Author's response to reviews

Title: Prevalence of bullying and victimization among children in early elementary school: Do family and school neighbourhood socioeconomic status matter?

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dr. Annemieke van Straten
Editor of *BMC Public Health*

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*Regarding:* Resubmission of MS 1856808292609322

Dear Dr. van Straten,

Please find enclosed the second revised version of our manuscript “Prevalence of bullying and victimization among children in early elementary school: Do family and school neighbourhood socioeconomic status matter?”. We would like to thank you and the reviewer for the useful suggestions.

Our point-by-point reply to the comments of the reviewer is presented below. The enclosed version of the manuscript has been prepared taking into account the suggestions of the reviewer. For your convenience, we highlighted the changes in the text. A major change regards the re-categorization of employment status into “at least one of the parents employed” and “both parents unemployed”. As suggested by the reviewer, we removed the category “both parents fulltime employed” from the analyses, because the interpretation of this category as an indicator of socioeconomic status was confusing. Other changes include the provision of information on the pilot phase in which we tested the assessment of bullying and victimization. Finally, the lack of testing inter-rater reliability in our study was added as a limitation to our Discussion.

We hope the revisions are satisfactory and look forward to your evaluation.

Yours Sincerely,

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Author's response to comments of reviewer Michal Molcho:

Reviewer's report:
The current version of the paper is much improved and all previous comments were well addressed. The language of the paper has much improved. More specific comments are below.

Introduction
1. The language of the introduction has improved, the requested changes were made, and more current literature is cited. The authors had also presented the concept of bully-victim early on in the introduction.

Author's response: Thank you for these kind comments!

Methods
Minor Compulsory Revisions
2. Under measures, the authors describe how bullying was measured. In their cover letter, the authors mentioned that that type of questions were examined in the pilot phase and were found to have good face validity. However, this information is missing from the actual manuscript and is of importance.

Author's response: We apologize for mentioning the pilot phase solely in the cover letter. This information should indeed be included in the manuscript and we changed the text as follows.

METHODS, Measures, Bullying and victimization (coloured text is added):
"Bullying and victimization during the past three months were studied as outcome. The teacher of each elementary school child rated the occurrence of four victimization and four bullying items [20]. The victimization items assessed 1) "whether a child was physically victimized by other children, for instance by being hit, kicked, pinched, or bitten" (further referred to as physical victimization); 2) “whether a child was verbally victimized, such as being teased, laughed at, or called names” (verbal victimization); 3) “whether a child was excluded by other children” (relational victimization); and 4) “whether belongings of a child were hidden or broken” (material victimization). Each form of bullying was assessed by questioning about perpetration, e.g. “Whether a child physically bullied other children”. Examples of physical and verbal victimization / bullying were added to the items, and we provided concrete descriptions of relational and material victimization / bulling. A pilot study had indicated that teachers thought these examples and descriptions were more helpful for consistent answering of the items than a formal definition of bullying. Each item was rated on a four-point rating scale ranging from “Never or less than once per month” to “More than twice per week”. Children with a “Never or less than once per month”-rating on all four bullying
and four victimization items were classified as uninvolved children. Children were classified as victims if they experienced any of the four victimization types at least once a month. Likewise, children were classified as bullies if they perpetrated any of the forms of bullying at least once a month. Children meeting the criteria of both bullies and victims were categorized as bully-victims.”

3. The authors have clarified that inter-rater reliability was not tested. This should be mentioned in the limitations (inter-rated reliability should be tested between schools, so even if there is one rater per class, the instrument needs to stand that test).

Author’s response: We agree with the reviewer that a limitation of the study is the lack of an inter-rater reliability test. We now acknowledge this limitation in the Discussion as follows (coloured text is added):

“… Limitations of this study include the use of a single informant of bullying and victimization. In principle, a teacher’s bias against children of lower socioeconomic backgrounds can affect ratings [54]. Multiple informants could also generate more accurate data on less overt bullying behaviours such as relational bullying [55]. Moreover, although we aimed to reduce teacher’s subjective opinions by providing examples and concrete descriptions of the different bullying and victimization types, the degree of agreement between teachers’ ratings is not known, as we did not assess inter-rater reliability.”

Major Compulsory Revisions

4. Under methods – family socioeconomic status – paragraph, towards the end of the paragraph: the authors explain why ‘one working parent’ is chosen as the reference category. However, given that the authors indicate that both parents working could indicate either very low or very high SES, the value of this indicator is unclear. Unless it is a proxy for parents’ supervision (or the lack of) but then again, it needs to be clearly explained. The same issue is repeated in the Results section, with employment put under family SES, although it is impossible to identify direction with this indicator. The lack of clarity of what this indicator measure significantly hinders the quality of this manuscript.

Author’s response: We understand that the value of fulltime parental employment as an indicator of socioeconomic status is still confusing, as it can represent both a very low or very high SES. We appreciate the reviewer’s suggestion to interpret the category of “both parents fulltime employed” in terms of a proxy for parental supervision. However, we also agree with the reviewer’s next comment (no. 5) that the manuscript probably improves most if we omit the category of “both parents fulltime employed” from the analyses. Therefore, we merged this category with “At least one of the parents employed”. Parental employment now consists of “At least one of the parents employed” as the reference category and “Both parents unemployed” as an indicator of low socioeconomic background.
We are confident that the interpretation of employment status as an indication of SES is now more clear. We changed the Methods, Results, and Discussion of the manuscript accordingly (see below). For changes in Tables, we kindly refer the reviewer to pages 21 and 22 of the manuscript (highlighted in yellow).

METHODS, Family socioeconomic status (coloured text is changed):
“Information on indicators of family socioeconomic status was assessed by a parental questionnaire … Given that the highest obtained schooling significantly structures occupational levels [33], we included (un)employment status – instead of occupational level – as an indicator of family SES. Unemployment is generally seen as a strong indicator of low socioeconomic status [34]. Employment status was categorized as “At least one of the parents employed” and “Both parents unemployed”. The latter category indicated that none of the parents had paid employment and were comprised of parents who were in the categories of housewife/husband, student, job-seeker, or social security or disability benefit recipient.”

RESULTS (coloured text is changed):
“Table 2 shows the association between SES and risk of involvement in bullying and victimization. Indicators of family SES were highly associated with bully and bully-victim status: single parenthood, young parental age, low educational level of parents, and parental unemployment increased the risk of children being a bully or bully-victim (see Table 2). …

Finally, the independent effect of family SES and school neighbourhood SES on risk of involvement in bullying behaviour was estimated. Table 3 shows that, adjusted for family SES, the association between school neighbourhood SES and involvement in bullying was not significant anymore. The ORs for the family SES variables were attenuated slightly, but all except parental employment status remained significant predictors of bully or bully-victim status. Again, victimization was only predicted by parental education. Results were approximately the same if paternal age and education were included in this model instead of maternal age and education.”

DISCUSSION, Socioeconomic disparities in bullying and victimization (coloured text is changed):
“Low socioeconomic background of families might have influenced children’s involvement in bullying and victimization in several ways. Parental educational level reflects intellectual resources, general and specific knowledge, norms and values, literacy, and problem solving skills [33, 46], all aspects that could be related to child raising behaviour and, consequently, to children’s development of social skills and coping strategies. Additionally, it has been shown that children of low-educated parents watch more television than children of high-educated parents [47, 48]. Possibly, exposure to violent television programs might stimulate bullying and peer aggression [49]. The association between single parenthood and the risk of children being a bully or bully-victim could be explained by less time for parent-children interaction. This could result in reduced parental control of children’s behaviour and limited time for
parents to talk about the problems a child encounters in daily life, such as difficulties in peer relations. Alternatively, the effect of single parenthood could be accounted for by the stress inherent to a situation of broken families. Stress and parental well-being are known to have adverse influences on children's behaviors in multiple ways [50]. Regarding employment status, we showed that children of whom both parents are unemployed were more likely to be a bully or bully-victim. This effect was explained by other SES indicators suggesting that parental unemployment is associated with children's bullying behaviour through its relation with low educational level, single parenthood, and disadvantaged school neighbourhoods.

Discussion
Major Compulsory Revisions
5. The discussion is much stronger, but again, the issue of parental employment needs to be resolved, and probably with the lack of clear conceptual explanation of what the category of two working parents mean, removed from the analysis and manuscript.

Author's response: We agree with the reviewer that the interpretation of the category of both parents working full time remains confusing. As suggested, we removed this category from the analyses and revised the manuscript accordingly. We kindly refer the reviewer to the previous comment (no. 4) where the changes are shown.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest
Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:
No competing interests.