Survivors of School Bullying: A Collective Case Study

Octavio Ramirez

This article explores the coping strategies of five junior-high school students with a history of peer victimization and how those strategies help them manage the effects of bullying. The data were collected using observations, interviews, and a review of school records. The data were analyzed using categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, constant comparison, and identification of patterns. On analysis, the following categories emerged from the data: identification of supportive systems, in-class strategies, premonition and environmental analysis, thought cessation and redirection, and masking. These categories were amalgamated into two general patterns: preventive and reactive strategies. The results of the study show that although the strategies helped participants to cope with the immediate effects of bullying, they did not exempt participants from the psychological and emotional implications of peer victimization.

KEY WORDS: bullying; coping skills; school; survivors; victims

To examine the growing problem of bullying in schools, it may be helpful to view the issue from the perspective of the victim and observe how children use various coping strategies to overcome the painful effects of bullying (Hunter & Boyle, 2004). It can also help us understand the implications behind the various strategies (Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2002). This collective case study explored the coping strategies of five junior high school students and how effective those strategies were in dealing with the pejorative effects of school bullying.

The findings of this study are of great importance to school social workers because most schoolwide antibullying programs have yielded limited success, and some have failed altogether (Newman-Carlson & Home, 2004). Moreover, studies have shown that not all coping strategies generate positive outcomes (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006; Mahady-Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000). Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify the various coping mechanisms used by the participants of the study, describe how those strategies were implemented, and discuss the immediate implications of using those strategies. Although it cannot be easily defined, for the purposes of this study, bullying is physical, psychological, or verbal intimidation or attack that is meant to cause distress or harm to an intended victim (Mizell-Christie, 2003). Bullying is a problem that nearly everyone can relate to, whether as a bully, a victim, or a bystander (Orpinas, Home, & Staniszewski, 2003). In 2010, approximately 2.7 million children were bullied. The problem of bullying in schools has been notoriously linked to school shootings and suicide attempts (Bullying Statistics, 2010). Coupled with the recent proliferation of cyberbullying, which is the “use of information and communication technologies with the intent to harm others” (Li, 2007, p. 1779), and the tepid success of schoolwide antibullying programs, children must rely on coping strategies to overcome depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, feelings of vengeance, nightmares, and so forth (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Paton 2001; Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Storch, Brassard, & Masia-Warner, 2003; Van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003).

There are numerous coping strategies used by children to regulate the stressors of bullying. These strategies can be grouped into two distinct clusters: problem-solving strategies that de-escalate and resolve conflicts, and aggressive strategies that perpetuate and escalate them (Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000). Examples of problem-solving strategies include acquiescence, avoidance, and instrumental coping skills. Children who use instrumental coping skills attempt to befriend bullies in hopes of decreasing the attacks. They also seek support from family members, friends, teachers, or caregivers (Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000).
When asked about using problem-solving strategies, children responded; "I ignore it, put up with it, forget it, cope on my own, hope it would stop, bottle it up, tell them it hurts, ask them to stop" (Cowie, 2000). Although it has been found that children who use the avoidance method tend to have more problems adjusting (Causey & Dubow, 1993), avoidance has also been found to de-escalate and reduce bullying. The outcome is dependent on the bully, the setting, and the type of bullying experienced (Hunter et al., 2002; Kanetsuna et al., 2006; Kristensen & Smith, 2003).

Conversely, aggressive coping strategies involve verbal and physical retaliation by the victim. Boys have a tendency to use this strategy when they themselves have experienced physical abuse (Andreou, 2001). Girls prefer to use avoidance and internalization when they have experienced physical and verbal abuse (Roecker, Dubow, & Donaldson, 1996). When asked about the use of aggressive strategies, children responded, “I hit them back, beat them, threatened to get my big brother, shout back, and threaten to tell the teacher” (Cowie, 2000).

There are differences in the use of coping strategies at different academic levels. For example, elementary school children are inclined to share their experiences with caregivers and teachers, whereas secondary school children depend on self-reliance (Borg, 1998), with the exception of girls, who have been found to share their experiences with friends (Griffith & Dubow, 1993; Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Laursen, 1993).

As children grow older, it becomes more challenging for them to share their experiences with adults. This is because they either lose confidence in themselves or believe the bullying will become worse (Kanetsuna et al., 2006). However, this has not been the case with children who care for a parent with a disability. It was found that these children shared their experiences with ease. It is believed that the bond established between them contributes to this phenomenon (Polkki, Ervast, & Huupponen, 2004).

Another problem-solving strategy that has shown promise in alleviating the effects of bullying is forgiveness. Forgiveness has been known to placate vengeful feelings (Egan & Todorov, 2009). Children who have been victimized have a natural tendency to feel angry or depressed and often develop vengeful thoughts. Forgiveness is a strategy that has been known to help manage feelings of shame, humiliation, embarrassment, vengeance, and low self-esteem. The biggest advantage of forgiveness is that it has been found to help children manage their shame by acknowledging their feelings rather than displacing them (Ahmed & Smithwaite, 2004). Forgiveness, as proposed in this context, does not mean denying, ignoring, minimizing, tolerating, condoning, or forgetting the offense (Wirtvlieet, Ludvig, & VanderLaan, 2001). Rather, it is viewed as a source of strength.

Although research has indicated that children who are victimized use problem-solving and aggressive coping strategies to overcome the effects of school bullying (Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Naylor, Cowie, & del Rey, 2001; Salmivalli, Karhunen, & Lagerspetz, 1996), this study adds to the existing body of knowledge by depicting how participants use their coping strategies to successfully get through the school day.

**METHOD**

The collective case study design was selected because it allowed for detailed, extensive data collection through multiple sources of information. In this study, the researcher observed the participants in their natural setting, conducted interviews, and analyzed their progress through a review of their academic records. Five cases were selected, and the researcher became immersed in the lives of the participants.

The participants of the study were selected on the basis of a history of peer victimization. The school principal made the initial referral. The participants' caregivers corroborated the referral and their academic records supported it. According to Drake and Jonson-Reid (2007), the number of participants selected for this study is appropriate for this qualitative tradition. The intent of this study was not to generalize the findings or to theorize them or to reach saturation; the intent was to explore the intrinsic value that each of these participants could contribute through their experiences. The focus on reliability was not on acquiring similar results but on assuring consistency in the process. The use of triangulation served to strengthen the reliability of the data, by using interviews, observations, and a review of school records, for example. Validity was attained by the measures taken to assure the participants were students who had a history of peer victimization.

The participants consisted of two female African-American, one male Hispanic, one female Hispanic,
and one female African American. All of the participants attended an inner-city charter school in the northeastern part of the United States. Anonymity was used to protect their identity.

Ricardo is an 11-year-old male Hispanic in the seventh grade. He is a timid, aloof child who suffers from dyspraxia, an inability to perform coordinated movements (Miyahara & Baxter, 2011). Although Ricardo made continuous efforts to be accepted by bullies, they continue to attack him both verbally and physically. Ricardo lives with his mother and two sisters, and he has regular contact with his father. He enjoys watching movies, playing video games, and playing sports with his friends.

Aaron is a 13-year-old male African American in the seventh grade. He is gregarious and has an outgoing personality. Aaron was diagnosed with a specific learning disability several years ago. Bullies attack him verbally and physically and often focus on his conspicuous overbite. Aaron resides with his mother in a three-bedroom house. He has no contact with his father and enjoys playing football and basketball and riding his bicycle.

Tammie is a 12-year-old female African American in the sixth grade. She is shy, quiet, and sensitive. Bullies focus their attacks on her weight. They laugh and call her names. According to school records, Tammie has a history of transferring schools because of the bullying. She has no siblings and lives with her mother. Tammie has no contact with her father. She enjoys spending time on Facebook, watching cartoons, and playing board games.

Sandra is a 12-year-old female African American in the sixth grade. She was diagnosed with a specific learning disability. Sandra resides with her older brother and grandmother. Although her mother lives in the same town, Sandra has no contact with her. Sandra experiences verbal and physical abuse at school. Bullies call her names like “dirty, stinky, homeless, and nappy.” Sandra enjoys watching comedy programs on television and playing with her dog.

Iris is a 13-year-old female Hispanic in the seventh grade. As with Tammie, bullies often focus on her weight. They call her names like “big mama, bus, and house.” Iris is quiet and aloof. She resides with her mother and younger sister in a three-bedroom house. Iris has daily contact with her father and feels supported by him. She enjoys watching comedy programs on television and listening to R&B music on the radio.

Prior to the study, each of the participants’ caregivers provided informed consent. In addition, permission to conduct the study was granted by the board of trustees of the charter school where the children were enrolled.

The first method used to collect the data was field observations. Each participant was observed in structured settings, like classrooms or the lunchroom, and in nonstructured settings like hallways, bathrooms, and the schoolyard. According to Cowie (2000), bullying attacks are more prevalent in nonstructured settings. Therefore, additional observation time was spent in those areas. The researcher used the role of the complete observer because it limited the possibility of the Hawthorne effect (Babie, 2010). Although the participants were cognizant of the study, they were unaware they were being observed for the purpose of the study. The participants viewed the researcher as a staff member at the school and, therefore, maintained their normal behavior.

Observations occurred for six months, four hours a day. The researcher recorded the time spent observing each participant to ensure an equal amount of time. A standard protocol was used to record the observations (Creswell, 2006). The protocol was used to record the names of the participants, the setting, the time, the date, and the duration of the observation. It also allowed the researcher the opportunity to record the emic and etic perspective (Tripp-Reimer, 2007).

In addition to conducting observations, the researcher interviewed each of the participants for approximately 60 to 90 minutes in an office at the school. The researcher explained the purpose and significance of the study to the participants, and a standard protocol was used to guide the interviews. Each protocol contained six structured and 14 nonstructured questions. The following are examples of the questions asked: "When you are in class and you are being attacked, what do you think about?" "How do you respond to bullies who are verbally attacking you?" "How do you respond to bullies who are physically attacking you?"

Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and uploaded to the software NVivo for analysis. The NVivo program helped the researcher analyze the text and identify categories, themes, and supportive quotes. The program also provided an organized storage filing system whereby cases could be easily retrieved (Creswell, 2006).
A thorough review of the participants' academic records was another useful method of data analysis. Each record contained the following information: performance evaluations, attendance history, assessment reports, and copies of disciplinary actions. None of the files were removed from the school, and the researcher limited the analysis to the information pertinent to the study. Once all of the data were collected, the researcher used the process of "coding up" (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2007). The researcher read the transcripts from the interviews, reviewed the information from the observational protocols, and used the academic records to identify content units. Once these units were identified, the researcher was able to develop a coding scheme and use the NVivo software to determine categories and themes.

FINDINGS

The following categories emerged from the data: identification of supportive systems, in-class strategies, premonition and environmental analysis, thought cessation and redirection, and masking. The first category, identification of supportive systems, described how participants use instrumental coping skills to deal with the effects of bullying. Tammie found a classmate to help her cope with the bullying: "When bullies say ugly things to me, I get quiet and go to my friend. He always makes me laugh." Iris identified a teacher: "My social studies teacher does not allow kids to attack me. She moves them away from me." Sandra admitted that there were times when her teacher was not aware of the bullying, but because she had established a relationship with her teacher, Sandra saw her as a source of support. In addition to classmates and teachers, participants also identified family members as buffers against the negative effects of bullying. Ricardo reported experiencing a "weird feeling" prior to being attacked. Although he was unable to fully articulate this feeling, he realized it made him aware of impending danger, saying, "There are times when students will surprise me and attack me, but for the most part I have a weird feeling that something is going to happen." Ricardo understood that identifying this feeling and responding to it helped him avoid imminent attacks. However, when this feeling was ignored, Ricardo suffered the consequences.

Another tactic, analysis of the surrounding environment, was found to be useful to the participants. Aaron used this coping strategy whenever bystanders would provoke or incite bullies, "When I see that bystanders are instigating bullies, or I think there's a good chance that I will be attacked, I look for a way to leave the area." Although leaving the area contributed to Aaron's feelings of shame and humiliation, he preferred to face those feelings rather than experience the physical abuse.

Sandra and Iris reported using thought cessation and redirection. This strategy helped suppress and redirect negative thinking: "When a bully verbally attacks me, I think about other things... I make up things in my mind like a squirrel chasing a bug—I know it sounds strange, but it helps me ignore what bullies are saying" (Sandra). Iris reported, "When bullies say ugly things to me, I think about my favorite TV show and it makes me feel better." At times redirection would take a few seconds, other
times a few minutes. The success of this technique varied widely depending on the setting, the bully, and the type of bullying.

The last category to emerge from the interviews was masking, or hiding true feelings. This coping strategy helped Sandra and Aaron to regulate their emotions by reacting and behaving in a manner that was contrary to the expected behavior. Both participants reported smiling or laughing in the midst of being verbally attacked: "When bullies tease me and others laugh, I also laugh—I don't laugh because I think is funny, I laugh because it helps them stop when they see I'm not getting mad" (Aaron). Sandra said, "sometimes I smile when bullies talk about my hair. This helps them see that I'm not bothered by what they are saying." Aaron used this strategy with bullies who were physically bigger and stronger than he was. Moreover, both Aaron and Sandra reported that masking lessened the likelihood that the verbal attacks became physical ones.

In addition to the information derived from the interviews, the researcher collected information from the observational protocols (Babbie, 2010). From the protocols, it was determined that participants preferred to be accompanied by their friends during nonsupervised times of the school day (Aaron, Iris, and Sandra). This highlights their ability to use relationships as a coping mechanism. Furthermore, the observation showed that none of the participants intentionally provoked or elicited the attacks. Ricardo, Aaron, Sandra, and Tammie all attempted to befriend bullies, either by wanting to be included in recreational activities, sitting at the same table for lunch, or seeking to participate in group projects. Unfortunately, the bullies showed no interest.

The academic records of the participants showed that Sandra, Iris, Tammie, Ricardo, and Aaron's grades suffered as a result of high absenteeism. One of the reasons for the high absenteeism was the use of aggressive coping strategies. When Sandra, Tammie, Iris, and Ricardo responded aggressively to bullies, they received the same disciplinary consequences as the bullies. The records indicate that all of the participants maintained average to below-average grades, including Aaron and Sandra who have learning disabilities.

All of the coping strategies identified in this study fell under two general patterns: preventive and reactive. Preventive strategies are ones that help participants avoid attacks, and reactive strategies help participants respond adequately to the attacks. Premeditation and environmental analysis fall under the pattern of preventive strategies, whereas reactive strategies include thought cessation and redirection, identification of supportive sources within the environment, and in-class strategies.

**CONCLUSION**

In addition to having a history of peer victimization, the participants of this study typified characteristics of passive or provocative victims (Olweus, 1993). Some were shy, aloof, and introverted (Ricardo, Iris, and Tammie); others had physical limitations such as obesity or a motor imbalance (Tammie, Aaron, and Iris). Hence, bullies did not perceive them as a threat and proceeded with the attacks.

Sandra, Iris, Tammie, and Ricardo all used instrumental coping skills as a means for dealing with bullying at school. The implementation of these skills included seeking the support of classmates, family members, and teachers. This strategy allowed them to express their anxiety, concerns, and fears to the people they trusted. It also helped them see that they did not have to suffer through the victimization alone; they had support.

Sandra and Iris used the thought cessation coping strategy to suppress negative thinking, and redirection to integrate positive thinking. This skill helped them minimize feelings of sadness and depression.

In the classroom, Iris and Sandra used several problem-solving strategies to fend off bully attacks. The girls would get the attention of the teacher in the midst of an attack and either request permission to go to the restroom or to see the resource teacher. These strategies helped limit the attacks within the classroom.

Ricardo reported that he often experienced a "weird feeling," which he could not describe. When he recognized this feeling, he immediately left the area because he viewed it as a harbinger of impending danger. Sandra and Aaron reported using reaction formation (Corey, 2009), a defense mechanism that can also be referred to as masking. Although this strategy can reduce the intensity and length of the attacks, Causey and Dubow (1993) found that children who used this method had difficulty adjusting.

Although many of these strategies helped participants prevent attacks or respond to them more effectively, they did not shield the participants...
from depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem that result from being the victim of a bully. Moreover, these strategies did not suppress the bullying. Whether the participants showed characteristics of a passive or provocative victim (Olweus, 1993), they continued to experience bullying.

The use of instrumental coping strategies by the participants supports previous findings (Hunter et al., 2002; Naylor et al., 2001; Smith, 2004). Although Hunter and Boyle (2004) found that girls were more inclined to seek assistance than boys, and Kristensen and Smith (2003) found that students in junior-high school preferred to use self-reliance rather than seek outside assistance, in the present study, Ricardo and Aaron used the identification and utilization of assistance as a coping strategy. In his 2001 study, Andreou found that boys who had experienced verbal and physical bullying relied on their friends as a reactive coping strategy, but in this study Ricardo reported using his peers as a means to prevent the bullying, especially, in times of minimal supervision.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

School social workers are in an excellent position to identify and reinforce problem-solving skills. According to the findings of this study, instrumental coping strategies (Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000) such as seeking support from parents, teachers, and friends helped decrease the intensity of the attacks while providing an opportunity for participants to share their experiences with individuals they trusted. Moreover, school social workers can use psychoeducational approaches to teach students the benefits of thought cessation and redirection. Thought cessation and redirection are established methods of intervention used in cognitive-behavioral therapy (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 2011), yet some of the participants already use this approach to cope with the effects of bullying.

School social workers can teach students to use simple in-class techniques such as getting the attention of the teacher, requesting permission to use the bathroom, or seeking the assistance of a resource teacher to avoid attacks by bullies. In addition, social workers can suggest strategies to teachers, like changing student seating, speaking to students privately, reinforcing their positive qualities in front of the classroom, referring them for individual counseling, and serving as advocates during disciplinary conferences.

It is important to note that masking, like any other defense mechanism, has both short- and long-term implications. However, the participants in this study saw the immediate benefits of it. School social workers can help children understand the immediate benefits and the long-term implications of using such a strategy.

Finally, it is recommended that future research focus on comprehending the long-term effects of using these problem-solving and aggressive coping strategies.

**REFERENCES**


at the British Psychological Society, Developmental Section Conference, University of Sussex.


**PRACTICE HIGHLIGHTS**

Share your practice experience providing exemplary services to individuals and families in school settings, especially involving interdisciplinary collaboration. Provide a brief review of the literature and tell how what you did builds on it, describe your program, and indicate what you learned from your experience. Articles should be typed double-spaced and no longer than six pages. Send your Practice Highlights column as a Word document through the online portal at http://cs.msubmit.net (initial, one-time registration is required).