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Risk factors for high school dropouts: do perceptions of bullying play a role?

Alison Hunt

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**RISK FACTORS FOR HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: DO PERCEPTIONS OF
BULLYING PLAY A ROLE?**

by
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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Special Educational Services/Instruction
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
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Thesis Chair: Terri Allen, Ph.D.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Lucy, Gabby, Penny, Emily, Jessica, Liz and Meredith.

Without their support and friendship I wouldn't have made it.

Acknowledgements

I would have never been able to complete this thesis without the support and guidance from Dr. Terri Allen and Dr. Roberta Dihoff. I cannot express enough gratitude to Dr. Allen and Dr. Dihoff for the help they provided me with the many obstacles I encountered while working on this project. I would also like to thank my family and friends for all of their positivity and encouragement.

Abstract

Alison Hunt

RISK FACTORS FOR HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: DO PERCEPTIONS OF BULLYING PLAY A ROLE?

2011-12

Terri Allen, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in School Psychology

The current study compared perceptions of bullying experiences among students in a public in-house alternative high school education program for at-risk students with those of the students in the general education population of the same high school. Eleven students enrolled in the alternative high school education program between the ages of 16 and 19 were asked to report their experiences with bullying through a school-created survey that is administered annually to the entire high school population. The results of the 2010 survey of 816 high school students were compared to the results of the 11 students enrolled in the alternative education program. An independent samples t test revealed no significant difference in perceptions of bullying experiences between the results of the two groups. Both groups reported experiencing almost the same amount of bullying during their school year. The implications of these results will be addressed, and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

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Chapter I Introduction

Background and Need

High school bullying has been an issue that has demanded attention for decades, and it is an even more thoroughly studied topic today, as a considerable buzz follows the new laws aimed at combating the surge of bullying in American schools. The effects of bullying are vast and of great interest to educators, with the latest studies proving the span at which bullying can harm a student (Devoe & Murphy 2011). With almost one third of school age students from age 12 to 18 experiencing bullying in traditional school settings during the school year, the need to examine all facets of intervention remains in demand (Devoe & Murphy 2011). Perhaps the most worrisome effect of bullying is the power it can have on robbing students of a safe and necessary education, consequently resulting in student disengagement. With just under a 10% drop out rate in America, the implications bullying can have on student disconnection is another issue worthy of attention (Devoe & Murphy 2011). The feelings of ostracism, rejection and fear that develop in a bullied student can make a positive learning experience impossible. A student that is victimized by bullying in the form of physical, verbal, or psychological harassment is often left feeling alienated, a sure path to estrangement from school. A student who feels disconnected is more likely to fall into a pattern of truancy, failing grades and disciplinary infractions (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable & Tonelson, 2006).

According to the National Institute of Educational Statistics, 57% of students who are considered at risk of dropping out, and eligible for alternative education were both chronically truant as well as continuously failing academically (Carver & Lewis 2010).

Alternative education has been a solution to the truancy and disconnection issues of at-risk high school students for decades (Van Acker, 2007). Alternative high schools that focus on meeting the needs of the disengaged have been a method of prevention of the academic failure of at-risk high school students since their inception in the 1960's (Van Acker, 2007). By offering freedoms and support that traditional high schools cannot, they facilitate a more customized education option for an at risk student. As Van Aker (2007) explains, Alternative schools generally “strive to provide a caring, collaborative, and engaging learning environment and to develop a community of learners that demonstrates acceptance, leadership, and academic success” (p. 6). Students that attend the alternative programs generally report a greater sense of belonging and self-worth, as they feel their teachers treat them with more respect (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable & Tonelson 2006). By providing an opportunity to students on the verge of dropping out, Alternative High Schools can be perceived by students as an escape from the ostracism they suffered in the traditional high school setting, and a chance to feel belonging. With an aim of fostering more individualized education as well as strengthening mental health, alternative high schools provide a haven for students who feel rejected.

Given the difference in atmosphere, and the grouping of similarly disconnected students, one could then assume that incidents involving bullying that cause isolation and estrangement may be reduced in alternative education programs. This study investigates how alternative education environments that are meant cultivate students' sense of belonging as well as provide more individualized support prevent the disengagement that

occurs as a result of at-risk students' perceptions of safety and rejection (in the form of bullying experiences) in the general education setting.

Purpose

By comparing alternative education students' feelings of belonging and school safety through the lens of their perceptions of bullying experiences with those of general education students; the success of alternative education interventions in promoting student engagement through the reduction of bullying experiences can be measured.

Hypothesis

The researcher believes that perceptions of students in alternative high schools indicate that bullying experiences are much less prevalent in the alternative education setting, due to the flexible curriculum, increased peer support, and individualized educational support that ultimately facilitate self-esteem increase as well as student engagement. The research questions asked include the following:

1. Do alternative high school students experience more or less bullying incidents than general education students?
2. What is the prevalence of bullying experiences among students in a general education population in a public high school and students enrolled in an alternative high school education program within the same school?

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of clarity and understanding, the following terms are defined:

Student: a child in secondary education.

Alternative High School: Alternative schools offer nontraditional education for students whose needs cannot be met in a regular, special education, or vocational school. While alternative schools are distinct from regular, special education, and vocational schools in their teaching approach or classroom environment, they can provide similar services and/or curriculum for students. Alternative schools include schools or potential dropouts, residential treatment centers for substance abuse, schools for chronic truants, and schools for students with behavioral problems (“Alternative Schools,” 2012).

At-risk student: A student who is likely to leave high school early, without earning a diploma.

Engagement: Statistic Canada (2010) provides a detailed definition of school engagement:

The concept of high school engagement refers to both academic engagement and social engagement. A student's academic engagement is defined as their identification with, and participation in, the academic aspects of school. Academic aspects of school include the students' dealings with teachers, curricula, and the school governance. Social engagement is defined as the identification with, and participation in, the social aspects of school. It involves both a feeling of belonging to the school's social environment and a sense of fit between the individual and the school. This connection reflects the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school's social environment. (p.1)

Assumptions

There are several assumptions that are apparent in this research. It is assumed by the researcher that:

1. Students were accurately placed in program.
2. Students completed the bullying survey accurately and could read well enough to understand the content.
3. Students possessed the necessary computer skills to complete the survey.
4. Students will answer each question honestly and according to their experiences in the current school year.

Limitations

This study was limited to one alternative high school program in New Jersey, comprised of a smaller sample size of 12 participants. Since the survey was voluntary, the findings were also limited to by those who chose to participate.

Summary

The following study will compare the pertinence of the occurrence of bullying experiences as an issue in an alternative high school setting as well as the general education setting, in order to illustrate how alternative education interventions affect student's levels of engagement. By gaining insight from students currently enrolled in an alternative high school program, the reader will be able to explore the relevancy of the perceptions of bullying experiences in an alternative education setting that has so far been overlooked in terms of current research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review will address several areas of research related to risk factors associated with students at-risk of dropping out of high school, as well as discuss the effects peer relations have on student engagement. This review of literature will also discuss the effectiveness of alternative education interventions that prevent disengagement in high school students. In the first section, research studies pertinent to the dropout problem in American high schools will be presented. The second section will discuss the research studies that illustrate the most common risk factors and school estrangement issues among the at-risk student population. In the third section, research illustrating the effect peer relations have on school engagement as well as literature examining the connection of bullying experiences to school engagement will be presented. In the fourth section, literature pertaining to alternative high school education, the leading intervention for at-risk students will be reviewed. Finally, a rationale for research concerning the success of alternative education interventions (in terms of promotion of school engagement by fostering a positive school climate), measured by perceptions of bullying experiences and school safety in the alternative high school population will be proposed.

The Dropout Problem

The challenge of keeping teens in school is as grave a concern to parents, educators and society as a whole as it ever was. With roughly 10 percent of the nation's

teens failing to graduate, it is evident that the need to reach at-risk youth for prevention is ever-present (Chapman, Laird, Ifill & Ramani, 2011). The future for dropouts in today's economy is grim, as the median income of dropouts ages 18-67 was 25,000 in 2009, compared to the 43,000 median incomes of those who stayed in school (Chapman, Laird, Ifill & Ramani, 2011). High School drop outs are 72 percent more likely to earn 30 percent less than those who complete school (US Department of Labor, 2003). Perhaps an even more frightening result of the dropout epidemic is the strain it continues to put on the economy. A high school dropout can potentially cost the economy close to \$200,000 in a lifetime due to higher dependency on welfare programs, lack of revenues, insufficient tax contributions and higher incidence of criminal behavior (Levin & Belfield, 2007). Adolescents who miss their high school years are robbed of opportunities and likely to struggle to find work (Morse, Anderson, Christenson & Lehr, 2004). It is evident that the disconnection of America's youth from secondary education marks only the beginning of a lifelong hardship, keeping the search for adequate dropout prevention programs a priority for educators.

Contributing Risk Factors for Dropouts

Although some researchers argue that risk factors frequently used by dropout prevention programs are ineffective measures of prediction for dropout (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rosenthal, 1998), most identify specific definitions of risk factors as strong predictors of dropout. Gleason and Dynarski (2002) listed several general demographic risk factors associated with dropping out as such as; family background, past school performance, personal/psychological characteristics, adult responsibilities,

school characteristics and neighborhood characteristics. In terms of demographics, many researchers agree that White adolescents are more likely to stay in school than Black or Hispanic classmates (e.g., Eckstrom, Pollack, & Rock, 1987; Pallas 1987; Rumberger 1995). Generally, students of which English is their second language are also more at risk for dropping out (NCES, 2008; Rumberger 1995). Students with a brother or sister who has discontinued their education are more likely to follow suit (NCES, 2008), and it has also been found by researchers that employment obligations as well as parental duties lead to increased dropout risk (Pallas, 1987).

Jordan, McPartland, & Lara (1999) introduced further information about why students drop out, illustrating the idea of push and pull effects weighing on at-risk students. Push effects, the factors students most frequently attribute as reasons for dropping out, refer to occurrences that contribute to a student's feeling alienated, like a failure; such as earning poor grades, disciplinary issues, and general aversion to school (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). Pull effects were found to consist of external problems that detract from successful school completion, such as pregnancy, financial obligations, parental duties and employment (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999).

Taking a more in-depth look at risk factors for dropouts, Pallas contends that "Poor academic performance is the best predictor of who drops out of school" (p.4). Poor attendance, suffering grades, disinterest in academic activities, low test scores, placement in special education programs have all been identified as the major contributing factors to poor academic performance (Rumberger, 1995). Poor academic performance is often directly related to chronic truancy, disciplinary problems, and in-

school violence among the at-risk youth (Pallas, 1987; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). The most common characteristics among at-risk adolescents, however, include low self-esteem, feelings of alienation, lower expectations and poor self-concept as found by Ekstrom et.al. (1986).

The Relationship between School Engagement and Dropping Out

In addition to the consideration of the consistency of shared risk factors among at-risk students, researchers also focus much effort on the concept of student engagement. Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, and Godber (2001) show that there is much supportive evidence that disengagement from school is a fast route to failure, and eventually dropping out. Student engagement is seen by researchers as the counteragent of alienation (Blumenfield, Fredericks & Paris, 2004). Blumenfield, Fredericks, and Paris (2004) find, “The concept of school engagement has attracted growing interest as a way to ameliorate low levels of academic achievement, high levels of student boredom and disaffection, and high dropout rates in urban areas” (p. 59). Additionally, some studies look at how academic instruction can facilitate engagement (Newman, Wehlage & Lamborn, 1992), while some illustrate the association of school disengagement and dropping out (Finn & Rock, 1997).

When reviewing definitions, measures, precursors, and outcomes of engagement in their study, Fredericks, Blumenfield and Paris suggest viewing engagement as a multidimensional construct (2004). They contend that as it is also supported in other literature, engagement should be defined in three ways. Behavioral engagement refers to

a student's involvement, and subsequent participation in scholastic or academic activities, imperative to dropout prevention. Emotional engagement involves interactions with peers, teachers, academics and school as a whole, facilitating the student's feelings of allegiance to the school and bolstering a student's feeling of self worth. Finally, cognitive engagement associates the student's idea of investment, integrating compliance and desire to exert effort to perform academically (Fredericks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004). Fredericks, Blumenfield and Paris (2004) do note, however, that if not defined as such, the term "engagement" can, "result in a proliferation of constructs, definitions, and measures of concepts that differ slightly, thereby doing little to improve conceptual clarity" (p.59). They believe that the inclusion of behavior, emotion and cognition when addressing the concept of engagement is important, because it offers a better characterization of students than would otherwise have been provided in research in components without this merger (Fredericks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004).

For as multidimensional as the definition of student engagement can be, the requirements for promotion of it are as well. Students with positive self-image regarding academic performance, who also feel a sense of security in their academic environment, are more likely to succeed and experience more engagement in school as Morse, Anderson, Christenson, and Lehr found (2004). Also found by Morse, Anderson, Christenson and Lehr (2004), is that through "genuine relationships with students, teachers can lend support and encouragement to students, communicate their beliefs in students' abilities to succeed in school, and increase engagement in school" (p. 3). Also found as major contributors to the breakdown of engagement are bullying, social

estrangement, and disconnection with extracurricular activities (Morse, Anderson, Christenson & Lehr, 2004).

Researchers find that there is no single determining factor in a student's engagement experience, but rather several contributing components. However, a lack of connection to peers as well as an unwelcoming school atmosphere are two of many variables that stand out in terms of the occurrence of disengagement (Morse, Anderson, Christenson & Lehr, 2004). In addition to conceptualizing the framework of the three types of student engagement, Fredericks, Blumenfield and Paris (2004) also looked at what further connections could be made between student engagement and academic achievement. They found the most substantial relationship can be found between behavioral and cognitive engagement and academic achievement, rather than emotional engagement (2004). Another study by Connell, Spencer and Aber (1994) supports these findings, and it was also found that missing classes due to negative experiences with peers, an important facet of behavioral engagement, was directly linked to academic achievement and motivation. Recent studies have also shown how negative peer interactions result in lower levels of academic achievement and decreased cognitive engagement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Nansel et al, 2001). Researchers found that students who have negative interactions with peers are more likely to disengage from school and become at-risk for dropping out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Nansel et al, 2001).

Conversely, other research has shown that the opposite is true, and having supportive and positive relationships with peers, friends and classmates is associated with

higher levels of academic achievement (Wentzel et al., 2004). Wentzel's study also illustrates how students' perceptions of peer acceptance positively affect behavioral engagement (2004). In a study from 2001, it was also found by Ryan and Patrick that student engagement was positively impacted by students' perceptions of a positive social classroom environment. They found that where students felt they had positive interactions with their classmates, they also perceived that their motivation to succeed academically was increased (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

When considering the implications of the findings of Fredericks, Blumenfield and Paris (2004), looking at school climate can also shed light on the connection between bullying climate and behavioral as well as cognitive engagement. In a study by Cohen (2006), school climate was described as the experience of the school atmosphere from the perspective of the students, including relationships and interconnectedness. An important part of school climate is the presence and dynamics of bullying. Bullying climate can be looked at as the extent to which students perceive bullying to be a problem in the school. A study by Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konold (2009), suggested that bullying climate was connected to behavioral engagement, in terms of students' feelings of safety in the school, the level of disciplinary infractions occurring in the school, and students' perceptions of levels of support from teachers. Additionally, a study by Gregory et al. further proved that bullying climate was associated with engagement in involvement in school community and school activities (2010).

Results from a study by Nakamoto and Schwartz (2010), report that victims of bullying are also likely to have poor academic functioning. Additional studies show that

peer victimization is also associated with patterns of lower grade-point averages (Juvonen, Wang & Espinoza, 2011). Additional studies support this, showing how decreased academic achievement has also been directly related to being victimized by bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). Yibing et al. (2001) also found that being a victim of bullying had negative effects on behavioral and academic engagement over long periods of time. In addition, several studies found that negative peer relationships and victimization impact student behavioral and cognitive engagement considerably, and are directly related to students' feelings of disconnection from school (Nansel et al., 2001; Yibing et al., 2011).

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are the most prevalent dropout prevention programs in this country, and thus far, the most effective (Poyrazli, et.al., 2008). Disengaged students that become estranged from the mainstream schools turn to alternative programs for a chance to be successful in their roles as students (Van Acker, 2007). Kleiner, Porch and Farris (2002) found that alternative schools mostly house those students who are at risk of educational failure, due to a history of disengagement or failure. For many students, an alternative school can support the many needs they have in terms of their disengagement. Alternative education interventions are meant to give at-risk students a chance to have an educational experience with additional support from teachers (and peers) and to be grouped with peers with similar challenges (Van Acker, 2007). The National Research Council Institute of Medicine lists that these supports include:

A challenging but individualized curriculum that is focused on understanding; knowledgeable, skilled, and caring teachers; a school culture that is centered on learning; a school community that engenders a sense of support and belonging, with opportunities to interact with academically engaged peers; strong ties linking the school with students families and communities; an organizational structure and services that address students' non academic needs; and opportunities to learn the value of schoolwork for future educational and career perspectives. (p.14)

Fuller and Sabatino (1996) explain that many students in alternative programs are often described as, “cynical, suffering academic and behavioral adjustment problems in school, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, lacking educational and/or career goals, and having problematic relationships with both family and peers” (p. 295).

However, in a 2006 study of 3 racially and economically diverse selections of exemplary alternative schools, Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, and Tonelson (2006) found that students who had previously been classified as troubled, “flourished in alternative learning environments” (p.16). Students felt that the additional support cultivated a more welcoming and safe environment. They also believed that their teachers cared about their well being, listened to them, respected them and established fair rules. The students in the study reported that they not only feel supported by their teachers, but also from their peers in this setting. This research suggests that given the supportive environment, even students who were classified as deviant or victimized could exceed expectations of success (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). A meta-analytic assessment conducted in 1995 of delinquency-related outcomes of alternative education programs also supported that most students have positive feelings about going to an alternative high school education program, and their desire to be connected to school increased (Cox et.al., 1995). Previous studies by Arnove and Strout (1980) as well as Ellison and Trickett (1978) showed parallel results. In 1992, Epstein studied

students who had completed an alternative high school program for academically average but otherwise at-risk students and found that they described their alternative school environment as welcoming, encouraging and academically challenging. Similarly, Cox et.al. (1995) showed that alternative education programs “can have a small positive effect on school performance, school attitude, and self-esteem, regardless of research design” (p. 229).

Rationale for Bullying Research in High School Alternative Education Programs

Overall, the research surrounding the alternative education field fails to fully illustrate how alternative education interventions affect students’ levels of engagement. There is ample research concerning the risk factors leading to dropouts as well as the causes of disengagement in students. However, there is much to be learned about how the style of alternative education programs can improve behavioral engagement, encourage positive peer relations and reduce negative peer relations (such as victimization of bullying) once in the program. Current research also fails to show how the bullying climate differs in alternative education programs from general education settings. In contrast with general education and mainstream studies, the perceptions of school safety, the perceptions of bullying experiences and the perceptions of peer to peer acceptance of students in alternative schools are not given much attention at all. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that alternative education programs vary so widely in definition. The massive growth in the prevalence of alternative education programs proves the demand for programs such as these, but the research on what makes an effective program is yet to be found.

A better understanding of students' perceptions of their alternative school environment, along with their perceived experiences as a student sheltered from the mainstream of general education can offer useful direction to the educational world. By considering the prevalence of risk factors that led alternative education students to disengagement (such as feelings disconnection from peers, victimization and negative peer relations) while examining how they perceive their current school climate in terms of victimization and bullying, much can be learned about what facets of their alternative education proved most efficient. Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor and Chauhan (2004) as well as Scholte, Engels, Overbeek and Haselager (2007) are among many researchers who studied the stability of bullying and victimization in mainstream education. Even studies investigating self-esteem and self regard with relation to bullying focus on the traditional education students (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001; Egan & Perry, 1998).

The population of alternative education students stands as an untapped research haven in that very few researchers have determined the prevalence of bullying or bully victimization strictly in alternative education setting. Research in this area could provide useful insight into how environments like alternative education settings that facilitate self esteem growth and students' sense of belonging prevent the disengagement that arises from students' negative self-regard and feelings of rejection. By comparing alternative education students' perceptions of bullying experiences (implicating their perceptions of school safety and belonging) with those of general education; the results gathered can shed light on how the nurturing environment of alternative education settings affects students' perceptions of safety regarding bullying, victimization and peer relations.

Chapter 3 Methodology

The following comparative research questions were addressed in this study:

1. Do alternative high school students experience and witness more or less bullying incidents than general education students?
2. What is the prevalence of bullying experiences among students in a general education population in a public high school and students enrolled in an alternative high school education program within the same school?

This quantitative comparative study was conducted on two groups of high school students, using a survey to measure perceptions of bullying experiences. General education students and students enrolled in an alternative education program were surveyed on their experiences with bullying in their current school year.

Participants

The participants of this study were 816 high school students in grades 9-12, in general education in a public high school in New Jersey in the 2010-2011 school year and a group of 11 students from grades 9-12, enrolled in an alternative education program housed in the same school in the 2011-2012 school year. The participants in this study were from varying ethnic backgrounds, and the mix ratio is typical of several other neighboring public schools of this size. This site was selected for the purpose of adding generalizability to the study. Out of the entire school population, roughly 48% are male,

52% female, 9% Asian, 7% Hispanic, 34% African American, 49% Caucasian and 1% unknown. The school has a 99% graduation rate.

The sampling method used for the alternative education group was that of a convenience sampling. The participants from the survey previously administered to the general education group were restricted to those who were present in school the day it was administered and willing to participate. The participants from the school were restricted to the 12 students currently enrolled in the alternative education program; however, 11 were available at the time the survey was administered. The 2010-2011 survey was administered by the school staff and participation was voluntary. Participation was also voluntary for the alternative education group. The survey was submitted anonymously by each student. The general education students took the survey on school computers and were asked by their teachers to report their experiences with bullying in their current school year. The alternative education students were given the same directions and asked to complete the survey on the computers in their classroom.

All of the students from the general education group who participated in the survey had average learning abilities. The students currently enrolled into the alternative education program voluntarily, through an application process. The students in this group either referred themselves, were referred to the program by a teacher or a parent referred them. However, regardless of the source of the referral, the student had to apply willingly to be considered for entry into the program. The students in the program were at-risk for dropping out of high school due to failing grades, excessive absences, lack of motivation to attend classes, rejection of the general education curriculum, a history of

substance abuse, problems with sustaining attention in class, behavioral issues, generalized anxiety or social anxiety. The students in this group enrolled into the alternative education program to be a part of a smaller, contained classroom. In this program, the students had a more flexible curriculum, and they were able to work at their own pace. Although they stay together as a group without changing classrooms, the students could work on their individual assignments or with the group. The program allowed for down time, and group study time, with more than one lesson being taught in the classroom at one time.

Materials

This study used a survey that was created by the school's anti-bullying coordinator, and is administered annually to all students who are willing to participate. The survey the school administers was comprised of 35 forced-choice yes or no questions that asked students the following: where, when and if they experience bullying, whether or not they would report bullying if they witnessed it, and if their teachers and school administration tolerate bullying (see appendix A). The students used classroom computers to take the survey. The results were gathered and summarized in a report that displayed percentages of which answers were chosen. The results were separated by grade. A copy of the survey and survey results were provided to the researcher by the school principal. For this study, only the first 13 questions that pertained to direct experience with bullying were analyzed and administered to the new group, leaving out the 22 questions that were related to reporting bullying and witnessing bullying outside of school. The 13 questions asked students if they felt safe when they came to school, if

they have missed school to avoid bullying, and if they have been bullied in various areas of the school campus during this school year. This portion of the survey was used by the researcher and administered to the 11 alternative education students in the 2010-2012 school year. The researcher used survey monkey, a web-collection site, to re-create the forced-choice survey and administer it to the alternative education group. The results in the form of percentages of which answers were chosen were also collected through survey monkey.

Additional materials used for this study also include a sample blank application form that the alternative education program requires students to fill out to be considered for admission into the program. This form contains a description of the program, the program's mission statement, an outline of the structure of the program and the student code the program adheres to. This information was used by the researcher to define the type of alternative education program this study examines. The researcher also used information provided via email from the alternative education program teacher that described the nature of the program as well as gave a general description of the overall reasons students enrolled in the program.

Design

The study illustrated the difference in perceptions of bullying in a general public high school population and an alternative education program population through the use of one survey. This study also examined the general prevalence of perceptions of

bullying experience in both educational settings through the use of one survey administered to two separate groups.

An independent samples t test was used to determine if there was a difference between the general education population's and alternative education population's perception of bullying experiences in this study. The independent variable in this study was the educational setting and it had two levels; the general education school setting and the alternative education classroom setting. The dependent variable measured was the students' perceptions of prevalence of bullying experiences. A paired samples t test also determined the prevalence of bullying experiences in each group.

Procedure

This study was conducted in the 2011-2012 school year. In the beginning of the school year, parental permission for students to participate in any surveys or questionnaires related to their experiences with bullying was obtained. In the fall of 2011, permission was also obtained by the board of education and the school principal for the researcher to have access to the results and content of last year's survey. The researcher was also permitted to administer the same survey to the alternative education students separately in their classroom, on their classroom computers, during their break in the middle of the school day. The researcher assured confidentiality when administering the survey, and also informed them that their participation was voluntary. The researcher instructed the students to answer the questions based on their experiences during the present school year. The students were instructed to log into survey monkey, select yes

or no based on their experiences and click finish when they completed the survey. The students were also reminded that at no time would they be asked for identifying information. No additional assistance with the site was requested from the students. Each of the students completed the survey in less than 10 minutes.

Once the researcher collected all of the completed surveys, the researcher reverse-ordered the forced-choice responses so that the positive responses were all classified as a answer of yes (For example: When the survey asked students if they felt safe in school, the portion of students answered “yes” would be classified as a positive answer and considered a yes. When the survey asked students if they stayed home to avoid being bullied, their answer of no would have been classified as a positive answer, making it a yes).

Chapter 4 Results

Research Question 1: Do alternative high school students experience more or less bullying incidents than general education students?

Through the measurement of an independent samples t-test, no relationship could be found between the perceptions of bullying experiences in the alternative education students' group and the general education population group. Figure 1 illustrates the lack of significance and the results of the comparison of the two groups (set 1 represents the alternative education group and set 2 represents the general education group).

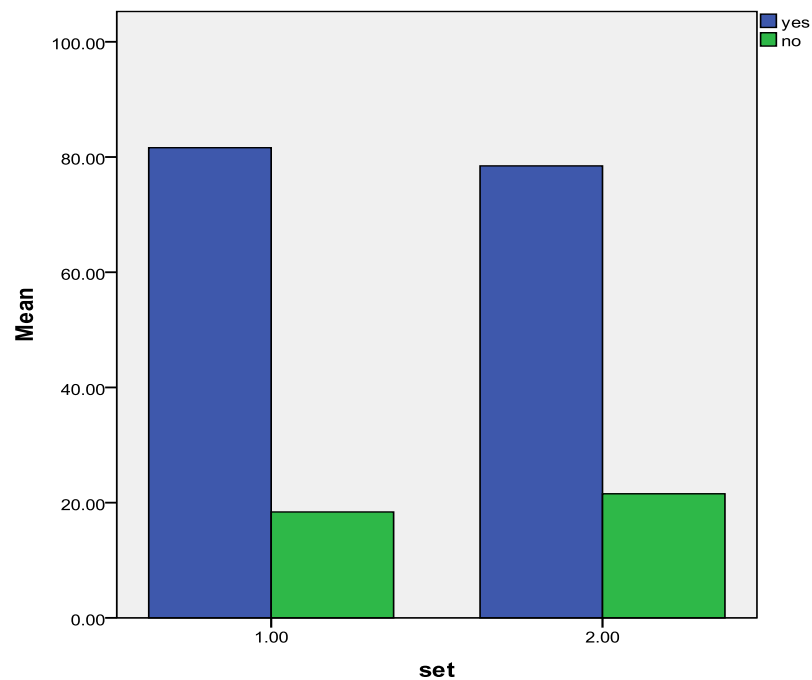


Figure 1: Bullying Survey Results

Research Question 2: What is the prevalence of bullying experiences among students in a general education population in a public high school and students enrolled in an alternative high school education program within the same school?

A large percentage of the general education group reported that they have not experienced bullying during their school year ($m=81.62$), revealing a considerable significance in the difference between who experienced bullying and who didn't ($t(13)=5.233$, $p \geq .000$). A similar percentage of the alternative education group reported they have not experienced bullying during this school year ($m=78.46$), also with a considerable significance ($t(13)=7.367$, $p \geq .000$).

Out of the 816 students from the general population 67% reported not having been bullied, 90% reported feeling safe when they came to school, 75% have not bullied another student, 92% have not missed school due to bullying/intimidations/harassment, and 80% have not been bullied in the classroom.

Out of the 11 students from the alternative education population 64% reported not having been bullied, 100% reported feeling safe when they came to school, 73% have not bullied another student, 90% have not missed school due to bullying/intimidations/harassment, and 90% have not been bullied in the classroom.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Summary of Findings

Students in alternative education programs have a more sheltered educational experience than students in traditional high school settings. In alternative education programs curriculums are more flexible, credits are earned at a different pace, more individualized support is provided to the students by their teachers and the students are educated in a setting that separates them from the general education population (Kleiner, Porch and Farris, 2002; Van Acker, 2007; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). Students who enter into an alternative education program are likely to have been estranged and disengaged from school before entering the program. Disengagement can result from a variety of reasons; however, research has shown that an unwelcoming school environment, negative peer relations, feelings of disconnection from peers and experiences with bullying are major contributors to student disengagement (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001; Cohen, 2006, Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, & Konold, 2009; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). This research also illustrates the parallels that can be seen among the effects that students who experience bullying suffer from with the contributors to disengagement. Bullying has been found by several researchers to be associated with negative outcomes related to self esteem in students and have considerable effects on student engagement (O'Moore & Kirkham; Egan & Perry, 1998; Cohen, 2006, Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, & Konold, 2009; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). A substantial percentage of victims of bullying in traditional high school settings have been found to avoid school, become disengaged and

consequently becoming at risk of dropping out (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross & Isava, 2008). Given the nature of alternative programs that provide solace to those students experiencing disengagement, the purpose of this study was to determine if perceptions of bullying experiences among students in an alternative education program differ from those of the general education population. Through the use of a school-created survey on bullying experiences, the researcher measured perceptions of bullying experiences from the two populations.

It was hypothesized in this study that the perceptions of students in alternative high schools indicate that bullying experiences are much less prevalent in the alternative education setting, due to the flexible curriculum, increased peer support, and individualized educational support that ultimately facilitate self-esteem increase as well as student engagement. The results demonstrated that although the alternative education programs provide a segregated learning environment for at-risk students, offering them an escape from the setting that was potentially causing their disengagement, their perceptions of bullying experiences did not significantly differ from those of the general education population. The results also indicated that both groups did not consider bullying to be an issue of concern in the 2010-2011 as well the 2011-2012 school years, however, the percentages of those who reported having some experience with bullying behavior were consistent with current studies of similar populations. In 2001, in a study of 15,000 public and private school children in grades 6 through 10, it was found that almost 30% of the sample experienced bullying moderately or frequently (Nansel et al, 2001). Out of the 15,000, almost 11% were targeted, 13% bully their peers and roughly

6% are bully-victims (Nansel et al., 2001). In a larger study conducted in 2007, a survey given to roughly 80,000 public school students in grades 6-12 revealed that 20% reported having been bullied during the school year and 18% reported bullying another student during the school year (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007). Overall, 28.2% of the students in the study reported having some involvement in bullying behavior (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007). The results of the current study were similar, in that in both groups roughly 20% reported involvement in some type of bullying behavior. In addition, almost 25% of the general education group in the current study reported having bullied another student, similar to the results of almost 20% of the sample in the study of 80,000 students. However, 27% of the alternative education group reported bullying another student, which could prove to be more a more significant finding when comparing their responses to similar studies.

Limitations

The current study revealed no significant difference in perceptions of bullying experiences between the alternative education program group and the general education group. These findings could be attributed to several different limitations. The use of a forced-choice survey was one of the possible limitations, in that they do not allow for students to elaborate on their experience because they limit response options. Students might omit a preferred answer, since they cannot apply detail or provide more in-depth responses. Another possible limitation to this type of survey is that it requires moderate knowledge of the subject matter, in order to submit the correct answer. However, in this case, the students who attend this school have been surveyed several times regarding their

experiences with bullying, so it is unlikely that they did not have enough base knowledge of the subject that it affected their answers. It should also be noted that the students did complete the survey rather quickly, with no additional questions, indicating that they had a certain degree of familiarity with the subject matter. Another limitation to be considered could also be that the students may have different interpretations of bullying experiences. For example, the questions in the survey do not ask the students what type of bullying they experienced or witnessed. Rather, the questions ask the students if they experienced bullying using the general term “bullying” in different areas of the school. The use of self-report data has long been questioned by bullying researchers in terms of validity when considering if they can accurately assess those surveyed, in accordance with the proposed definitions of bullying (Grief & Furlong, 2006).

An even more considerable category of limitations in this study was the sample size. Although the survey results provided by the school revealed results from a substantial sample size, the alternative education population was markedly smaller, including only 11 students. The vast difference in sample size affected the validity of this study. Another important limitation involving the sample is the structure and design of the alternative education program that was used in this study. As previous research has shown, alternative schools mostly house those students who are at risk of educational failure, due to a history of disengagement or failure, and they are meant to incubate students from the mainstream, giving them a chance to be grouped with peers facing the same challenges (Kleiner, Porch & Farris, 2002; Van Acker, 2007). Alternative education programs have also been the leading intervention for at-risk students as many

studies have shown (Van Acker, 2007; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006; Cox et.al., 1995; Epstein, 1992). Several researchers define alternative schools as supportive environments that are designed for students at risk of dropping out, and characterized by flexible curriculums, smaller enrollment and more individualized support from teachers (Lange & Sletten 2002; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Pallas, 1987; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Young, 1990). The program in this study provided the typical experience of alternative high school education, in that it housed students in a separate classroom, had a flexible curriculum, grouped students with similar struggles with disengagement and nurtured disengaged students with additional support and assistance. However, although many alternative education programs have similar norms, goals, and support structure, alternative education programs vary greatly in size (Van Acker, 2007). The program used in this study, was an in-house alternative program that consisted of only one small classroom, in which students were separated from the mainstream for most, but not all of the school day. In this program, the students were also mixed with the general education population before school starts, during lunch, in assemblies, as well as after school (including extra-curricular activities). This differs from the many alternative education programs that are a separate entity, and sometimes as large as the average mid-size public high school (Van Acker, 2007).). In a 2002 study, Kleiner, Porch and Farris estimated that in the United States in 2001, there were roughly 10,900 public alternative high school education programs for at-risk students varying in size and structure. This limitation suggests that the generalizability of this

study was affected by the size of the sample, and the sample used is not likely representative of the typical alternative high school education population.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the results of this study, there are several recommendations for future research. Most of the limitations outlined in this study can be eliminated by the selection of a larger sample size. A larger sample size will also eliminate the lack of generalizability of the current study, as a larger sample can most likely only be found if the alternative school is a separate entity, rather than an in-house program (making the sample more representative of alternative high school programs in general). Another limitation can be minimized if instead of using a forced-choice survey, a more qualitative design is used and student interviews are incorporated. This method would allow students to elaborate on their experiences and clarify their perceptions of bullying behavior, eliminating the validity issues of the survey and allowing the researcher to make more in-depth comparisons between the perceptions of the two populations. Furthermore, a qualitative method would also grant the researcher more control over the study. In the current study, because the researcher was not present when the school administered the survey to the general education population, the researcher was unable to witness the conditions experienced by the general education students when the survey was administered. Finally, by also incorporating a case study, using more detailed observations of students' attitudes towards being questioned about bullying, and by using a narrative format, the report of students' perceptions could provide more interesting, detailed insight in regards to their most current experiences with bullying.

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Appendix A

Survey Monkey Bullying Survey

1. I feel safe when I come to school.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
2. I have stayed home to avoid being bullied/intimidated/harassed.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
3. I have bullied/intimidated/harassed another student.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
4. I have been bullied/intimidated/harassed in the classroom.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
5. I have been bullied/intimidated/harassed in the hallway.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
6. I have been bullied/intimidated/harassed in the cafeteria.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
7. I have been bullied/intimidated/harassed in the gym.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
8. I have been bullied/intimidated/harassed in the lavatory.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
9. I have been bullied/intimidated/harassed on the bus.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
10. I have been bullied/intimidated/harassed on the internet.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
11. I have been bullied/intimidated/harassed at other places.
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
12. I have not been bullied/intimidated/harassed.

A. Yes

B. No

13. I have observed bullying/intimidation/harassment in the classroom.

A. Yes

B. No