The relation between emotional and behavioral disorders and school-based violence

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ABSTRACT

School-based violence is a pernicious and wide-spread problem which affects the lives of a large number of children in school settings as both perpetrators and victims. In this paper, we present a conceptual model of school-based violence which presents two distinct forms of the phenomenon: physical and relational violence; and discuss the distinction between aggression and bullying. Additionally, we present four different participant roles: the bystander, the "pure aggressor," the "pure victim," and the "mixed aggressive-victim," and discuss different psychological markers for each of these different participant actors. The implications for this conceptualization of school-based violence is discussed vis-à-vis the study of the nature and etiology of emotional and behavioral disorders and a call for future research is presented outlining possible avenues for empirical investigation and merging of these two related disciplines.

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Despite growing public awareness of the specter of school-based violence and aggression in our schools, there appears to be little consensus regarding the frequency of the phenomenon aside from the fact that most agree that many children and youth are involved as aggressors or victims. Prevalence studies (cf. Olweus, 1993; Whitney & Smith, 1993) show only varying degrees of agreement, caused by differing definitions of school-based violence (Gumpel & Meadan, 2000), differing foci (i.e., aggression versus bullying), and differing measurement methods (Pellegrini, 2001). Furthermore, while the

characteristics of students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBDs) in the schools would appear to predispose them to experience (as aggressors and as victims) school violence at rates higher than those of their peers, extant research on this topic is sparse. This paucity of research limits both our understanding and our ability to provide effective treatments to students with EBD and may, in turn, help explain the limited effectiveness of current school-based interventions on developmentally-desirable outcomes for students with EBD.

Lack of definitional clarity and measurement issues may present major obstacles to the understanding and treatment of aggression for this population. Most measures of school-based violence remain committed to self-report questionnaires regardless of the fact that

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there appear to be developmental trends in how primary informants about school-based violence perceive the phenomenon (Gumpel & Meadan, 2000). Despite issues related to the psychometric properties of school-based violence questionnaires, paper and pencil self-report instruments remain the most common method for gauging these phenomena. These instruments are fraught with complex external and internal validity measurement problems inherent in self-disclosure of anti-social behaviors and in a lack of taxonomic clarity in defining these latent traits. On the other hand, corroborative data are often even more elusive and problematic since, generally, the aggressor intends not to be caught or observed, and may go to lengths to keep his or her behavior covert. While there appears to be a general consensus regarding the classification of extreme cases of school-based violence, more common ambient types of these behaviors (Gumpel & Meadan, 2000) appear to be to more developmentally and subjectively loaded and hence are overlooked or underreported by children, youth, and caretakers.

Understanding these developmental trends, and potential deviations from them, is instrumental in developing appropriate treatment plans for both aggressors and their victims. To illustrate, Gumpel and Meadan (2000) found that elementary aged children tended to be more inclusive in their definitions of behaviors as aggressive or non-aggressive relative to middle and high school students. The authors attributed these differences to developmental trends in attributional thought, specifically in understanding the concept of intentionality. This issue of intentionality has been visited and revisited over the last two decades in connection with children's biases in interpreting ambiguous social situations and is key in understanding how children perceive and process stimuli from their social environment.

1. Terminology

EBD is a general term adopted in the late 1980s by the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition (Forness, 1988; Forness & Knitzer, 1992), and encompasses the five characteristics described in the DSM IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000): conduct disorders, anxiety disorders, withdrawn behavior, immaturity, and socialized aggression (Quay, 1986). In the current context, since we are dealing with the two issues of school violence and emotional and behavioral disorders in the classroom, we have opted to relate to EBD in the school sense: namely, how EBDs manifest themselves in the classroom. We choose this route, rather than relating to EBD in the clinical sense (i.e., according to DSM-IV or ICD-10 criteria). It is beyond the scope of the present paper to examine clinical markers of conduct disorders, anxiety disorders, withdrawal, immaturity, and socialized aggression (Quay, 1986). Accordingly, we retain a focus solely on externalizing versus internalizing behaviors. EBD and school violence are clearly related, yet not synonymous topics. Each field, developing separately has shown only limited responsiveness to clinical intervention. We believe, therefore, that there is theoretical and clinical justification to examine these two fields together.

Our goals in this article, therefore, are twofold. First, we will attempt to elucidate areas both enjoying a scientific consensus and those without and to ask more questions than supply answers; as such we will endeavor to outline some potential research agendas in this field. Second, we will re-examine theoretical perspectives in order to begin to redevelop associated treatment paradigms. We will begin by discussing the extant literature on students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and school violence, highlighting in particular characteristics of students with EBD which predispose them to experience school violence, as aggressors and/or bullies, victims, or aggressive-victims. We will then compare and contrast differing conceptualizations of the bully–victim relationship, ending with recommendations for further research in this area, particularly in relation to students with EBD.

2. Students with EBD and school violence

While some evidence suggests that students with disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities) are likely to be exposed to violence in schools (e.g., Morrison, Furlong, & Smith, 1994; Sabornie, 1994; Sharp & Thompson, 1994; Svetaz, Ireland, & Blum, 2000) research on exposure to school violence (both as perpetrators and victims) and students with EBD is scarce. This is odd given that the characteristics of students identified and diagnosed with EBD might predispose them to experience school violence at rates greater than those of their peers, both with and without disabilities. For example, students with EBD present challenging behaviors to peers and adults, including relationship problems, aggression, and oppositionality (Gresham, Lane, MacMillian, & Bocian, 1999; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Research has indicated a relation between problem behaviors and a number of negative developmental outcomes, including poor achievement, school drop-out, delinquency, teacher and peer rejection, and vocational adjustment problems (Gresham, Lane, MacMillian, & Bocian 1999; Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992; Pope, Bierman, & Mumma, 1991; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey 1995). Further, students with EBD exhibit classroom behavior (e.g., disruptive and off-task behaviors) that adversely affects relationships with teachers, peers, and other school personnel (Gunter, Denny, Jack, & Shores, 1993; Gunter, Denny, Shores, & Reed, 1994; Wehby, Symons, & Shores, 1995).

Anti-social behavior patterns that characterize students with EBD include both externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency) and internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal) behaviors (Achenbach, 1991). Externalizing behaviors, typical of many students identified as EBD, tend to be more stable, more resistant to intervention, and, consequently, have a worse prognosis for remediation relative to internalizing behaviors (Hinshaw, 1992). Both externalizing and internalizing behaviors have been linked to increases in peer-reported victimization (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999), and victimization predicted increases in externalizing and internalizing behaviors for children without a mutual best friendship. Furthermore, Schwartz, Proctor, and Chien (2001a) found that aggressive-victims in schools tended to have comorbid externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Forness (2003) notes the difficulty inherent in treating children with comorbid disruptive behavior disorders and depression and/or anxiety disorders and that these children may be less likely to select adaptive responses and more likely to respond impulsively without regard to consequences than children with a sole diagnosis of disruptive behavior disorders (Granic & Lamey 2002); as we will discuss later, these children may be more likely to be both recipients and perpetrators of school violence. Regardless, students with EBD may be at greater risk for exposure to school violence due to both their externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

The school violence literature has primarily been associated with direct physical bullying (Olweus, 1993), which is a form of proactive aggression and is intended to achieve, demonstrate, or maintain social dominance (Pellegrini, 1998; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). Bullying, defined by Olweus (1999), includes aggressive and repeated behaviors where an asymmetry between the bully and the victim exists (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Olweus, 2001) and refers to the systematic use of physical or psychological power by a stronger child against a weaker child (Olweus, 2001). Aggression is commonly defined in broader strokes, usually including primarily behavioral topographies (Parke & Slaby, 1983). According to Brain (1994), an aggressive act must (a) have the potential to harm, (b) be accompanied by arousal, (c) be intentional, and (d) be aversive for the victim. Accordingly, bullying and aggression are not synonymous: all bullies are aggressors, but not all aggressors are bullies. Despite the fact that the empirical differentiation between bullying and aggressive behavior is at times unclear, a large body of research has conceptualized bullying as a subset of general youth aggression (Boulton, Bucci, &