Reviewer’s report

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

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Reviewer: Ken Rigby

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This is well presented and in general a carefully written paper on a topic of contemporary interest drawing on data from a large scale survey of teachers and parents of young school children. In some respects, the authors appear to have done what they could with the data they accessed. However, their sophisticated statistical analyses of the data is not matched by a thoughtful and commonsensical consideration of such matters as (i) what is a reasonable definition and clarification of what constitutes bullying and (ii) justified measurement procedures. Possibly the authors did not have much input in framing questions in the survey about bullying. Further, there is only limited recognition and discussion of how the findings of the study compare with other studies of bullying prevalence and a disappointing lack of discussion of implications for further research and for practice.

It is well known that an understanding of what constitutes ‘bullying’ can vary widely between respondents, with some focussing solely on behaviours and others on contextual factors such as whether there is an imbalance of power between the children involved so that the target cannot defend himself/herself adequately. In this article the reader does not know what instructions were given to the respondents to elicit their judgements. This is very important.

The reader is not given a clue as to what ‘object’ bullying is – certainly this needs explaining.

The measurement of socio-economic status on the basis of five attained educational levels also requires some justification. It is intuitively far from obvious that social and economic status can be inferred from such data. Can they really be placed on an ordinal scale of social status as the authors assume? It would be more reasonable to present findings for each of these categories separately.

Given that four kinds of bullying were indicated, it would be of much interest to know in detail how frequently each was indicated among both boys and girls. One of the claims of the study is that ‘the findings provide insight into what forms of bullying were common at this age’ i.e at 5-6 years. But surprisingly we are only provided with an example - one relating to verbal bullying.

It would also have been of much interest to compare prevalence rates for the different kinds of bullying for the different status categories. One plausible hypothesis is that physical bullying may be higher for children from low socio-econ families; verbal and indirect bullying for high ses. The researchers
missed the opportunity to examine this relevant question.

The findings are very much at odds with many other studies of bullying prevalence, which typically show that bully-victims are relatively rare compared with pure victims. In this study bully-victims are very highly represented; for pure victims very low. This suggests that the raters – teachers – probably saw bullying as conflict between students generally – not just conflict in which there was a notable imbalance of power (see above).

Regarding the nature of the sample – of 5-6 year olds – could there be some consideration of how and why the proportions of children in the different categories of behaviour differ from the reported findings for older groups? This might throw some light on how the nature of bullying itself changes with age or is perceived among young children.

Implications from the study could profitably have indicated what more it would be useful to know and what the practical implications of the study could be – beyond merely paying more attention to the more at risk low ses children. What specifically could be done? Is there a case for social workers helping some families who were thus at risk to learn how to handle conflict and especially bullying better? Is there a case for the teaching of certain social skills eg., assertiveness, especially to children from families where they are perhaps not taught? Such issues could briefly explored.

Finally the statement in the abstract that ‘children from families with a low socio-economic background are at risk for this [bullying] behaviour’ is actually not informative. All children are at risk. What presumably is meant is that such children are more at risk than others, a more justified conclusion.

I think the study has significant flaws. Some improvements could be made in attending more to definition and measurement issues. Some re-analyses, as suggested above, could be done and more results of interest to the reader who wants to know about what 5-6 year olds actually do could be provided. Assumptions relating to measurement of ses should be discussed and the limitations of the study addressed further. The findings need to be related more to other studies of prevalence and the possible uniqueness or difference in the nature of bullying between age groups recognised.

Here are response to specific questions - see above for qualifications.