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Research article

Bullying and school transition: Context or development?☆

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A B S T R A C T

The relative impact of school transition versus development on peer victimization and bullying perpetration were examined in a natural experiment involving 698 students where half transitioned into middle school from Grade 5 to Grade 6 and the other half remained in their elementary school over the same period. Results indicated that, on average, peer victimization decreased over the transition period while bullying perpetration remained stable for the whole sample. Multilevel modeling was used to investigate the effects of school transition and sex on changes in victimization and perpetration. Results indicated that the effect of transition status on changes in peer victimization was moderated by sex. Middle school transition status predicted decreases in peer victimization for girls, but not for boys, who transitioned. However, school transition status and participants' sex (and their interaction) did not predict changes in perpetration over time. Our findings indicate that changes in student involvement with peer victimization are better understood as a contextual rather than a typical developmental process, whereas bullying perpetration may be better understood as developmental.

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Introduction

In North America, transition into middle school and high school is common. However, for many students, making the transition to a new school is not always a successful, happy, or exciting experience because some students report higher rates of bullying involvement after their transition to a new school (e.g., Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Pepler et al., 2006). Bullying is intentional and repetitive aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). Bullying may include direct actions, such as hitting, taking or damaging possessions, taunting, or name-calling, or indirect actions, such as social exclusion, rumor-spreading, or manipulation of friendships (i.e., relational or social bullying), and may also involve the use of communication technologies, which is often referred to as cyber bullying (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). Bullying has been linked to negative feelings about school and reduced student functioning such as poor mental health outcomes, fear of attending schools, and compromised academic performance, school social justice, and school climate quality (e.g., Barber & Olsen, 2004; Forrest, Bevans, Riley, Crespo, & Louis, 2013; Vaillancourt, Brittain, McDougall, & Duku, 2013; Wang et al., 2014).

Research suggests that bullying is part of the human condition (e.g., Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2013) and may be a developmental phenomenon (i.e., changes with age; Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008; Barker, Boivin, et al., 2008). Studies of North American children and youth suggest that as many as 30% of students are bullied

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at school, and of these students, 8–10% are abused on a daily basis (Nansel et al., 2001; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). With respect to sex differences, Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, and Sadek (2010) reported in their meta-analysis that boys were more likely than girls to be bullied by others, to bully others, and to be bully-victims (i.e., to be bullied and to also bully others). In the present study, we examined changes in peer victimization and bullying perpetration over a period of early adolescence to address the question of whether these changes were linked to middle school transition (i.e., context) or if they were better characterized as part of typical development. Said differently, we tested a contextual versus a developmental framework to understand students' involvement with bullying during the school transition years. In the present study, we treated development as synonymous with change over time, and context as social context/setting in which children's social landscape changed and new hierarchies were formed.

School Transition

Children often experience transitions to new schools in their progression through the education system. Researchers frequently describe school transitions as a negative phenomenon for many children, pointing to difficulties related to academic functioning, social network organization, adaptive behavior, quality of school life, and mental health outcomes (e.g., Barber & Olsen, 2004; Forrest et al., 2013; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Sirsch, 2003; Tilleczek, 2008; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). For example, Wigfield et al. (1991) followed 1,850 American students across the transition from elementary to junior high school (i.e., from Grade 6 to Grade 7) and found that students' achievement self-perceptions (e.g., in math, English, social activities, and sports) and self-esteem declined when they made school transitions. In a more recent cohort study of 1,479 American children from 34 schools, Forrest and colleagues (2013) found that the transition into middle school had negative influences on students' connectedness to teachers, school engagement, and academic achievement.

A number of intra- and interpersonal factors that may lead to negative perceptions of school transition have been documented in literature. These factors include students' social functioning (e.g., adjustment difficulties, self-esteem; McDougall & Hymel, 1998), school climate (e.g., teacher support, peer relations, school/classroom size, school identity; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, & Sanchez, 2000; Roderick, 2003), mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, loneliness; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Benner & Graham, 2009), students' academic attitudes and perceptions of academic control and importance (Benner, 2011; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001), family characteristics (e.g., home culture, family socioeconomic disadvantage, low maternal warmth, and maltreatment; Barber & Olsen, 2004), and pubertal development (e.g., Forrest et al., 2013; Stice, Presnell, & Bearman, 2001), among others.

However, the research on middle school transition is not always definitive with regard to the valence (positive or negative) of the experience. Barber and Olsen's (2004) longitudinal study involving 933 American adolescents showed that sixth grade students reported higher self-esteem, lower depression, and lower loneliness in middle school compared to elementary school. In the Canadian context, McDougall and Hymel (1998) followed 160 children who made transitions from elementary school to middle school (from sixth grade to seventh grade) and found that although some students reported significant stress and unhappiness in connection with the move, most students reported successful and happy perceptions of the transition experience. In another Canadian study, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, Seifert and Schulz (2007) tracked two cohorts of children over the transition period from elementary school (ages 10–11) to middle school and reported a small negative impact of school transition on students' academic achievement (i.e., reading and mathematics) but no effect on their social relations (i.e., peer relationships, prosocial behavior, and social skills) or psychological well-being (i.e., self-concept, anxiety, and parental rejection).

Peer Victimization and Bullying Perpetration Trajectories

The developmental course of children's involvement with bullying across time has been well documented. For example, in North America, research has indicated that peer victimization and bullying perpetration rates are lower for older children than they are for younger children (Nansel et al., 2001; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). In addition to charting overall trends, there has been work done to identify different trajectories. As one Canadian example, Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, and Connolly (2003) mapped four trajectories of peer victimization for students in Grades 5–7: (1) non-victims (low victimization over time), (2) late onset victims (increasing victimization), (3) stable victims (high victimization over time), and (4) desisters (starting with high levels of victimization which decreased over time). In another study, Pepler, Jiang, Craig, and Connolly (2008) identified four trajectories of bullying perpetration in a sample of early adolescents followed over seven years including: (1) consistently high levels of bullying; (2) early moderate levels desisting to almost no bullying at the end of high school; (3) consistently moderate levels; and (4) almost never bullying. In both Goldbaum et al. (2003) and Pepler et al. (2008), groups of low victimization or bullying and groups of high victimization or bullying were present in early adolescence. There is also evidence in the case of both victimization and bullying, for a trajectory characterized by declining involvement.

Studies have also emerged to examine longitudinal development of victimization and bullying simultaneously over time. As one example, Haltigan and Vaillancourt (2014) looked at the joint development of trajectories of bullying perpetration and peer victimization (Grades 5–8) and identified four distinct subgroups of children—low/limited involvement with bullying, bullies (i.e., moderately increasing involvement in bullying perpetration and low in victimization), initial/declining victims (i.e., low in bullying perpetration and moderate/decreasing peer victimization), and victim-to-bully (i.e., increasing bullying perpetration and moderate decreasing victimization). Haltigan and Vaillancourt's study provides evidence that students'