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A review of mixed methods research on bullying and peer victimization in school

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Recognizing the negative outcomes associated with experiences in bullying at school, educational researchers, school officials, and policy-makers have called for more rigorous research on bullying in school. Research on bullying behavior in school has primarily been examined using quantitative methods. Mixed methods research in the field of education has gained ground in recent years. However, no systematic review of mixed methods studies on bullying and peer victimization has been conducted to date. The major focus of this article is to review empirical studies on bullying in schools using mixed methods. In particular, we examine research studies on bullying in schools within the contexts of *new insights*, *complementary findings*, and *divergent findings*. Directions for conducting mixed methods research on bullying and peer victimization are also discussed.

Keywords: bullying; education; mixed methods; school; youth

Introduction

The series of school shootings in the United States since the 1990s reinforced a public notion that schools are no longer a safe haven for students as they once were. A report conducted by the US Secret Service found that among 41 school shooters between 1974 and 2000, bullying has been identified as a factor in the shooting in 71% of the cases (Espelage and Swearer 2003; Swearer and Espelage 2004). Of the 15 shooting incidents between 1995 and 2001, bullying was present in all but two cases (Leary et al. 2003). School shootings prompted school officials and policy-makers to implement school violence prevention programs and policies (e.g., zero tolerance policies) (Garbarino 2004). Moreover, the US government has launched anti-bullying policies and practices across school districts that would outlaw bullying and harassment. The US Department of Health and Human Services, for example, has launched a national bullying public awareness and prevention campaign (Espelage and Swearer 2003). Prior experiences in bullying among school shooters have also evoked scholarly debates on the factors associated with bullying behavior in school.

A number of bullying researchers (e.g., Bosworth, Espelage, and Simon 1999; Colvin et al. 1998; Espelage and Swearer 2003; Nansel et al. 2001; Newman, Murray, and Lussier 2001) identify bullying as a behavior, which involves physical

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(e.g., hitting, pushing, shoving, and kicking) and verbal (e.g., taunting, teasing, threatening, spreading rumors, and rejection) forms of aggression. "Bullying" was originally coined by Dan Olweus, a Norwegian researcher who studied bullying, who defined a bully as someone who "chronically harasses someone else either physically or psychologically…" and "[a] student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to *negative actions* on the part of one or more other students" (Olweus 1993, 9). A number of researchers have adopted Olweus' definition of "bullying" (e.g., Atlas and Pepler 2001; Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster 2003; Nansel et al. 2001; Pellegrini 2002; Twemlow, Sacco, and Williams 1996).

The prevalence of bullying is difficult to estimate, as measures used vary significantly (Espelage and Horne 2008; Espelage and Swearer 2003). However, studies have reported that bullying is a pervasive problem in school. Findings by Berthold and Hoover (2000) indicate that one-third of 591 fourth through sixth grade elementary school students in a mid-sized mid-western school reported experiencing bullying victimization, and one-fifth reported bullying others. Haynie et al.'s (2001) study, which included a sample of 4,263 middle school students in a Maryland school district, found that 24.1% of students reported bullying a peer at least once within the past year, with 16.7% bullying one or two times and 7.4% bullying three or more times. A total of 44.6% reported being bullied, at least once during the past year; of these, 13.7% indicated being victimized once or twice, and 30.9% being victimized three or more times Nansel et al.'s (2001) study, which included a nationally representative sample of youth in the United States, found that a total of 29.9% of the 15,686 students in grades 6–10 reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying.

One of the major concerns among researchers is the type of research methods employed in the studies on bullying behavior in schools. Because the appropriateness of using quantitative or qualitative research methods rests on the assumption of the researcher and the nature of the phenomena under investigation, the combination of both methods appears to be counter-intuitive, yet mixed methods research is not uncommon (Yauch and Steudel 2003). Mixed methods have been well received by the social science community due to a strong commitment to utilizing multiple sources to generate findings (see Greene 2007). A multiple data collection approach can: 1) provide information from one approach not easily identified in an alternative approach; 2) reduce the likelihood of non-sampling error by providing redundant information from multiple sources; and 3) ensure that a potential bias from one particular approach is not replicated in alternative approaches (Axinn and Pearce 2007). For practitioners, the integration of quantitative and qualitative is not new or unique, as assessment necessitates the consideration of multiple sources of data (Powell et al. 2008). The focus of this paper is to review insights gained from the limited number of studies on bullying in schools that employed mixed methods research designs. In recent years, a number of researchers have adopted a mixed methods approach in understanding bullying and peer victimization in schools. However, little is known about studies on bullying that employed mixed methods approaches. In this article, we first provide a rationale for the review, which includes identifying some of the gaps in our understanding of bullying and peer victimization. We then review the current mixed methods research on bullying and assess the findings from these studies. Directions for mixed methods research on bullying are also discussed.

Current research methodologies used in bullying research

A great deal about bullying has been studied by a number of researchers in the past three decades since Dan Olweus published his first study on bullying in 1977 (Meyer 2007). Regrettably, much is still unknown about this phenomenon. In their review of recent empirical literature on the topic of childhood bullying, Griffin and Gross (2004) note that we do not yet have a comprehensive understanding of childhood bullying behavior, which is attributed, in part, to the types of methods that have been used. The majority of researchers on bullying have traditionally employed quantitative methodology to generate statistical findings with large samples (e.g., Bosworth, Espelage, and Simon 1999; Espelage, Bosworth, and Simon 2000; Espelage, Holt, and Henkel 2003; Nansel et al. 2001; Orpinas, Horne, and Staniszewski 2003; Rodkin et al. 2006). To illustrate, a review of quantitative research on bullying by Powell et al. (2008) yielded 75 empirical studies between the years of 2000 and 2004; and of these 75 studies, only seven employed a qualitative approach, and 12 were mixed methods studies. Given that effective bullying prevention and intervention programs call for a whole-school approach, large sample sizes appear to be necessary in research on bullying in schools (Ma, Stewin, and Mah 2001).

Unfortunately, the over-reliance on quantitative studies has limited our understanding of certain aspects of the bullying phenomenon. Torrance (2000) noted that a dearth of qualitative research on bullying is surprising given that the exploration of bullying occurrences within the social context is necessary. She stated: "[Qualitative research] offers the advantage of reaching an implicit understanding of a group and interpreting experiences from the participants' own point of view. . .there is a danger that when bullying is divorced from its social context, investigations become limited by questions and answers" (Torrance 2000, 16). Qualitative studies on bullying have focused on elaborating and explicating the experiences of bullies and victims in their own words (Ma, Stewin, and Mah 2001). For this purpose, individual and focus group interviews with smaller sample size have been commonly used in recent years (e.g., Berguno et al. 2004; Cullingford and Morrison 1995; deLara 2008a; Espelage and Asidao 2001; Garbarino 1999; Garbarino and deLara 2002; Gamliel et al. 2003; Mishna 2004; Mishna et al. 2007; Owens, Slee, and Shute 2000). Considering the advantages of combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, an increasing number of researchers have taken a mixed methods approach.

Review of mixed methods studies on bullying

Rationale for the review

Several reviews of studies on bullying and peer victimization have been published in national (Bauman 2008; Espelage and Swearer 2003; Griffin and Gross 2004; Pellegrini 1998; Swearer et al. 2010; Vreeman and Carroll 2007) and international journals (Bjorqvist 1994; Hawker and Boulton 2000; Rigby 2003; Salmon et al. 2000; Smith 2004; Smith and Brain 2000). Many bullying researchers (e.g., Bauman 2008; Bjorqvist 1994; Espelage and Swearer 2003; Griffin and Gross 2004; Pelligrini 1998) have conducted reviews of studies that have identified characteristics of bullying behavior and associated risk factors, examined types of bullying victims and perpetrators, and explored how these factors vary across demographic variables (e.g., gender, age). Other researchers have conducted reviews of studies that examined the

association between bullying and psychosocial maladjustment (e.g., Griffin and Gross 2004; Hawker and Boulton 2000; Rigby 2003; Salmon et al. 2000), and have evaluated school-based intervention programs for bullying prevention (e.g., Bauman 2008; Vreeman and Carroll 2007). These reviews of research studies have significantly enhanced our understanding of bullying behavior in school, which have major implications for research and practice. Regrettably, however, these reviews have not been inclusive of studies that employed mixed methods. A review of bullying by Smith (2004), for example, notes that various methods have been used to ascertain bullying behavior, such as large scale surveys and observational methods. He concurs with Pellegrini and Bartini's (2000) argument that multiple approaches to understanding bullying behavior in school are needed.

According to Yauch and Steudel (2003), the difference between quantitative and qualitative research methods occurs at two levels. First, there is a major distinction between different types of data or evidence. Quantitative data are traditionally collected through surveys or other measurement techniques, and qualitative data are collected through interviews, focus groups, and participant-observation. Second, both methods are presented as two entirely distinct research paradigms. Morgan and Smircich (1980) have argued that the appropriateness of using either technique depends on the researcher's underlying assumptions and the nature of the social phenomena to be studied. As a consequence, combining qualitative and quantitative methods appears to be contra-indicated or stemming from disparate assumptions. However, Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) asserted that there are three main purposes for combining quantitative and qualitative methods: 1) *triangulation*, for corroborating data and obtaining convergent validity; 2) *complementarity*, for fully explaining the results of the data analyses; and 3) *development*, for guiding further data collection, sampling, or analysis (Yauch and Steudel 2003). In sum, mixed methods have the potential to generate a more enriched understanding of the problem under investigation than using either qualitative or quantitative methods alone (Creswell et al. 2003; Greene, Benjamin, and Goodyear 2001; Reichardt and Cook 1979; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2003).

Method for research selection

Published empirical studies featured in peer-reviewed journals were identified through searches of MEDLINE, PSYCINFO (Psychological Abstracts), and GOOGLESCHOLAR databases for the period from 1997 to 2011, as we were able to find research on bullying that utilized mixed methodology, which were published from 1997. Keyword, title, and abstract information were also utilized for this review. The main search terms were "bullying", "peer victimization", "relational aggression", "peer aggression", and "mixed methods". Moreover, literature reviews on bullying research and dissertation were also systematically reviewed. Twenty mixed methods studies on bullying in school (Beightol et al. 2009; Burns et al. 2008; Cowie and Olafsson 2000; deLara 2000; deLara 2008a, 2008b; Erickson 2010; Feigenberg et al. 2008; Gil and da Costa 2010; Guerra, Williams, and Sadek 2011; Hahn 2008; Harris 2009; Johnson 2009; Kochenderfer and Ladd 1997; Kulig, Hall, and Kalischuk 2008; Linkroum 2006; Pellegrini and Long 2002; Powell et al. 2008; Thornberg and Knutsen 2010; Varjas et al. 2006; Zacharias 2010) were found. Studies examined here are primarily articles that were published in academic journals as well as graduate theses.

Findings from the review

The following section reviews mixed methods research on bullying and peer victimization in school within the contexts of *new insights*, *complementary findings*, and *divergent findings*.

New insights

Mixing methods can generate new insights and new perspectives, along with a more "complete knowledge" (Greene 2007), which requires both "objective" observations and an understanding of the personal context within which the phenomenon occurs (Carroll and Rothe 2010). In her dissertation study, deLara (2000) for example examines factors that contribute to rural high school students' sense of safety and variables that contribute to bullying at school. Her research was designed as a mixed methods exploratory case study using both quantitative (researcher-designed survey on students' perceptions of safety at their school) and qualitative (focus groups and individual interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators) methodologies. The results from the quantitative data found that girls are more likely than boys to believe in conflict resolution as resolving peer conflicts. The findings from the focus groups and interviews indicate that the students express a need for adult supervision and intervention in bullying incidents. Findings from deLara's (2000) study contradicted prior quantitative research findings, which report that students hesitate reporting to adults. The data presented in this study provided insights about a breadth of school safety issues, which became the foundation for the interviews. The interviews, which generated purely qualitative data, facilitated trustworthiness of the survey findings and more importantly, added depth and richness to the understanding of students' perceptions of their school environment. The survey and the interviews produced information that served different purposes – breadth versus depth – both of which were critical to the study.

Complementary findings

The idea of complementarity has been deeply rooted in social science research (Carroll and Rothe 2010). Weber argued about the importance of *rational or objective* (quantitative) and *empathic or subjective* (qualitative) research for understanding human behavior (Weber 1949). Cooley concurs, suggesting that statistical knowledge is incomplete without empathic knowledge, and others have advocated that understanding social phenomena requires a complementary understanding of different aspects of the causes (Merton 1949; Polyani 1951). According to Greene, Carcelli, and Graham (1989), mixed methods research is designed to obtain convergent validity through *triangulation*; to fully explain the results of analyses through *complementarity*; and to guide further data collection, sampling, or analysis through *development*. Using mixed methods can compensate for biases and limitations in single method when investigating the same phenomenon to strengthen the validity of the results. When two methods with offsetting biases are used, and the results from both converge, then the validity of the finding is strengthened (Greene, Carcelli, and Graham 1989), as evidenced by several mixed methods researchers on bullying in school (e.g., deLara 2008b; Feigenberg et al. 2008; Hahn 2008; Harris 2009; Kulig, Hall, and Kalischuk 2008; Varjas et al. 2006). These studies report that the results from both quantitative and qualitative methods were complementary,

which enhanced the validity of the findings from each type of method (deLara 2008b; Feigenberg et al. 2008; Kulig, Hall, and Kalischuk 2008; Varjas et al. 2006). Kulig, Hall, and Kalischuk (2008) for example employed a mixed methods approach to ascertain youths' perceptions of and experiences in bullying victimization. The study included a self-report questionnaire administered to a total of 180 students and in-depth interviews with 52 students. The researchers report that the results from in-depth interviews complement the results of the survey instrument, which can enhance the validity of the survey findings.

In addition to interviews, the most common methodology in qualitative research, other studies have utilized written documents (e.g., journals entries) and participatory field observations, which were also reported to enhance the validity of the quantitative findings (Pellegrini and Long 2002; Varjas et al. 2006). In their study on bullying behavior among students making a transition from elementary to middle school, Pellegrini and Long (2002) utilized a multi-informant, mixed methods to provide a tenable definition of bullies and bully victims. The study included participant observation and diary entries, as well as peer nominations and self-reports from a sample of 421 fifth through seventh grade students in a rural school. Participants were asked to keep a diary once a month for the entire school year, recounting their experiences within the last 24 hours. The researchers reported that the validity of constructs, such as bullying increased when using mixed method and multiple sources, which minimized the possibility of Type I error. Varjas et al. (2006) examined the effects of bullying victimization on urban youth and evaluated an intervention strategy using a mixed methods approach. The qualitative component of the research consisted of group interviews, curriculum artifacts (worksheets or drawings), *Acceptability Measures* (evaluation form assessing participants' feelings about the session), and *Integrity Measures* (group leader journals, session curriculum outlines, audiotapes of the session, and interviews). The quantitative measures consisted of *Outcome Measures* from Behavior Assessment System for Children and the Revised Child Self-Report Post Traumatic Stress Reaction Index. The key causes of bullying were identified from the qualitative data, which included racial minority status, physical differences, perceived sexual orientation (i.e., labeled as gay by peers), and being a new student at school. The qualitative results were complementary to the findings from the quantitative analyses, and provided additional support for tentative conclusions for quantitative pre-post difference.

Clearly, the strength of these studies lies in their utilization of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative data from the interviews, written documents, and participant field observations complemented the survey results, which allowed researchers to make richer interpretations of the study findings (Powell et al. 2008). However, although these researchers have reported complementary findings, they have not addressed how paradigm, research questions, methods, and data can complement one another (see Bedini and Henderson 1995–1996). The "objective" (quantitative) and the "subjective" (qualitative) are profoundly different means of understanding a social phenomenon (Carroll and Rothe 2010). The quantitative research paradigm is constructed on "scientific rationality", which itself is constructed on an individual's subjective realities. As argued by Carroll and Rothe (2010), when these paradigms are also combined in a complementary manner, it leads to a more holistic understanding of the social phenomena under study and to a more comprehensive view of how the phenomena change and evolve. In other words, a complementary integration of the paradigms can allow us to better

understand that the causal relationships among the dimensions are interdependent and fluid, rather than static.

Divergent findings

Divergence in the findings is also a major issue in mixed methods research on bullying in school (Barker, Pistrang, and Elliott 2002; Cowie and Olafsson 2000; Linkroum 2006; Mathison 1988). Barker, Pistrang, and Elliott (2002) argued that inconsistencies and contradictions in interviews frequently pose a challenge to researchers, as they generate "incompatible" findings. According to Mathison (1988), *inconsistency* among the data occurs frequently in the outcome, as researchers are exposed to a wide range of perspectives or data that do not confirm one aspect of the social phenomenon. In conjunction with inconsistency, *contradiction* is another issue; it is not only possible for data to be inconsistent but also contradictory.

Linkroum's (2006) mixed methods research examined how African American middle school students cope with bullying victimization. First, 213 African American middle school students were randomly selected and were administered questionnaires concerning their experiences in bullying. The researchers then conducted semi-structured interviews with 80 students in order to understand their coping strategies. Qualitative findings identified 15 coping strategies that participants would use, and 13 coping strategies that participants thought they should do, which were categorized into social cluster. However, results of the regression models did not support the main hypothesis that the type of coping responses generated from the qualitative analyses would depend on social cluster. The researcher identified the lack of congruence between findings from the self-report and interviews as a major limitation.

Cowie and Olafsson's (2000) study also demonstrates divergence in qualitative and quantitative findings. The researchers examined the impact of a peer support services program for reducing aggressive behavior in a school with a high rate of bullying. The program consisted of peer training in support skills. The "peer supporters" met with students during lunch and were instructed to keep an eye out for incidences of bullying and to intervene when appropriate. The researchers conducted a program evaluation, which included administering a questionnaire (quantitative) twice to collect pre-test and post-test data. Results from the quantitative analysis suggest that the program was not successful in decreasing bullying behavior. The researchers then conducted interviews with peer supporters, students, and potential users of the intervention. The results from the interviews with the peer supporters demonstrated that students believed that the program made a positive impact in counteracting the problem of bullying. Students who participated in the program also reported that the peer supporters were helpful and would recommend it to their peers. Findings from the quantitative data alone paint a dismal picture of the program and would imply that the program was potentially harmful. However, the qualitative data are particularly rich, as they highlight the strengths of the program, and thus provide a rationale for modifying the program to address weaknesses rather than merely discarding it (Powell et al. 2008). The researchers concluded that despite the divergence in the findings from two types of methods, new insights were generated.

The use of mixed methods in a single study frequently reveals inconsistencies between the data collected using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, as evidenced by several aforementioned studies. However, attempts have not been

made to investigate *why* the findings are inconsistent. There has also been no attempt to resolve the inconsistent results during the study; inconsistent results are only identified and discussed after the study (Pool et al. 2010).

Directions for future research

Given the reality that school bullying is "a moving target" and changing in prevalence, type, form, and etiology and consequence (Swearer and Espelage 2011), there is much room for future mixed methods studies. For example, increased research attention is focused on how children and adolescents are using technology (e.g., cell phones, computers) to engage in bullying, which is called cyber-aggression, electronic aggression, cyber-bullying, and digital harassment (Bauman 2010). Mixed methods should be employed to examine the extent to which face-to-face bullying dynamics either converge or diverge with bullying through technology. This would be especially helpful as this research would require venturing into different contexts such as social networking sites, blogging communities, virtual communities, and chatrooms.

Mixed methods could also be employed to evaluate bullying prevention programs across different schools and communities. To date, quantitative meta-analytic studies have yielded inconsistent results in programs' ability to reduce bullying behaviors. A meta-analytic investigation of 16 studies published from 1980–2004 yielded similarly disappointing results regarding the impact of school-based anti-bullying programs (Merrell et al. 2008). This meta-analysis included data from over 15,000 students (grades Kindergarten to twelfth) in Europe, Canada, and the United States. Positive effect sizes were found for only one-third of the study variables, which primarily reflected favorable changes in knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of bullying. No changes were found for bullying behaviors. Ttofi, Farrington, and Baldry (2008) have yielded mixed results. In a report for the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, they evaluated 44 bullying intervention studies, of which the majority was based on the Olweus Program, which is the most widely used bullying prevention program in the world and US. Researchers noted that anti-bullying programs were more efficacious in smaller-scale European studies and less effective in the United States. If some of these studies were complimented with interviews, observations, and focus groups, it might allow for a better assessment of potentially positive effects of mediating or intermittent variables.

Further, bullying programs are only as good as their implementers. Teachers are often implementers of these programs in their classrooms; however, they have many demands on their time and are likely to drift in their ability to adhere to bullying lessons. Thus, mixed methods research would be helpful in determining the ways in which teachers implement the program and the types of strategies they use to adhere to the program components.

Conclusion

Mixed methods are gaining ground in the research community, as methodologies can clearly influence what can or cannot be understood about a particular social phenomenon. Mixed methods not only potentially enhance the validity of the findings from either quantitative or qualitative method, but also provide greater insights in bullying. Divergent or contradictory findings from two methods can also influence researchers to rethink and re-conceptualize their research questions and hypotheses. Such unified approach can potentially fill the gap in our understanding

of this phenomenon, which has major implications for both researchers and school practitioners. As the communities that children and adolescents reside in are ever-changing and being shaped by technology, it is imperative that we are careful to employ mixed methods approaches to gain a clear understanding of the ways in which bullying changes. Only then can we design prevention programs that reflect the dynamic and complex intersection between youth, schools, families, technology, and the use of bullying tactics.

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