: increased stress, crisis, loss and grief, body image, self-concept, stigma, uncertainty, unpredictability, and the overall quality of one's life (Hong et al., 2015). The ultimate psychosocial outcome in rehabilitation practice for counselors working with youth with disabilities is enhanced well-being and quality of living. Bullying negatively affects the person's quality of life, and can lead to increases in depression, anxiety, loss, and the overall ability to adjust to one's disability.

Recommendations for Rehabilitation Counselors for Bullying Prevention

The role of the rehabilitation counselor in preventing bullying is an integral component to decreasing this activity in schools and may help all students, not just those who have disabilities. Recommendations for rehabilitation counselors in bullying prevention are the following:

1) A whole-school or district-based response to bullying with effective leadership is needed to help teachers stem school bullying. This includes taking responsibility for changing the culture of bullying (Mehta et al., 2013). An integrative whole-school approach is key to success of any program (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011).
2) A response to school bullying can begin with a needs assessment or survey, including students with disabilities. An example is Olweus's (1996) Bully/Victim Questionnaire, a commonly used form for prevention. This is an anonymous self-re-

port questionnaire, which includes items related to physical, verbal, indirect, racial, and sexual kinds of bullying.

3) Make available in-service training and professional education of all teachers, administrators, and staff on the various aspects of disability.
4) Build awareness that disability harassment and bullying are prevalent in schools. Bullying based on disability is similar to sexual, gender, and racial harassment (Holzbauer & Conrad, 2010; Shaw, Chan, & McMahon, 2012).
5) Recognize the importance of and need for advocacy, disability awareness, and acceptance of disability (Livneh & Antonak, 2012). This includes teaching students with disabilities how to self-advocate by notifying school personnel and parents when they are being harassed.
6) Create a school environment that is aware of and supportive of disability concerns and harassment (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).
7) Implement an effective school monitoring program (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).
8) Modify anti-bullying programs already in place to encompass students with disabilities (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011).
9) Enhance student engagement, effective leadership, and team building. Establish and encourage positive interactions among students with and without disabilities Hong et al., 2015). Develop a program to increase understanding, awareness, and sensitivity (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).
10) Involve teachers, administrators, staff, and students, as well as parents, PTA, and other community members. Confirm that students with disabilities are included (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011).
11) Offer counseling services for victims, as well as perpetuators.
12) Monitor programs to follow-up on resolved issues to see if they remain effective and continue to be resolved.
13) Prevention programs need to include training on the importance of respecting others, accepting differences, and building empathy (Raskauskas & Modell, 2011).
14) Emphasize "holding schools accountable for severe, persistent, and pervasive bullying and harassment" (Young et al., 2011, p. 6).
15) Create a shared vision as a foundation to an integrated whole-school approach.
16) Cultivate a culture which prevents bullying (Migliaccio, 2015).
17) Develop a detailed protocol for school supervision to create and/or maintain safety (Young et al., 2011).
18) Focus on student engagement and safety, both on and within the immediate area of campus, including the school bus system and afterschool programs (Weber, 2007; Young et al., 2011).
19) Require parental notification of incidents of bullying (Young et al., 2011).
20) Understand the 'power of bystanders' to acts of bullying. Encourage peer intervention. Research has demonstrated that more than 50% of bullying stops when a peer intervenes (PACER'S National Bullying Prevention Center, 2012).

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NOTE: See corrected Kena reference