Immigrant children and school bullying: *the "unrecognized" victim?*

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Abstract

Purpose – The current study aims to investigate whether the victimization of immigrant children is more likely to be unrecognized by teachers and parents and what demographic factors contribute to children's unrecognized bullying victimization.

Design/methodology/approach – Data from the publicly accessible US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort, 2011 were utilized (N = 10,587 children across 2,194 schools), and the hierarchical linear model was used for modeling.

Findings – Among all bullying victims included in this study, only 32% were recognized by both parents and teachers. Bullied children who had only foreign-born parent/s were more likely to be unnoticed by adults than those who had only US-born parent/s. Among all bullied children, girls were more likely to be overlooked by adults than boys, and Asian and Hispanic children were more likely to be overlooked by adults than White children.

Social implications – To better protect and support all victimized children, schools should develop innovative strategies to engage more immigrant parents; teachers and parents need to learn how not to rely on social and cultural biases to guide their interpretations and response to school bullying; parents and teachers should keep good communication with children.

Originality/value – Previous research demonstrates that immigrant children have a high risk of being bullied in school, but it is unclear whether parents and teachers are sufficiently aware of their victimization. This paper is the first study to demonstrate how parents' nativity, gender and race/ethnicity are associated with children's unrecognized bullying victimization.

Keywords Bullying, Immigrants, Children, Gender, Race

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

School bullying is a social problem affecting many children in the world. Today in the US, more than one out of every five children have been bullied in school (Lessne and Yanez, 2016). Bullying victims often suffer from severe developmental and health issues, such as lower self-esteem, school avoidance, derailed educational progress and even suicide (Holt *et al.*, 2008; Swearer and Espelage, 2010). Although the negative consequences associated with school bullying can be moderated by teacher and parental support (Hong and Espelage, 2012; Juvonen and Graham, 2014; Lee, 2011), many bullying incidents occurred without being noticed by any adults. Previous research reveals that parents and teachers are not always aware of all situations where bullying occurs; thus, many victimized children are overlooked and left alone (Holt *et al.*, 2008; Stockdale *et al.*, 2002). Unfortunately, those "unrecognized" victims are also understudied in the literature of school bullying. While a small group of studies discussed perceptual discrepancies among children, teachers and parents with regard to school bullying (e.g. Bradshaw *et al.*, 2007; Mishna *et al.*, 2006), to the best of my knowledge, no prior research has systematically investigated the phenomenon of unrecognized bullying victimization among school-aged children in the US.

Over the last 30 years, an increasing number of immigrant children have entered the US education system. According to a report produced by the Center for Immigration Studies, in 2015, about 23% of public school students in the US came from immigrant households, while

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in 1990, the number was 11%, and in 1980 it was 7% (Camarota *et al.*, 2017). Despite cultural differences, unfamiliarity with the educational system and language barriers, immigrant children were shown to outperform their peers with US-born parents (Alon, 2009; Hao and Woo, 2012; Keller and Tillman, 2008). Among different explanations of this paradoxical pattern, Feliciano and Lanuza (2017) suggested that immigrant parents' education levels within the historical and geographic contexts in which they were attained (parental contextual attainment) could explain why most groups of immigrant children completed more years of schooling than did White children with native-born parents. In another study, Feliciano and Lanuza (2016) pointed out that different forms of cultural capital were linked to immigrant children's high educational expectations, such as high parental expectations, great interest in school and foreign language use in early childhood. However, other researchers argued that immigrant children often had lower test scores and school grades despite higher educational aspirations than their White peers with US-born parents (Engzell, 2019).

Among various challenges immigrant children may have to face, their safety in school has merged as a particular concern (Alink *et al.*, 2013). For example, a study found that more than 50% of Asian immigrant children reported experiencing ethnic and racial tension in school (Qin *et al.*, 2008). Other researchers also confirmed that immigrant children had a high risk of being bullied by their peers (e.g. Maynard *et al.*, 2016; Peguero, 2008; Pottie *et al.*, 2015), but it is not clear whether parents and teachers are sufficiently aware of immigrant children's bullying victimization. Due to language barriers and unfamiliarity with the US educational system, it might be particularly difficult for immigrant parents to detect and understand their children's experiences of being bullied in school, which curtails their engagement level to support their children. Teachers, on the other hand, might also be underprepared to address immigrant children's needs and concerns (Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, it is possible that children from immigrant households are facing double jeopardy in school bullying: they are more likely to be bullied by peers and less likely to be recognized by adults.

The current study goes beyond identifying risk and protective factors of school bullying; instead, I focused on victimized children from a national-representative sample of third-grade students and asked: (1) *Is victimization of immigrant children more likely to be unrecognized by teachers and parents?* (2) *What are other demographic factors associated with children's unrecognized bullying victimization?* To answer the two research questions, I utilized data from the publicly accessible US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort, 2011 (ECLS-K:2011). The ECLS provides a unique opportunity to study children's unrecognized bullying victimization experiences; as in the ECLS, peer victimization was reported by children, teachers and parents.

Methods

Data source

I used publically available data from the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), Kindergarten Cohort, 2011 (ECLS-K:2011). Sponsored by the US National Center for Education Statistics, the ECLS followed a national-representative cohort of children from kindergarten through their elementary school years, by collecting information from children, parents, teachers and school administrators (Tourangeau *et al.*, 2018). For this study, I used ECLS-K: 2011 data pertaining to third-grade children that were collected in the spring of 2014. These data were collected through a child questionnaire, direct assessments of individual children's academic competency, a parent questionnaire and surveys of teachers and school administrators.

In the child questionnaire (CQ), there are questions related to peer victimization. Specifically, each child was asked to report: "*during this school year, how often have other*

children…": (1) "*…teased, made fun of, or called your names?*" (verbal bullying); (2) "*…pushed, shoved, slapped, hit, or kicked you*?" (physical bullying); (3) "*…intentionally excluded or left you out from playing with them*?" (relational bullying). Responses to each of the three questions were gauged using a five-point Likert-type scale, which ranged from 1 = "Never" to 5 = "Very often." Based on responses to those questions, I included children who self-reported being verbally/physically/relationally bullied in my analyses (n = 10,587 third grade children across 2,194 schools). Using the ECLS data, 12 variables were constructed to measure factors suggested by the conceptual model. I introduce those variables in the next section and provided descriptive statistics of each variable in Table 1.

Dependent variable

Similar peer victimization questions (Espelage and Holt, 2001) were included in the parent questionnaire and teacher survey. Based on responses to those questions, I created the teacher-reported bullying variable (0 = The child was not bullied; 1 = The child was verbally/physically/relationally bullied) and the parent-reported bullying variable (0 = The child was not bullied; 1 = The child was verbally/physically/relationally bullied). Based on these two variables, an ordinal variable was created to measure children's experiences of unrecognized bullying victimization: 0 = The child was reported as a victim of bullying by two adults (teacher and parent); 1 = The child was reported as a victim of bullying by one adult (teacher or parent); 3 = The child was not reported as a victim of bullying by any adults.

Key independent variables

Parents' nativity. This variable includes three categories: (1) only foreign-born parent/s; (2) one parent is foreign-born, and one is US-born; (3) only US-born parent/s. I used only US-born parent/s as the reference category.

Sex. I used the child sex variable provided by the ECLS. Females were coded as 1, and males were coded as 0.

Race/ethnicity. An ECLS-provided variable indicating the child's race/ethnicity was used. I recoded the variable into six binary variables (0 = No; 1 = Yes), including: Black/African American, nonHispanic; Hispanic; Asian, nonHispanic; native Hawaiian/American Indian, nonHispanic (indigenous); multiracial, nonHispanic and White, nonHispanic. White was used as the reference group in the analysis.

Child-level control variables

Age. The child's age at the direct academic assessment in months was calculated by comparing the exact date the child completed the direct assessments in science/math with the child's date of birth. The age calculation used the number of days in each month and is adjusted for leap years.

Academic performance. This measure was developed using the theta scores of children's knowledge and skills ascertained through direct assessments in reading, mathematics and science by trained professionals. Theta scores ranged from −6 (low ability) to 6 (high ability) and were normally distributed. I developed a composite academic performance measure by summing the three standardized theta scores and then recoding that additive measure into two variables: bottom 10% for academic performance among all the children in the sample (0 = No; 1 = Yes) and top 10% for academic performance among all the children in the sample (0 = No; 1 = Yes). The middle 80% was the reference group.

Household income. Household income was a variable provided by the ECLS, and it was collected during the parent interview.

Variable		Frequency	% Missing	Mean	SD
Dependent variable					
Unrecognized bullying victimization	Unrecognized by adults	2,080	29.5		
	Recognized by one adult	3,023			
	Recognized by two adults	2,357			
Key independent variables					
Parents' nativity	US-born parent/s	5,764	21.7		
	Foreign-born parent/s	1,872			
	One foreign-born and one US-born parent	658			
Child's gender	Boys	5,441	0.1		
	Girls	5,136			
Child's race/ethnicity	White	5,133	0.1		
	Black	1,155			
	Hispanic	2,730			
	Asian	934			
	Indigenous	157			
	Multiracial	467			
Child-level control variables					
Child's age (in months)			0.0	108.95	4.41
Child's academic performance	Bottom 10%	1,058	0.0		
	Middle 80%	8,454			
	Top 10%	1,057			
Household income			19.1	74394.42	57244.322
ECLS sampling weights			0.0	303.02	457.52
School-level control variables					
Type of school	Public	1,979	0.0		
	Private	214			
School locale	City	840	4.5		
	Suburban	808			
	Town/Rural	447			
School enrollment			1.0	520.53	189.41
Percent of non-White students in school			1.1	54.92%	30.34%
School serves 12th graders	No	2,049	0.9		
	Yes	126			

Note(s): Descriptive statistics for children-level variables were weighted based on the ECLS recommended sampling weights (W8C18P_8T180)

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for analysis variables (original data, $N = 10{,}587$ children across 2,194 schools)

School-level control variables

Type of school. I recoded the ECLS-provided school type variable into two categories (each coded 0 = No; 1 = Yes): public school and private school.

School locale. The ECLS school locality variable was used. It included three categories: city, suburban, town or rural. I recoded each category as a separate variable (0 = No; 1 = Yes), and city was used as the reference group.

School's racial/ethnic composition. This is a variable provided by the ECLS that indicates the percentage of nonWhite students in each school.

School enrollment. This ECLS-provided variable indicates total school enrollment.

Highest grade at the school. Based on the highest grade taught at the school, I constructed a variable with two categories (0 = this school does not serve the twelfth grade; 1 = this school serves the twelfth grade).

Analytic approach

The hierarchical linear model (HLM) was used to answer the two research questions because it is the most appropriate statistical technique to use when analyzing multi-level data (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). Before modeling, all continuous independent variables at the child level (age, household income) were standardized using group mean centering, and the continuous variables at the school level (enrollment, percent nonWhite students) were standardized using grand mean centering. The missing values of all analysis variables were imputed through multiple imputation (MI), which involves creating multiple sets of values for missing observations using a regression-based approach. MI is used when values are not missing completely at random (Penn, 2007) and is appropriate for self-reported survey data (Enders, 2010). Although the original dependent variable was ordinal, it was treated as a continuous variable after MI. Because when using imputed data, it is best practice to analyze originally ordinal measures as continuous variables. Rounding-off imputed values based on discrete categorical specifications produces more biased parameter estimates than treating them as continuous (Enders, 2010). Finally, as suggested by the ECLS-K: 2011 User's Manual (Tourangeau *et al.*, 2018), the sampling weight, W8C18P_8T180, was used in the analyses.

Results

Table 2 reports the results from the HLM model predicting children's experiences of unrecognized bullying victimization. Among the key independent variables, parents' nativity was a significant predictor as children with only foreign-born parent/s were significantly more likely to experience unrecognized bullying victimization than those with only US-born parents ($B = 0.25$; $p < 0.001$), but there were no significant differences between children with only US-born parent/s and children with one US-born parent and one foreign-born parent ($p = 0.350$). In terms of gender and race/ethnicity, I found that girls were significantly more likely to experience unrecognized bullying victimization than boys ($B = 0.08$; $p = 0.003$). As compared to White children, Asian ($B = 0.23$; $p = 0.007$) and Hispanic ($B = 0.11$; $p = 0.04$) children were significantly more likely to experience unrecognized bullying victimization.

With regard to control variables at the child level, the results show that older children had higher odds of experiencing unrecognized bullying victimization ($B = 0.01$; $p = 0.036$). For academic performance, low-performing children were significantly less likely to experience unrecognized bullying victimization than children with average performance ($B = -0.13$; $p = 0.015$), while high performing children were significantly more likely to experience unrecognized bullying victimization than children with average academic performance ($B = 0.12$; $p = 0.007$). Finally, the higher the household income, the more likely the child would experience unrecognized bullying victimization ($B = 0.00$; $p = 0.004$).

For school-level control variables, I found that children attending suburban schools were more likely to experience unrecognized bullying victimization than children attending city schools ($B = 0.13$; $p = 0.003$); and when children attended schools with larger percentages of nonWhite students, they were less likely to experience unrecognized bullying victimization ($B = -0.002$; $p = 0.003$).

Discussion

This paper highlighted how inequalities linked to parents' nativity, gender and race/ethnicity are associated with children's unrecognized bullying victimization. Specifically, for the *first research question*, the results from the HLM model suggest that bullying victims who had only foreign-born parent/s were more likely to be unnoticed by adults than those who had

Variables	Parameter	SE	95% confidence interval	*p*
Key independent variables				
Parents' nativity				
US-born parent/s	ref	ref	ref	ref
Foreign-born parent/s	0.254***	0.056	(0.144, 0.365)	<0.001
One foreign-born and one US-born parent	0.052	0.055	(−0.057, 0.160)	0.350
Female (ref: male)	0.078**	0.026	(0.026, 0.130)	0.003
Race/ethnicity				
White	ref	ref	ref	ref
Black	−0.047	0.059	(−0.162, 0.069)	0.427
Hispanic	0.107*	0.052	(0.006, 0.209)	0.038
Asian	0.233**	0.086	(0.065, 0.400)	0.007
Indigenous	−0.062	0.109	(−0.276, 0.152)	0.568
Multiracial	−0.051	0.059	(−0.167, 0.065)	0.387
Child-level control variables				
Child's age	0.008*	0.004	(0.001, 0.015)	0.036
Academic performance				
Mid-academic performance	ref	ref	ref	ref
Low academic performance	−0.130*	0.054	(−0.235, −0.025)	0.015
High academic performance	0.116**	0.043	(0.031, 0.201)	0.007
Household income	0.000001**	0.00000012	(0.0000008, 0.000001)	0.004
School-level control variables				
Private school (ref: public school)	0.069	0.068	(−0.063, 0.202)	0.305
School locale				
City	ref	ref	ref	ref
Suburban school	0.129**	0.043	(0.045, 0.213)	0.003
Town/rural school	0.010	0.051	(−0.090, 0.111)	0.840
School enrollment	0.0001	0.0001	(−0.00006, 0.0003)	0.173
School serves 12th graders	0.0005	0.074	(−0.144, 0.146)	0.994
Percent of nonWhite students in school	−0.002**	0.0008	(−0.004, −0.001)	0.002

Note(s): *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; HLM results were weighted based on the ECLS recommended sampling weights (W8C18P_8T180)

Table 2.
Two-level hierarchal linear model predicting unrecognized bullying victimization among third grade students in the US

only US-born parent/s. This finding can be explained from the perspective of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993). With more cultural capital, US-born parents might be better at identifying whether their children were bullied in school, and they would also deploy social capital to communicate with the teacher and gain useful information from other parents. Interestingly, I did not find differences between children with only US-born parent/s and children with one US-born parent and one foreign-born parent, which implies that having one US-born parent in a household could bring enough cultural and social capital to protect the child from unrecognized bullying victimization. Prior research has noted that children from immigrant households are more likely to be bullied in school, and school bullying might be more detrimental to them (Pottie *et al.*, 2015; Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, when bullying incidents occur, immigrant children might need more attention and support from adults to help them cope with associated academic, physical and mental health issues. Ironically, the current study indicates that victimized immigrant children were, in fact, more likely to be overlooked by teachers and parents. Although educational advantages of immigrant children were identified in the literature of immigrant children and education

(e.g. Alon, 2009; Feliciano and Lanuza, 2016; 2017; Hao and Woo, 2012; Keller and Tillman, 2008), the current study challenged this "immigrant paradox" by demonstrating that immigrant children were vulnerable in terms of bullying victimization.

To answer the *second research question*, I tested the relationship between children's demographic background and their unrecognized bullying victimization experiences, and the results reveal inequalities among bullied children. In terms of gender, I found that victimized girls were more likely to be overlooked by adults than victimized boys. Most previous research suggests that boys, in general, are more likely to be bullied in school than girls (e.g. Espelage *et al.*, 2000; Seals and Young, 2003; Varjas *et al.*, 2009), and teachers and school administrators tend to pay more attention on and intervene in the bullying incidents among boys (Young *et al.*, 2006). This study provides empirical evidence to confirm the lack of attention paid to girls' bullying victimization, which might contribute to the reproduction of sexism in school (Eder *et al.*, 1995; Pascoe, 2011).

Racial stereotyping played a role in the relationship between race/ethnicity and unrecognized bullying victimization. Interestingly, based on the results, both "positive" and "negative" racial stereotypes led to the nonrecognition of bullying. On the one hand, I found that although Asian students were bullied at a higher rate in school (Mouttapa *et al.*, 2004; Qin *et al.*, 2008), their victimization was less likely to be noticed by adults. The "model minority" stereotype could have caused this lack of attention paid to Asian children. In the US society, Asian students are often stereotypically portrayed as academic overachievers and being self-sufficient (Chou and Feagin, 2008; Lee, 2015; Park, 2008). However, the model minority myth masks the barriers that Asian children face every day in school (Koo *et al.*, 2012), and teachers tend to assume that Asian students do not need help or assistance (Chou and Feagin, 2008; Lee, 2005). As a result, Asian children disproportionately suffered from unrecognized bullying victimization: they were bullied by peers and overlooked by adults.

On the other hand, for Hispanic students, the negative stereotype contributed to their struggles with unrecognized bullying victimization. In fact, teachers and school officials often perceive that bullying and violence are daily aspects of racial/ethnic minority students, including Hispanics, so they pay relatively less attention to minority students' exposure to bullying than to White students (Graham and Juvonen, 2002; Peguero, 2012). However, I did not find significant differences between White and other minority (Black and indigenous) children regarding unrecognized bullying victimization. More research is needed to directly examine the effects of racial stereotyping and prejudice on unrecognized school bullying, especially how they affected Black and indigenous children.

There are several limitations of this study. First, the ECLS only provided data on the child-, teacher-, and parent-reported bullying victimization. It will be interesting for future studies to collect and analyze bullying victimization reported by peers as some researchers proposed that peer reports of bullying are less prone to bias than self-reports and peers are more aware of bullying incidents than adults (Pellegrini and Bartini, 2000; Salmivalli, 1998). Second, this study only examined factors that predict children's unrecognized bullying victimization. Future researchers should investigate the academic and health outcomes of those neglected victims of bullying. Third, the current study relied on a cross-sectional design so future longitudinal research could seek to investigate how patterns suggested by this study vary over time.

Conclusion

Common methods used for assessing children's peer victimization are self-reports, teacher reports and parent reports (Crothers and Levinson, 2004). Although each method has advantages and disadvantages, self-reporting of bullying experiences has been considered

the most important given that victims are most aware of their victimization experiences (Card and Hodges, 2008). When self-reports of bullying are not available, researchers also rely upon teacher- or parent-reported data on bullying (e.g. Jansen *et al.*, 2014; Kennedy *et al.*, 2012; Morales *et al.*, 2019). In the present analysis, utilizing the ECLS data allowed me to compare bullying victimization reported by children, teachers and parents. My results are in line with previous studies indicating that teachers and parents tend to underreport children's bullying victimization (Holt *et al.*, 2008; Stockdale *et al.*, 2002). However, I argue that discordance between children and adults' perspectives on bullying experiences is not just a measurement issue. It reveals a "hidden" problem that some children might have experienced bullying victimization without adult recognition and support.

To better protect and support all victimized children, I provide four practical implications. First, schools should develop innovative strategies to engage more immigrant parents. For example, schools could encourage immigrant parents to join the parent–teacher association or attend school events, by setting meeting or event times convenient for them and may consider additional incentives such as providing food or child care. Second, teachers and parents need to learn how not to rely on social and cultural biases to guide their interpretations and responses to bullying. For example, this study's results indicate that the gender and racial/ethnic bias in school bullying might be why victimized girls, Asian and Hispanic children were more likely to be overlooked by teachers and parents. In fact, many bullying prevention training courses have been developed, such as the Bullying Prevention Training Center at StopBullying.gov. Schools should encourage teachers and parents to make good use of those resources. Third, parents and teachers should keep good communication with children, be cautious of warning signs of bullying (e.g. unexplainable injuries; avoidance of social situations; self-destructive behaviors) and ultimately work together to establish an environment where all children will feel and be safe.

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