



***Project REAL (Rural Early Adolescent Learning):
Social Dynamics, Bullying Involvement, and School Adjustment in Middle School***

National Research Center on Rural Education Support
<http://www.nrcres.org/index.html>

Introduction

Classroom social dynamics are important to understand when school personnel are considering how to manage students' behavior and how to promote a positive learning environment for all students. It makes intuitive sense to experienced educators that peers influence one another during the middle school years; current research suggests that peers may have an impact on risk-taking behaviors, academic performance, bullying, and other behaviors. Early adolescence is a time when students are at risk to develop academic problems. Students in rural schools, in particular, may be at risk for difficulty (Estell et al., 2007). Given that early adolescence has been associated with an increase in bullying behavior and that many rural youth report that bullying is a frequent problem that they face (Iserhagan & Harris, 2004), our team of researchers wanted to study the relationships among bullying and other social dynamics, and student academic adjustment, in rural schools. At the University of North Carolina and Pennsylvania State University, researchers involved in Project REAL (Rural Early Adolescent Learning) examined social, behavioral, and academic needs of students in rural areas who were entering middle school, and also high school. Specifically, in a series of studies we sought information about how peer influences and social dynamics among students had an impact on bullying behavior and school

adjustment. We hoped that a further understanding of social dynamics that contributed to problems with school academic adjustment and bullying, as well as an understanding of those factors that helped students to do better in school and not be involved in bullying, could be used to develop school-wide, class-wide, and individual-level interventions and prevention programs for students in rural schools.

Initial Studies: African-American Students in the Deep South

For one aspect of the study, two rural middle schools with high rates of poverty (more than 50%) and having a majority of African American students were studied in seventh through ninth grades. The research team collected various kinds of information including ratings from teachers and parents about school adjustment, behavior, and social skills. Students were given the task of rating who in their school "hung around together a lot" to better understand the social groups in the school, asked to nominate students on behavior characteristics, and asked to name who in their grade they liked most and least. Information from report cards and standardized test scores provided information about students' academic performance. Results of analyses indicated several important findings. In general, higher academic performance was strongly related to more favorable academic, behavioral, and social adjustment. These patterns of adjustment and behavior tended to continue through ninth grade. Students who in

middle school had low aggression, high academic performance, and who were liked by their peers had higher grades in the beginning of high school than those students who had high aggression, were disliked by peers, and had low academic performance in middle school. Taking a closer look at bullying involvement for African American rural youth in this sample showed, similar to other research on bullying for this population, that boys were more likely to be identified by peers as bullies and that the rates of bullying involvement for these rural youth were similar to other schools. Bullies in this study, as in other studies, were rated by their peers as being disliked but were still well-integrated into the social network, while victims of bullying, including victims who were themselves, aggressive, were more marginalized in the social system. Given these findings for African-American rural youth, Project REAL also sought to investigate rural populations on a larger scale, including those from other regions of the country, larger sample sizes, and a more ethnically diverse group of students.

Social Competence and Fifth Grade Achievement and School Adjustment

To better understand the profiles of students who performed worse or better in school in relation to social dynamics and other factors, we continued this same kind of work with eight elementary schools in rural Appalachia. In a study of over 300 fifth graders, students were classified into behavioral types, called interpersonal competence configurations (ICCs), using teacher-rated student behavior scores analyzed with cluster analysis. Several distinct ICCs emerged for girls and boys; we examined

differences in school performance and aspects of students' social adjustment by these ICCs. One cluster included students rated by teachers as being highly competent socially, behaviorally, and academically. These students tended to have end-of-the-year grades and more positive peer relationships than did students in other configurations. Students whose academic, social, and behavioral adjustment was rated as teachers as poor were classified as being at high-risk for positive adjustment and indeed, had difficulty with peer interactions, low academic performance, low social competence and behavioral and emotional difficulties that predicted future problems.



Bullying and Students with Disabilities

Another aspect of Project REAL involved participation of over 1,300 students from 35 schools in rural areas, to investigate whether or not there were differences in bullying involvement for students with and without disabilities. Data were collected from students including teacher ratings of interpersonal competence, students' perceptions of how much they valued school and bonded with their school, and teacher and student ratings of both bullies and victims of bullying in their schools. Behavioral profiles similar to those analyzed in the fifth grade study were created for boys and girls. Analyses were conducted to examine differences between bullies and victims in terms of their interpersonal configurations, school belonging and valuing perceptions, and disability status. Students who were victims of bullying were more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems, as well as more negative perceptions of the school environment. In

contrast to victims, bullies were more socially integrated into the school social system, less likely to have high-risk profiles, and less likely to have internalizing (sadness and anxiety) behavioral problems. Students who had a disability were more likely to be victims or bully-victims (aggressive victims) and were at higher risk for emotional difficulty than those students who did not receive special education services.

Bullying and the Transition to Middle School

Although many rural early adolescent students move from elementary to middle school around the sixth grade, a significant proportion remain in the same school through eighth grade or even beyond. Are students in rural areas more likely to experience bullying if they move from an elementary to middle school, or if they do not make a building transition in early adolescence? Project REAL tried to address this question, given that research conducted in suburban and urban environments has suggested that transitioning to middle school may involve an increase in aggression and bullying when students try to re-establish their peer relationships when attending new and larger schools. Analyses of over 1800 students in 36 schools from 10 states were conducted to examine differences between bullying and aggression rates for schools that did not have a middle school transition and those schools that did. Results showed that at the end of sixth grade, schools that did not have a building transition had *more* bullies than expected compared to those schools that did have a transition. Moreover, in schools without a building transition, aggressive students were



more likely to be viewed by their classmates as cool, popular, leaders, and good at sports, than were bullies in schools with a building transition. Thus, it seems that contrary to research findings from metropolitan areas, that in rural schools without a building transition, aggressive behavior is rewarded by more favorable peer status and bullying occurs at a higher rate than in schools with a transition.

Implications

- ✓ Bullying and aggression are present in rural schools, just as in metropolitan schools. Rural schools need school-wide prevention programs that are tailored to the specific needs of the schools and their students.
- ✓ Rural schools may have different dynamics than schools in other types of communities. Schools without a middle school transition may want to carefully consider bullying and aggression in their schools
- ✓ Interventions need to be tailored to the specific profiles of their students at-risk, given that many students who are involved in bullying are perceived as having socially desirable characteristics and are well-integrated into the social system of their school

References: Studies Described in this Brief

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