Bullying Behaviour and Victimization Among Aboriginal Students within Northwestern Ontario

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Abstract

This study describes the self-reported bullying experiences and behaviours of Aboriginal students within two schools in a northwestern Ontario community. Different types of bullying and victimization experiences include, but are not limited to: physical, verbal, social, and electronic bullying. These bullying and victimization experiences were assessed among grades 4 through 8 students using the Safe School Survey. The results of the study showed that relative to the entire sample, Aboriginal students reported comparable levels of both victimization and bullying behaviour at school. All students reported verbal bullying behaviours and victimization experiences as the most frequent form of bullying. The results reflected no significant difference between Aboriginal male and female rates of reported bullying and victimization.

Keywords*: bullying, victimization, Aboriginal students, cyber bullying, school children*

Introduction

Bullying has been shown to be a common problem with serious consequences experienced by children and adolescents (Vaillancourt et al., 2010). Both bullies and victims are reported to be at increased risk of experiencing serious health and psychosocial problems, including somatic difficulties (Schnohr & Niclasen, 2006; Due et al., 2005), depression (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, & Rantanen, 1999), anxiety (Bond et al., 2001), substance abuse (Alikasifoglu, Erginoz, Ercan, Uysal, & Albayrak-Kaymak, 2007; Alikasifoglu et al., 2004), suicide attempts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999), aggressive behaviours (Alikasifoglu et al., 2004), truancy, and lower grades (Srabstein & Piazza, 2008). Despite the serious and persistent behavioural, psychosocial and health related outcomes associated with bullying and the potential for "bias-based" bullying directed at minority groups (Mishna, 2008), there remains a paucity of research specifically examining the experiences of bullying and victimization amongst Aboriginal Canadians.

Aboriginal Canadians are defined by the Canadian Constitution Act (1982) as comprising First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. This study sought to address this issue by exploring bullying behaviours and experiences among Aboriginal children in northwestern Ontario.

The definition of bullying has varied within the literature (Arendt as cited in Sperry and Duffy, 2012); although Olweus' (1993) definition that it involves being "exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more persons" (p.9) has been widely accepted (Smith et al., 2002). Some researchers have argued that the definition should be expanded to recognize that bullying represents an imbalance of power, with an intent to cause harm and usually includes some form of threat of further aggression (Coloroso, 2003). Thus, most definitions of bullying have generally accepted Olweus' definition with the recognition that it entails the repeated intent to harm a victim based on an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim (Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006).

Prevalence rates for bullying behaviour and victimization at school vary according to grade level, frequency within a time frame (e.g. over a week or a month), the type of bullying behaviour or victimization reported, and the demographic characteristics of the participants (Public Safety Canada, 2008; PREVNet, 2010). The contribution of these factors to variability in prevalence rates, including international prevalence rates, has not negated the fact that bullying behaviour and victimization reflect a significant social issue amongst school aged children (Ateah & Cohen, 2009; Craig & Peplar, 2007; Kepenekci & Çınkır, 2006; Nansel, et al., 2001; Nguy & Hunt, 2004; Volk, Craig, Boyce, & King, 2006; Wong, Lok, Lo, & Ma, 2008). Canadian data given by UNICEF in 2007 for children aged 11, 13, and 15 show prevalence rates for victimization as high as 36.3% and as high as 37.0% for engaging in bullying behaviour (reported in Vaillancourt et al., 2010).

Bullying can be conceptualized as either an overt or covert behaviour. Overt bullying requires a direct, interpersonal interaction between bully and victim, and typically employs physical and verbal tactics (van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003). By contrast, covert bullying is generally associated with indirect or relational behaviours designed to manipulate, hurt or influence the victim, for instance by social exclusion (Li, 2006; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). Physical bullying usually emphasizes the size of the perpetrator relative to the victim and includes aggressive behaviours such as kicking, pushing, and spitting (Ando, Asakura, & Simons-Morton, 2005; Hinduja & Parchin, 2008; Wong et al., 2008). Verbal bullying, by contrast, does not rely on physical dominance, but rather the use of words to hurt, degrade, dehumanize, or intimidate the victim (Swart & Bredekamp, 2009). Social bullying is similar to verbal bullying, but involves exclusion, ostracism, alienating, gossiping, and making others look foolish (Coloroso, 2003). A recent form of bullying that has emerged along with advances in technology is electronic or cyber bullying (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010). This form of bullying refers to a deliberate intention to hurt or belittle a victim via any form of electronic communication, such as sending false emails, derogatory comments on instant messaging, blogs, or a website, or forwarding private pictures or information to a cell phone (Keith & Martin, 2005; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Two unique aspects of cyber bullying are that the victim may not know the identity of the bully and that it might include the action of a group (Tokunaga, 2010). Each type of bullying is designed to create and sustain a power imbalance; however, the manner in which this power imbalance is imparted will depend on the bullying behaviour.

Gender and Age

Bullying behaviours unfold within developmental and gender specific contexts. The literature has found mixed results in terms of gender differences in prevalence rates of bullying behaviours. Overall, the literature appears to favour the conclusion that boys are more likely to engage in physical bullying and to be victims of physical bullying (Hinduja & Parchin, 2008; Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006; Wei, Jonson-Reid & Tsao, 2007; Wong et al., 2008); whereas girls are more likely to be perpetrators and victims of electronic bullying (Hinuja & Patchin, 2008; Li, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008). The literature regarding gender differences and verbal bullying is more varied with some studies citing no difference (Wong et al., 2008) and other studies reporting that males are more likely to engage in verbal bullying (Ando et al., 2005; Scheithauer, et al., 2006; Wei et al., 2007). In terms of social bullying, the results are once again mixed with some researchers reporting no gender difference in bullying behaviour (Wong et al., 2008), and others finding females more likely to socially bully their peers (Scheithauster et al., 2006). Similarly, with respect to victimization, research studies have suggested that girls are more likely to be socially bullied (Andreou et al., 2005), while other studies report no gender difference (Monks, Ortega-Ruiz & Rodriguez-Hidalgo, 2008; Scheithauer et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2008). Although the patterns are difficult to discern, enough research suggests possible gender differences in bullying and victimization to warrant continued exploration.

Like gender, age also plays a role in bullying experiences; and again, the research studies have reported varied results. For instance some studies have found that preadolescence is associated with higher rates of victimization that tapers off with increasing age (Monks et al., 2008; Scheithauer et al., 2006; Strabstein & Piazza, 2008). In contrast, other studies have reported that victimization peaks during adolescence (Peskin, Tortolero & Markham, 2006; Srabstein et al., 2006). In terms of bullying behaviour, the results have been more consistent. Researchers have reported that bullying behaviours increase with age and peak for students in early high school (Chapell et al., 2006; Pepler et al., 2006; Rigby, 2004 Solberg, Olweus & Endresen, 2007).

Minority Groups

Bullying behaviour and victimization have often been associated with perceived differences, such as sexual orientation or ethnicity (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Mayencourt, Locke, & McMahon, 2003). Research focusing on the different experiences of minority groups based on ethnicities within North America have found no clear pattern of prevalence rates for bullies, victims, and bully-victims among Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, and African American populations (Holt & Espelage, 2007; Mouttapa, Valente, Gallaher, Rohrback, & Unger, 2004; Sawyer, Bradshaw, & O'Brennan, 2008; Srabstein & Piazza, 2008). Literature suggests instances of bullying behaviours described as ethnoculturally-based, which is when minority groups are more prone or vulnerable to victimization or bullying (Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995; Dell & Kilty, 2012; Larochette, 2009; Rigby, 2002). Research investigating bullying experiences and group membership suggests that minorities might be bullied due to intolerance related to such factors as gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and socio-economic status (Mishna, 2008). Some authors (cf. Larochette, Murphy, & Craig, 2010; Rigby, 2004) suggest that bullying itself is a socio-cultural phenomenon because it occurs within a cultural context of historical and social biases that both generate and perpetuate power differentials across social groups. There is a history of disadvantage reflecting disparities between mainstream society and Aboriginal Canadians. Intergenerational trauma,

forced separation from parents through the residential school system, and colonialism have created and sustained a power imbalance (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996) that might contribute to differences in prevalence rates for bullying experiences among Aboriginal Canadians.

A study conducted in the United States examined the prevalence of bullying among Native Americans (Srabstein & Piazza, 2008) and reported a higher proportion of bully-victims within the Native American population. A Canadian survey of high school students conducted by Eisler and Schissel (2004) also reported that Aboriginal youth experienced a higher rate of bullying victimization than other youth. Similarly, Lemstra, Nielsen, Rogers, Thompson, & Moraros (2011), surveyed 4,197 Grades 5−8 students in Saskatoon and reported that First Nations or Métis students were more likely to be victims of physical bullying. A recent study in Canada by Do (2012) reported a higher involvement of Aboriginal children with bullying behavior and victimization when compared to Caucasian or ethnic minority children. Aboriginal males were reported to be involved with both more physical bullying and victimization, while Aboriginal girls were involved with more social bullying. The above studies suggest that Aboriginal students are at greater risk of being bullied or being involved with bullying; however, there is insufficient research examining bullying experiences among the Aboriginal population.

Further research is needed on how Aboriginal children experience bullying because "the context of mainstream Canadian schools is one in which Aboriginal children may often feel marginalized" (Rawana, et al., 2010, p. 219). Consequently, the current study aims to contribute to the body of literature on bullying by exploring and describing comparative rates in the different types of bullying and victimization among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. In addition, the current study sought to explore the role of gender and age as it pertains to differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student bullying behaviours.

Method

Participants

The present study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and was independently reviewed by the appropriate university and school Ethics Review Boards. Data for the present study was drawn from a larger community-based study focusing on bullying and violence in two elementary schools in northwestern Ontario. Surveys were administered to 103 students in grades 4-8. Demographic information including age, gender, ethnicity and grade were collected. The students ranged in age from 9 to 14 years, with a mean age of 11 years. The majority of students were between the ages of 11-12 (46.1%). The gender composition was 49% male and 51% female. Self-identification was used to determine Aboriginal status, which resulted in 36 individuals or 35% of the sample reporting themselves as being Aboriginal Canadians (4 individuals from the sample answered 'I don't know' to the question).

Materials and procedure

The Safe School Survey (SSS) (Totten, Quigley, & Morgan, 2004) is a 47-item questionnaire that assesses perceived safety and frequency of bullying and victimization within a social context. The questions on the SSS used in this survey inquired about the incidence of bullying and victimization over the past four weeks. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from: Never, Once or Twice, Every

Week, Many Times a Week, and Don't Know. This measure also assessed different types of bullying and victimization behaviours including: physical, verbal, social, and electronic. When asked about physical bullying and victimization the students are offered examples on the SSS such as being hit, kicked, pushed, slapped, spat on or hurt by others in any physical way. Questions about verbal bullying included examples such as having said mean things to other students, teased others, called students names, threatened or tried to hurt other students' feelings. Social bullying and victimization included examples such as having left other students out on purpose, refused to play with others, said bad things behind their back, and got other students to not like certain people. For electronic bullying and victimization the SSS suggested examples such as the use of email, phone or cellular phone text messages to threaten other students or make them look bad. Although reliability and validity information for the SSS have not been established, this measure has been recognized by the Canadian Public Health Association as a leading measure of bullying in Canada (Stys, 2004).

Results

Bullying and victimization, frequencies and types

Due to the low frequency rates at the extremes of the 5-point Likert scale for bullying and victimization, the items were collapsed for analysis into two categories: reporting having experienced or not having experienced victimization; or engaged in bullying in the past four weeks. Using this dichotomy, frequency tables are reported below to show how many students reported each of the types of bullying behaviours. Table 1 shows that for the entire sample the rate of victimization at school was high (63.4%). The percentages of victimization reported by the Aboriginal students (54.3%) versus the non-Aboriginal students (69%) at school are also presented in Table 1. The percentage of victimization is comparable between the groups and no significant differences emerged using a chi-square analysis.

Table 1

Victimization experienced at school for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students

Victimization	*Aboriginal*		*Non-Aboriginal*		*Total*	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Never	16	45.7	18	31	34	36.6
At least once or twice	19	54.3	40	69	59	63.4
Total	35	100	58	100	93	100

To further analyse the different types of victimization, the scores relating to types of bullying behaviour were examined. The frequencies and percentages for different types of victimization are presented in Table 2. A number of students reported experiencing many types of bullying; therefore, when added together the total percentages do not sum to 100%. Table 2 shows that for the total group verbal victimization (57.8%) was reported as the most frequent type of victimization and electronic bullying

(22.2%) was reported as the least frequent. Chi-square analyses of the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students for each of the types of bullying behaviours did not indicate any significant differences in the rates of types of victimization reported.

Table 2

Types of victimization reported by the students as having occurred at least once or twice in the past four weeks at school

Victimization	Aboriginal		Non-Aboriginal		Total	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
Physical	9	29	28	48.3	37	41.6
Verbal	17	51.5	35	61.4	52	57.8
Social	10	31.2	28	51.9	38	44.2
Electronic	8	24.2	12	21.1	20	22.2

Overall a much larger proportion of students reported experiencing victimization compared to students who reported engaging in bullying behaviour. Table 3 shows that some of the students did not answer all questions resulting in a lower response rate of 83 students. Of the students who did respond 28.9% admitted to bullying others at least once or twice over the last four weeks. A cross-tabulation analysis of this number revealed that 32.1% of the Aboriginal students reported bullying and 27.3% of the non-Aboriginal students reported bullying. A chi-square analysis revealed that this difference was not significant.

Table 3

Bullying behaviour reported by the students as having occurred at least once or twice in the past four weeks at school

Bullying	Aboriginal		Non-Aboriginal		Total	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
Never	19	67.9	40	72.7	59	71.1
At least once or twice	9	32.1	15	27.3	24	28.9
Total	28	100	55	100	83	100

The frequencies and percentages of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students reporting different types of bullying behaviour at least once or twice over the past four weeks are presented in Table 4. Verbal bullying

(27.3%) emerged as the most frequent type of bullying behaviour. A similar pattern to the total sample was found, with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students reporting similar rates of bullying behaviours. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students for any of the types of bullying.

Table 4

Types of bullying reported by the students as occurring at least once or twice in the past four weeks at school

Bullying	Aboriginal		Non-Aboriginal		Total	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Physical	6	20	7	12.1	13	14.8
Verbal	10	32.3	14	24.6	24	27.3
Social	4	13.8	8	13.8	12	13.8
Electronic	4	12.9	2	3.5	6	6.8

Age. An analysis was conducted of bullying by age grouping using a two-way contingency table and chi-square analysis. To facilitate the analysis, age was collapsed into two categories, 11 to 12 years old and 13 to 15 years old. A chi-square analysis was also performed to examine the distribution of bullying and victimization behaviours for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by age. None of the results emerged as significant. Table 5 shows the victimization rates by age, which revealed that the highest levels of victimization for both the total sample (78.2%) and for Aboriginal students (88.9%) took place between the ages of 11 and 12 years old. No significant differences emerged between the groups. The sample sizes were too small for further statistical analysis.

Table 5

Victimization by age reported for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students

Age Categories	Aboriginal		Non-Aboriginal		Total	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Ages 10-12	16	88.9	27	73	43	78.2
Ages 13-15	2	11.1	10	27	12	21.8
Total	18	100	37	100	55	100

Gender. To examine any differences in bullying by gender, chi-square analyses were performed using two-

way contingency table analyses to determine whether males or females reported different levels of bullying or victimization behaviour at school. The results revealed no statistically significant differences between the genders for both bullying and victimization either for the total sample or for Aboriginal students.

An examination of whether there were any differences in the four types of bullying behaviour related to gender was also conducted. The only significant difference between males and females that emerged from the results was for victimization in electronic bullying χ^2 (1) $= 5.83$, $p < .02$. The frequencies and percentages of bullying behaviour of male versus female students, with respect to electronic bullying, are presented in Table 6 as a total sample. The results show that females tend to have a greater proportion of reported electronic victimization (31.2%) compared to males (10.9%). The effect size of this finding, Phi coefficient = .25, is generally regarded as small to a medium (Cohen, 1992), meaning that while the difference is significant it is not a very large difference between the groups. The sample sizes were too small to allow further statistical analysis of the gender differences in specific types of bullying as experienced by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal students.

Table 6

Victimization experienced by male and female students in the past four weeks

Victimization	Males		Females		Total	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Never	41	89.1	33	68.8	74	78.7
At least once or twice	5	10.9	15	31.2	20	21.3
Total	46	100	48	100	93	100

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe comparative rates in the different types of bullying and victimization among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. The results of this study indicate that a high number of participants (63.4%) reported being a victim of all forms of bullying behaviours at least once or twice in the four weeks prior to being surveyed. This is much higher than the Canadian data of 36% reported by Vaillancourt et al. (2010). Although it should be noted that considerable differences in prevalence rates of victimization have been reported depending upon the assessment method and definition used (Franks, 2011), it does suggest that the variability in rates within different contexts requires further understanding. An examination of the different types of bullying victimization experienced by all the students showed that: 41.6% experienced physical victimization; 57.8% verbal; 44.2% social; and 22.2% experienced electronic victimization. Lemstra et al. (2011) reported a comparable pattern of victimization, albeit lower prevalence rates, of 23% (physical), 42% (verbal), 31% (social), and 10% (electronic). Thus, the results of this study suggest that children who attend school in northwestern Ontario report similar patterns of bullying, but higher prevalence rates than other areas of Canada. This is

a social condition that requires further understanding, especially considering the deleterious health and social effects of bullying (Franks, Rawana, & Brownlee, 2013).

An analysis of the prevalence rates for victimization among Aboriginal students compared to non-Aboriginal students found that fewer (54.3%) of the Aboriginal students reported being bullied compared to the non-Aboriginal (69%) students. This difference did not emerge as significant and could be regarded as the natural variation between two samples rather than a systematic difference between the groups.

With respect to engaging in the bullying of others, the overall prevalence rate reported by the students (28.9%) was slightly lower, but comparable to the Canadian rate of 37% noted by Vaillancourt et al. (2010). Similar to victimization, the results did not show any significant differences between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in the rate of bullying others. Upon closer examination of the different types of bullying, the students reported verbal bullying as the most frequent form of bullying behaviours. This finding is consistent with research that shows verbal bullying behaviours as accounting for most of all bullying incidents (Coloroso, 2003). Verbal bullying leaves no visible signs on the victims making it difficult to detect and monitor. For these reasons, it also increases the probability of being a desirable bullying option.

The finding of no significant differences in overall reported rates of victimization or bullying behaviours between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is somewhat surprising given the racism and discrimination Aboriginal peoples have endured and continue to endure (Van der Woerd, 2006). With respect to being bullied, the results of this study differ from the perception that minorities are at an increased risk of victimization and discrimination (c.f. Besag, 1989; Hogarth & Crothers, n.d.; Van Ingen & Halas, 2006). However, the limited research literature has revealed mixed results on this issue. Rigby (2004) has suggested that minorities are at an increased risk for victimization due to the existence of socio-cultural power differential, which is certainly an issue for Aboriginal people within northwestern Ontario (Borg, Brownlee, Delaney, 1995; Brownlee, Neckoway, Delaney, & Durst, 2010). In contrast, Boyce (2004) reported that bullying associated with racial or ethnic differences occurred less frequently than other reasons given for bullying such as sexual orientation. Similarly, a study by Srabstein and Piazza (2008) from the United States suggested that American Indians are not at an increased risk of being bully-victims. The findings of the current study are congruent with this latter research, suggesting that Aboriginal students, at least as reported by the participants in this study, were not at increased risk of being bullied.

Another purpose of the current study was to explore the role of gender and age as it pertains to differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student bullying behaviours. A comparison between Aboriginal male and females found no significant difference for rates of reported bullying and victimization, indicating that both genders were equally represented across the four forms of bullying. This finding is consistent with the overall literature of mixed results regarding gender differences in the type of bullying and/or victimization (Crapanzano, Frick, Childs, & Terranova, 2011). It differs somewhat from the findings of Do (2012) who reported Aboriginal boys experienced greater involvement with physical bullying and Aboriginal girls greater social bullying. It is possible that differences in sample size or a more specific relationship to social context might account for the variations in patterns of bullying between studies. There were no significant results pertaining to age differences in bullying and victimization. Results nevertheless showed support for the notion that victimization decreases with age (c.f. Carlyle &

Steinman, 2007; Seals & Young, 2003). The current study revealed more instances of victimization for participants in the 10-12 age range than participants in the 13-15 age range.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study was the moderate sample size. Similar studies have used a larger sample size of 150 students. Future studies could incorporate larger sample sizes that would also permit multivariate statistical analyses. Second, Larochette, Murphy, and Craig (2010) reported that in their study racial victimization tended to vary between schools. This may indicate that if aggregated results were examined from a number of schools a different rate of bullying and victimization would emerge. Again this suggests that future research should incorporate a larger sample involving multiple schools. Third, although the focus of this study was on self-identified perceptions of bullying and victimization, it may be beneficial to use collateral measures of teacher and/or caregiver reports to confirm problems across multiple settings. The inclusion of a measure of bully-victims, rather than the reliance on the dichotomous category of bully or victim would permit the results to be compared against other studies that have used this form of classification. Furthermore, qualitative studies that explore how Aboriginal Canadian children experience bullying behaviours at school and in the community could provide rich insights into our current understanding of these dynamic processes.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that bullying is a very prevalent activity among school age youth in northwestern Ontario. The results did not indicate any significant difference between male and female rates of reported bullying and victimization or any significant age differences. Aboriginal students experienced similar bullying and victimization trends as non-Aboriginal students, which is surprising given that the Aboriginal community has experienced high levels of racism and discrimination. As there is a paucity of research exploring bullying within the Aboriginal community, further research is warranted, particularly with larger samples, to explore whether such trends are consistent across similar studies and populations.

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