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Are reading difficulties associated with bullying involvement?

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ABSTRACT

Reading difficulties (RDs) are easily noticed by classmates, may cause frustration in the affected students, and are often accompanied by emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal problems at school. Although interviews with students with RDs have revealed bullying experiences, whether RDs actually increase the risk of bullying involvement has not been investigated before. We tested the association of self-reported RDs with peer-reported involvement in bullying in a nationally representative sample of 17,188 students (grades 3–8) from 1045 classrooms in 147 schools. Results indicated that experienced difficulties in the most fundamental learning skill seem to put students at risk especially for victimization at school (viewed by peers as victims and bully/victims), when gender, level of schooling, self-esteem, and difficulties in math were taken into account. In general, over a third of students with RDs were involved in bullying as victims, bullies, or bully/victims, compared with approximately a fifth of students without RDs.

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1. Introduction

Reading difficulties (RDs) are easily noticed in school by other students as common school practices, such as reading aloud, group work, and presentations make these difficulties visible to everyone in the classroom (Kaukiainen et al., 2002) thus possibly making poor readers easy targets for victimization. In addition, when reading is difficult and arduous, there will be challenges in other subjects as well and going to school might start feeling burdensome and aversive. This frustration is likely to influence students' behavior in school as well as their reactions towards peers, resulting in externalizing and acting-out behaviors (Halonen, Aunola, Ahonen, & Nurmi, 2006; Morgan, Farkas, Tufis, & Sperling, 2008), including bullying others. Even though parents and educators are often concerned about the peer relations of students with RD, little research has been conducted specifically on the associations between RD and bullying, defined as deliberate, repeated aggressive behavior against an individual who finds it difficult to defend him- or herself (Olweus, 1999).

1.1. Reading difficulties

During the first school years the ability to read fluently is one of the most important learning goals for children. Reading is a skill needed in school every day and reading difficulties are relatively common. Since reading is emphasized in most learning situations, problems with it can be quite conspicuous. Children are expected to start using their reading skills acquired in the first school years as learning tools in other subjects. A school day becomes flooded with reading tasks and for a student with RD the classroom may turn into an inhospitable environment, as everything revolves around something formidable.

Specific reading disabilities constitute the most prevalent type of learning disabilities (LDs), as they affect 3%–17.5% of children and adults of the general population (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), 2010; Shaywitz, 1998; Taanila, Yliherva, Kaakinen, Moilanen, & Ebeling, 2011), and up to 80% of the LD population (Beitchman & Young, 1997; Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003). For example reading and math disabilities co-occur in 30%–70% of individuals with either disorder (Willcutt et al., 2013). Reading disabilities include impairments in single word recognition (i.e. decoding) and/or reading comprehension, and they result from problems in phonological processing skills, naming problems, or both (Wolf & Bowers, 1999). Moreover, not all poor readers are recognized by the education system (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and there are also students without diagnosed reading disabilities who

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experience difficulties in reading and feel that they read at an insufficient level in relation to the demands they face in school. The current study utilizes students self-reports of their reading difficulties in order to take into account the subjective disadvantage caused by RDs.

1.2. Learning disabilities and bullying involvement

Students with disabilities, including LDs in general, appear to be involved in bullying as victims and as perpetrators more often than their nondisabled peers (Mishna, 2003; Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011). Researchers have found that students with LDs are victimized more frequently than their nondisabled peers (e.g. Luciano & Savage, 2007; Nabuzoka, 2003), and they also seem to display more bullying and/or aggressive behaviors than other children (e.g. Estell et al., 2008). Students with LDs have been reported to bully others up to three times as often as students without LDs (Kaukiainen et al., 2002), and girls with LDs may be 10 times more likely to bully others than girls without LDs (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993). However, there are some inconsistencies in findings while some studies have found the association between LDs and both victimization and bullying (e.g. Estell et al., 2008; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009), but other studies between LDs and bullying only (Kaukiainen et al., 2002), or LDs and victimization only (Luciano & Savage, 2007; Nabuzoka, 2003; Rose, Espelage, Aragon, & Elliott, 2011; Saylor & Leach, 2009). In addition, students with LDs have been identified as bully/victims, that is students who both bully others and are victimized themselves, more often than their peers without such difficulties (Kaukiainen et al., 2002), although because of the small sample size of the study ($n = 141$, including only two bully/victims) the results have to be interpreted cautiously. Given that bully/victims have been found to be more maladjusted than victims and bullies in many ways (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003), it is not surprising that this group has also emerged when examining students with LDs. However, research in this area is still flawed by a lack of specificity in the definition of learning difficulties, and researchers have been examining heterogeneous groups of students in different educational settings and student populations (Cornwall & Bawden, 1992; Rose, Monda-Amaya et al., 2011).

Whether RDs in particular subject students to social adaptation problems such as involvement in bullying at school as bullies, victims, or bully/victims has never been studied in a community sample to obtain reliable and generalizable information. Previous studies provide information about the phenomenon within samples of RD students only. Few studies interviewing adolescents or adults with dyslexia have found negative memories of victimization due to learning problems to be common (e.g. Hellendoorn & Ruijsenaars, 2000). Studies interviewing children and youth with reading difficulties have reported victimization rates varying from about a third (Ingesson, 2007), to 50% (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002), and up to 85% (Singer, 2005), whereas in community samples the prevalence of victimization among students with reading difficulties has not been studied. However, in order to find out whether RDs increase the risk of bullying involvement in a school setting it is imperative to evaluate the risk in a sample where the prevalence of RDs reflects that of the entire population. Only then it is possible compare the risk level of the small group of students with RDs with the majority of students not experiencing difficulties in reading. Since there is no comparison group in the previous studies, it is impossible to know whether students with RDs are victimized more often than their peers without difficulties.

Although information about the risk RDs cause for bullying involvement in particular is very limited, it is well established that

difficulties in reading are frequently accompanied by many emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal problems at school (e.g. Taanila et al., 2011; Undheim, Wichstrøm, & Sund, 2011). Poor readers seem to portray anxiety, depression, and negative emotions (Arnold et al., 2005; Halonen et al., 2006; Mammarella et al., 2014; Morgan, Farkas, & Wu, 2012; Willcutt & Pennington, 2000), as well as aggressive, angry, and antisocial behaviors and conduct problems (Bennett, Brown, Boyle, Racine, & Offord, 2003; Carroll, Maughan, Goodman, & Meltzer, 2005; Morgan et al., 2008; Trzesniewski, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor, & Maughan, 2006). Thus, RDs often co-occur with internalizing symptoms, which are recognized risk factors for victimization (Cook et al., 2010), as well as with externalizing symptoms, which are risk factors for both victimization (Card & Hodges, 2008) and bullying others (Cook et al., 2010). Externalizing symptoms seem to be typical especially among bully/victims (Cook et al., 2010). Moreover, RDs have been linked with poor social skills and lack of social competence (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Parhiala et al., 2015; Vallance, Cummings, & Humphries, 1998), peer rejection (Kiuru et al., 2012; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993), low self-esteem (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002), as well as distractibility and inattentiveness (Carroll et al., 2005; Parhiala et al., 2015). Longitudinal findings support a reciprocal relation between reading difficulties and behavioral problems, leading to a negative cycle of increasing problem behaviors, school disengagement, and academic failure (Halonen et al., 2006; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001).

In addition, reading difficulties may lead to problems with general academic achievement (e.g. Hakkarainen, Holopainen, & Savolainen, 2013), which have also been associated with bullying involvement. According to a meta-analysis investigating predictors of bullying and victimization, poor academic performance appears to be a significant predictor of bullying, but not that much of being bullied, and bully/victims perform academically closer to bullies than victims (Cook et al., 2010). In some studies, also victimization has been related to academic difficulties, but this association seems to be relatively weak (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). However, in a study by Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, and Kernic (2005) it was victims and bully/victims, but not bullies, who were more likely to have low achievement than other children.

1.3. The present study

The present study is the first one focusing on bullying involvement of students with RDs compared to students without RDs in a large community sample of students in grades 3–8. We are interested in whether experiencing relatively common, non-observable difficulties such as RDs is enough to put students at risk for victimization, bullying perpetration, or both at school. By utilizing students' self-reports of their RDs and peer-reports of bullying involvement from a large, nationally representative sample, we have a unique opportunity to examine these relatively low-prevalence phenomena, RDs and involvement in bullying in relation to each other. Interestingly, in addition to victims and bullies, the large community sample enables the investigation of the group of bully/victims as well, which seems to be the most maladjusted group in many ways (Cook et al., 2010; Juvonen et al., 2003), and has never before been examined in relation to RDs, and only rarely in relation to LDs (only Kaukiainen et al., 2002). This is likely due to the fact that investigating such a small group of students (bully/victims) in relation to another small group of students (students with LDs or RDs) requires substantial sample size. Unlike previous studies (i.e. Humphrey & Mullins, 2002; Ingesson, 2007; Singer, 2005), we utilize peer-reports of victimization and bullying in order to gain an objective view to the situation observed by multiple peers, and to avoid inflation of the results due to shared method

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