



School-based anti-bullying interventions: Systematic review of the methodology to assess their effectiveness



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 June 2013

Received in revised form 13 January 2015

Accepted 16 April 2015

Available online 24 April 2015

Keywords:

school-based anti-bullying interventions

Evaluation

Research methodology

Internal validity

External validity

Research phases

ABSTRACT

Background: Knowledge and collective experience on the evaluation of anti-bullying interventions are spread across literature. Gathering it would contribute toward evidence-based anti-bullying interventions. This paper presents the results of a systematic literature review of the research methodology of school-based anti-bullying interventions (SBABIs).

Methods: Articles were identified using the word “bullying” either as keyword or subject heading on MEDLINE, PSYCINFO and ERIC. Search engine limitations were also used in order to identify eligible articles evaluating SBABI in childhood and adolescents. Further selection was based on information through titles and abstracts and full text for some articles. Content analysis of words, phrases or extracts accordingly to some pre-specified criteria was used.

Results: Results present research methodologies used in terms of evaluation research designs, number of study groups, collected information and the way information was collected, methodology used for analysis and strengths and limitations identified by researchers concerning their research methodology.

Conclusion: A great variability of research methodologies was observed. We suggest the adoption of a framework of research phases, suggested by someone else, to frame this variability on a continuum toward building evidence. Additionally, based on recommendation suggested by others, we discuss issues of internal and external validity of the evaluation methodologies. These three suggestions help to frame and enhance evaluation practices in bullying research.

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Abbreviations: SBABIs, school-based anti-bullying interventions.

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1. Introduction

Since the first books or reports on bullying during the decade of 1970s in Sweden and Norway, as summarized by [Roland \(2000\)](#), and the largely influential work of [Olweus \(1978\)](#), several researchers from all over the globe have worked in the field of bullying to understand its nature and consequences as well as to find effective and efficient ways to address it.

During these decades, the definition of bullying has evolved ([Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefoghe, 2002](#)). [Smith et al. \(2002\)](#) summarize this evolution over time. Originally, it contained only “physical” and “verbal” expressions of bullying, but subsequently included expressions of “indirect aggression” such as “gossiping and spreading rumors, and social exclusion” ([Smith et al., 2002](#)). Independent of the way in which it is expressed, bullying is always perceived as an “aggressive act” and it is characterized by an “imbalance of power (the victim finds it difficult to defend himself or herself)”, which differentiates it from “the odd fight or quarrel between two young people of about the same strength” and “friendly forms of teasing” ([Smith et al., 2002](#)).

Several researchers have investigated the impact of bullying on people’s health. [Hodgins \(2008\)](#) mentions that “there is ample evidence that the experience of having been bullied is associated with poor outcomes in both physical and mental health for both school going children and adults”. The consequences of bullying in school children make evident the need to consider bullying as an “official school priority” ([Olweus, 2003](#)). However, as in other fields, bullying research is often faced with resource limitations which strain the “need to identify and promote evidence-based practice” ([Black & Jackson, 2007](#)) in order to successfully tackle and prevent bullying.

Evidence-based practice is also a contemporary concern for other scientific fields that interact with bullying research, such as health promotion research. “Health promotion is the process of helping people to increase control over, and improve their health”, where health includes a “physical”, a “mental” and a “social” component ([World Health Organisation, 2009, page 1](#)). Health promotion offers the tools to design and implement effective interventions to prevent bullying ([Hodgins, 2008](#)). Health promoting schools offer an effective framework to develop comprehensive prevention programs in any preventative and well-being area ([Moon, 1999](#)). These in turn show “the no doubt close correlation between health and education” ([Suhrccke & de Paz Nieves, 2011](#)).

In 2006, the World Health Organization defined Evidence-Based Health Promotion as “the use of information derived from formal research and systematic investigation to identify causes and contributing factors to health needs and the most effective health promotion actions to address these in given contexts and population” ([Smith, Tang, & Nutbeam, 2006](#)). This definition emphasizes the notions of “formal research” and “systematic investigation” methodologies as prerequisites for building up evidence ([Smith et al., 2006](#)) of the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions.

Some researchers have conducted meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews (for instance [Ferguson, Miguel, Kilburn, & Sanchez, 2007](#); [Merrell, Guedner, Ross, & Isava, 2008](#); [Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004](#); [Ttoli, Farrington, & Baldry, 2008](#)) to summarize the evidence from school-based anti-bullying interventions (SBABIs) in several countries. Despite the availability of these syntheses of evidence, there is limited literature on synthesis of the methodology that most efficiently would provide sound evidence of effectiveness.

With regard to research methodologies that could be used, the plethora of research methodology textbooks is a resource for researchers. However, they are usually rather generalized covering a wide spectrum of health issues, while bullying research may present its own particularities. [Crothers and Levinson \(2004\)](#) have diligently reviewed and discussed the methods to assess and measure bullying, but their work does not extent to other aspects of research design. [Ryan and Smith \(2009\)](#) have assessed the rigor of anti-bullying program evaluation published in peer-reviewed journals during 1997–2007 and provided recommendations for evaluation research methodology. Their work covers a wide spectrum of components of a research design, such as “program monitoring, study design, outcomes, statistical analyses and study type” ([Ryan & Smith, 2009](#)) but it only covers 10 years of bullying research.

We consider that a useful resource for research methodologies in the field of bullying is actually located in each individual study report. Gathering this information in a consistent manner would facilitate the transmission, communication and potentially the effective and efficient use of this collective experience among those working in the bullying field. This would be beneficial for the area of evaluation of anti-bullying intervention since it faces some additional challenges for concluding evidence of effectiveness as compared to observational research on bullying. Therefore, this approach should be more focused as opposed to research methodology textbooks.

Describing what has been already used in the field of anti-bullying research can have two benefits. First, it can provide researchers with an arsenal of options of research methodologies that a study team may have not yet considered. Second, an in-depth discussion around these options can provide insights on the understanding of the research recommendations and guidelines that have been suggested so far. At the same time, we believe that this effort should not be limited only to recent years, since today’s “best practices” in research find their justification in the 4 decades of bullying research that have preceded, as they cannot be separated from the evolution of the definition of bullying and its influence on research practices over this time period.

Therefore, the first objective of this study is to map and record the research methodologies used to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of school-based health promotion interventions against bullying. The presentation of the different research methodologies is followed by a synthesis of the arguments on the strengths and limitations as identified by the researchers that have used them. [Tables 1 and 2](#), and [Appendix A](#) include the bibliographic citations and a short description of each article included in this literature review. They can serve as a starting point for researchers, who would like to seek more information on study design characteristics already used in these studies.

The second objective is to make the link between what has already been used in bullying research with a framework the phases of health promotion research as suggested by [Flay \(1986\)](#) as well as the criteria for internal validity proposed by [Windsor, Baranowski, Clark, and Cutter \(1984\)](#) and external validity proposed by [Green and Glasgow \(2006\)](#). Based on these 3 elements we discuss the findings of this literature review.

2. Material and methods

A schematic representation of the methodology for the selection of articles is presented in [Fig. 1](#).

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