Parental school involvement as a moderator of the association between peer victimization and academic performance

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A B S T R A C T

A link between experiences of peer victimization and poor academic performance has been established. However, the specific links between overt and relational forms of victimization and academic performance are not well understood, and factors that may help to mitigate this association are not known. Accordingly, the present study examined parental school involvement as a moderator of the associations between peer victimization (both overt and relational) and academic performance using teacher reports on 704 elementary school-age youth (51% female) in kindergarten thru 5th grade. Results indicated that high levels of peer victimization, particularly relational victimization, were associated with lower levels of academic performance at both high and low levels of parental involvement for both boys and girls. However, the highest levels of academic performance were evident when parental involvement was high and levels of relational victimization were low, and the lowest levels of academic performance occurred when parental involvement was low and levels of relational victimization were high. Implications for findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have shown that approximately 60% of elementary school-age children report being victimized by their peers (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001), with 10–20% of students reporting being severely or repeatedly victimized (Biggs et al., 2010; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001; Stadler, Feifel, Rohrmann, Vermeiren, & Poustka, 2010). Students who are victimized are at-risk for a wide range of negative outcomes, including depression, loneliness, aggression, and anxiety (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Khatri, Kupermidt, & Patterson, 2000; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2011). Further, peer victimization is associated with poor academic performance, or how well one is able to complete scholarly demands and tasks in the school setting (e.g., Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). The impact of peer victimization on academic outcomes in elementary school is particularly concerning, as academic performance in elementary school is a critical marker of future educational and professional success (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2002; Turney & Kao, 2009). However, not all children who are victimized by their peers experience these negative outcomes, and the magnitude of the association between peer victimization and academic performance varies substantially across studies (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010), suggesting that there may be mitigating factors contributing to these associations. Further research is needed to identify such factors so that effective interventions for victimized youth can be developed and implemented. High levels of parental school involvement have been found to be associated with high levels of academic performance (e.g., Domina, 2005; Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Steward, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009), and parenting behavior has been found to buffer the deleterious effects of peer victimization on child outcomes (e.g., Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Stadler et al., 2010). It may be that high levels of parental school involvement can prevent victimized youth from experiencing negative academic outcomes. Accordingly, we evaluated parental school involvement as a moderator of the associations between forms of peer victimization and academic performance in a sample of elementary school-age youth and evaluated whether these effects were similar for across gender.

1.1. Peer victimization and academic performance

Peer victimization is broadly understood as experiencing hurtful or ostracizing behavior from peers, and these behaviors can be overt (e.g., hitting, kicking, verbal threats; Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Olweus, 2001), relational (e.g., spreading rumors, teasing, excluding; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996), or cyber (e.g., posting hurtful messages, photos, or
videos online; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008) in nature. As stated above, peer victimization is associated with a host of poor adjustment outcomes (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hodges et al., 1999; Khatri et al., 2000; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Rueger et al., 2011), which likely result from experiencing psychological distress in response to the victimization (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Schwartz, Groman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005). Most relevant to the current study, consistent associations between peer victimization and academic outcomes have been demonstrated in the literature, such that high levels of peer victimization are associated with lower academic performance, as assessed using GPA, achievement tests, and teacher- and self-reports of academic performance (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996; Olweus, 1978; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). This association has been demonstrated across a wide range of school populations, from kindergarten (Ladd et al., 1996) through early high school (Juvonen et al., 2000). Effect sizes, however, are inconsistent across studies, with several studies reporting small-to-moderate associations (Card, Isaacs, & Hodges, 2007; see Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010 for a meta-analytic review) and other studies noting large effect sizes (e.g., Schwartz, Chang, & Farver, 2001).

One factor likely contributing to differences in effect sizes is measurement differences in the assessment of academic outcomes and victimization across studies. With regard to peer victimization, most researchers have focused on overt victimization or a broad measure of peer victimization. Only two of the aforementioned studies evaluated and found a specific link between relational victimization and academic performance (Schwartz et al., 2005; Sutton et al., 1999). For example, Schwartz et al. (2005), in a sample of largely Hispanic and European American 8–10-year-olds (53% male), found predictive associations between both overt and relational victimization and GPA and math skills, using both teacher- and self-reports. Thus, researchers need to further examine associations between overt and relational victimization and academic performance is needed to explicate how and when victimized youth are most at-risk for academic difficulties.

These discrepancies in effect sizes are also likely due in part to other factors contributing to these associations. To our knowledge, however, very few researchers have examined potential moderators of these associations. For example, peer victimization may have differential impact across time in the school year. Ladd et al. (1996) found significant links between self-reported peer victimization and standardized test scores in a sample of mostly Caucasian (78%) kindergarteners (M = 5.5 years old; 53% male) when assessed during the spring, but not fall semester, indicating that this association may grow stronger over the course of the academic year. Gender differences in these associations have also been examined and findings have been mixed, with some studies revealing a greater effect of peer victimization on academic performance for girls (e.g., Hoglund, 2007; Rueger et al., 2011) and others reporting a greater effect among boys (e.g., Perry et al., 1988). Further, a meta-analysis of 16 studies investigating the link between peer victimization and academic performance found no significant differences in effect size for gender (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). Accordingly, we examined gender differences in associations in the present study; however, no gender differences were expected given the results of the meta-analysis. Moreover, additional contextual factors (e.g., parenting) may mitigate the harmful effects of peer victimization on academic performance, and a better understanding of these factors is needed to inform prevention and intervention.

1.2. Parental school involvement and children's academic performance

Parental involvement in children’s educational environments is very important to their success and well-being at school (Walberg & Wallace, 1992), with researchers demonstrating that parental involvement predicts social and behavioral success at school (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). Of particular note, a growing body of evidence suggests that parental involvement in children’s education predicts academic success in elementary school (Domina, 2005; Englund et al., 2004; Stewart, 2008). For example, Domina (2005), using a sample of over 1400 children in grades four and below from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, estimated time-lagged growth models to examine the effect of parental involvement on academic and behavioral indicators. Parental involvement, defined by attendance at parent–teacher conferences, involvement with homework, and volunteering at school, was associated with higher academic performance on achievement tests and with lower scores on the Behavior Problems Index. Further, Englund et al. (2004) found that parental involvement, as measured by teacher-reported perceptions of parents’ interest and concern for their children’s schoolwork and involvement in parent–teacher conferences, had a significant impact on academic performance in the 3rd grade among a sample of 187 elementary school students. Last, using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) on 11,999 students from 715 high schools, Stewart (2008) investigated the influence of school (e.g., proportion non-White, size, poverty level, location, and cohesion) and individual-level characteristics (e.g., school attachment, school motivation, school involvement, peer attachments, and parental school involvement) on academic performance. Parental involvement was only associated with higher grade point averages when including the degree to which students reported they engaged in discussions with their parents on academic issues (e.g., selecting courses at school) rather than by student-reported parental involvement in school meetings and volunteering.

Although parental school involvement has yet to be examined as a moderator of the association between experiences of victimization and poor academic performance, several investigations have demonstrated that other parenting variables may mitigate the harmful effects of peer victimization. Most researchers have focused on the protective role of perceived support from parents. For example, German adolescents’ perceptions of parental support served as a buffer against the general mental health problems associated with self-reported peer victimization, especially for female students (Stadler et al., 2010). Similarly, another study of predominantly Caucasian adolescents revealed that students’ ratings of emotional support from mothers (but not fathers) were protective against the behavioral and emotional problems associated with self-reported experiences of overt (but not relational) victimization (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). Whereas other researchers have failed to provide support for the buffering role of parental support in the relation between peer victimization and internalizing symptoms (Cheng, Cheung, & Cheung, 2008; Papafratziskou, Kim, Longo, & Riser, 2011), Davidson and Demaray (2007) demonstrated that adolescent-rated support from parents mitigated this association, specifically among females, in a sample of predominantly Caucasian middle school students.

Specific to parental school involvement, researchers have found that parental involvement can protect youth from the negative impact of various risk factors and stressors on their academic performance. Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, and Weiss (2006) found that higher levels of mother-reported parental school involvement predicted improved child literacy, measured using a subscale from the Woodcock–Johnson Psycho-Education Battery — Revised, across the elementary school years in a low-income, predominantly African-American and Latino sample. Further, although an achievement gap existed according to maternal education level when levels of school involvement were low, this gap was no longer present when levels of mothers’ school involvement were high. In addition, adolescent-reported parental involvement in school, in conjunction with high racial/ethnic socialization, protected African American and Latino adolescents from the harmful effects of believing the public has low opinions of their racial/ethnic group on their self-reported academic motivation and performance (McGill, Hughes, Alicea, & Way, 2012). Given these findings and the consistently documented link between parental school involvement and higher
levels of academic performance (see Fan & Chen, 2001), it follows that parental involvement may buffer the association between peer victimization and poor academic performance.

1.3. Current study

Although an association between peer victimization and poor academic performance has been established, unique associations between relational and overt victimization and academic performance are not yet clear. Further, little is known regarding what factors contribute to the link between peer victimization and poor academic performance, which may have many implications for developing targeted prevention and intervention strategies for victimized youth. We extended the peer victimization literature by examining parental school involvement as a moderator of the link between peer victimization (overall measure, overt, and relational) and poor academic performance. We examined these associations while also controlling for aggression, as aggressive behavior has been linked to poor academic performance (e.g., Fite, Hendrickson, Rubens, Gabrielli, & Evans, 2013; Masten et al., 2005). Both overt and relational victimization were expected to be associated with poor academic performance. Moreover, parental school involvement was expected to buffer these associations, such that peer victimization would be associated with worse academic performance when parental school involvement was low relative to when parental school involvement was high. Finally, we expected these associations to be similar for both males and females.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study included teachers from an elementary school in a small, Midwestern town. Thirty-six out of 37 mainstream classroom teachers of the school participated in the study. Of these 36 participating teachers, all but one reported on all the students in their class, with each teacher reporting on between six and 23 students. The school is comprised of 739 kindergarten through 5th graders. A total of 706 student surveys were completed (i.e., data on 109 kindergarteners, 111 first graders, 126 second graders, 119 third graders, 137 fourth graders, and 104 fifth graders), representing 95.5% of the students in the school (49% male, 51% female). Although racial/ethnic and socio-economic data of students were not collected from teachers for the current study, school records indicate that approximately 35% of these students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and less than 20% of students belong to an ethnic or racial minority group. For this project, data was missing for 2 students, resulting in a total sample size of 704 students.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Peer victimization

Six items were used to measure levels of peer victimization. Teachers responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Never”, 5 = “Almost Always”) about each student in their class. Items were adapted from a nomination scale that included three items assessing a child’s level of overt victimization (e.g., “gets hit, kicked, punched by others?”) and three items assessing relational victimization (e.g., “other kids tell rumors about them behind their back”); Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Three sum scores were created: an overall victimization score, an overt victimization score, and a relational victimization score. Higher scores indicated more victimization experiences. In this sample, the internal consistency of these scales were good (overall scale $\alpha = .83$; overt scale $\alpha = .89$; relational scale $\alpha = .86$).

2.2.2. Parental involvement

Teachers rated parental involvement on four items created for the current study. Specifically, teachers responded to the following questions: 1) “Do you have regular contact with this child’s parent(s)?”, 2) “Does this child’s parent(s) volunteer to help with projects, fieldtrips, etc. for the classroom and school?”, 3) “Does this child’s parent(s) attend parent–teacher conferences?”, and 4) “Does this child’s parent(s) respond to correspondence sent from school?”. Teachers responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Never”, 5 = “Always or Almost Always”). The four items were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater parental involvement. The internal consistency of this measure was good ($\alpha = .82$).

2.2.3. Academic performance

Teachers completed two ratings regarding each student’s academic performance: 1) “How does this child perform academically relative to other students in your class?” and 2) “When thinking about this student how would you describe their overall academic performance (reputation based on all their classes)?” Teachers responded to these items using a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = “Well Below Average”, 5 = “Well Above Average”). Teachers also provided a letter-grade average reflecting each student’s performance in the class (A, B, C, D, or F), with higher letter grades corresponding with high academic performance (1 = “F”, 5 = “A”). The responses to these three items were averaged for each student to produce an academic performance score. Internal consistency for this measure was good ($\alpha = .94$).

2.2.4. Demographics

Teachers reported on each student’s gender (male/female) and grade (kindergarten thru 5th grade).

2.2.5. Aggression

Teachers rated students’ levels of aggression using Dodge and Coie’s (1987) proactive and reactive aggression scale. The measure consists of three items assessing proactive aggression (e.g., “uses physical force (or threatens to use physical force) in order to dominate other kids”) and three items assessing reactive aggression (“always claims that other children are to blame in a fight and feels that they started the trouble”). Teachers responded to items using a 5-point Likert scale (0 = “Never”, 5 = “Almost Always”). All six items were averaged for an overall aggression score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of aggression. The internal consistency of this scale was high ($\alpha = .92$).

2.3. Procedures

Data collection took place during the fall semester, approximately two months after the start of the academic year. All research procedures were approved by the school administrators and by the researchers’ institutional review board, and all teachers provided written consent prior to participation. Teachers were asked to complete an online survey for each student in their classroom using Qualtrics interview software. Teachers were compensated $7 for each 10-minute survey they completed.

3. Data analysis plan

All analyses were conducted using an overall measure of peer victimization in addition to separate relational and overt forms of victimization in order to compare results with previous studies as well as advance the literature. Correlation analyses were first conducted in order to evaluate bivariate associations. Next, multiple regression models were estimated in order to examine unique effects of peer victimization and evaluate parental school involvement as a moderator of the link between peer victimization and academic performance. More specifically, random effect regression models were estimated using the PROC MIXED procedure using SAS statistical software in
order to take into account the nesting of students within classrooms, with a random intercept included in models. Academic performance was first regressed on both parental school involvement and the peer victimization variables to establish first-order unique effects. Next, the interaction term between parental school involvement and peer victimization was added to the model to evaluate the moderating effect of parental school involvement. Note that grade and gender were also included as covariates in both models in order to account for any grade level and gender differences in academic performance. Additionally, aggressive behavior was controlled for in all models, as aggressive behavior has also been linked to poor academic performance (e.g., Fite et al., 2013; Masten et al., 2005).

All variables were standardized prior to analyses in order to aid in the interpretation of interaction effects. Significant interactions were probed at high (+1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of parental school involvement to determine the nature of the effects, according to standard procedures (Aiken & West, 1991).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Teachers reported that approximately 29% of the students had experienced some form of victimization, with 15.5% of students experiencing overt victimization and 20% experiencing relational victimization. Correlations, means, standard deviations, and ranges of scores for all study variables are reported in Table 1. Females and younger students were associated with higher levels of academic performance than males and younger students. Further, high levels of parental school involvement and aggressive behavior and low levels of all measures of peer victimization were associated with high levels of academic performance. Boys exhibited higher levels of aggression than girls. Aggressive behavior was negatively associated with parental involvement and strongly positively associated with all measures of victimization. Boys experienced higher levels of peer victimization than girls, particularly overt victimization. Younger students experienced higher levels of overt victimization than older students, and older students experienced higher levels of relational victimization than younger students. Younger students reportedly had higher levels of parental involvement than older students, and high levels of parental school involvement were associated with low levels of peer victimization, particularly relational victimization.

4.2. Regression models

4.2.1. Overall peer victimization

When academic performance was simultaneously regressed on the overall peer victimization measure, parental school involvement, aggressive behavior, grade, and gender findings suggested that peer victimization was uniquely negatively associated with academic performance, and parental involvement was uniquely positively associated with academic performance (see Table 2).

The multiplicative term between peer victimization and parental involvement was then added to the model to determine if the association between peer victimization and academic performance depended on parental involvement, and a significant interaction emerged (see Table 2). The association between peer victimization and academic performance was significant at both high (β = −.27, p < .0001) and low (β = −.13, p = .02) levels of parental involvement, with the slope steeper at high relative to low levels of involvement. As seen in Fig. 1, academic performance was highest when parental involvement was high and peer victimization was low, and academic performance was lowest when peer victimization was high and parental involvement was low. At high levels of parental involvement, academic performance was consistently higher than when parental involvement was low. Thus, it appears that parental school involvement may help mitigate the negative effects of peer victimization on academic performance.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlations, means, standard deviations, and ranges of study variables.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Grade</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Aggression</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Parental school involv.</td>
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<td>5. Peer victimization</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Overt victimization</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Relational victimization</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Academic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Range of scores</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Gender (0 = kindergarten, 5 = 5th grade); Grade (1 = boys, 2 = girls).
* p < .05

Table 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Multiple regression models with overall measure of peer victimization.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-order effects R² = .11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction model R² = .12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental school involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer victimization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer victimization × School involvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * p < .05.
Finally, gender differences in associations were examined by adding two- and three-way interactions with gender to the model. However, no significant interactions emerged ($p > .05$), suggesting that the effects of peer victimization and parental school involvement on academic performance were similar for boys and girls.

### 4.2.2. Overt and relational victimization

When academic performance was simultaneously regressed on overt victimization, relational victimization, parental school involvement, aggressive behavior, grade, and gender, findings suggested that relational victimization was uniquely negatively associated with academic performance and parental involvement was uniquely positively associated with academic performance (see Table 3). However, overt victimization was unrelated to academic performance.

The multiplicative terms between overt and relational victimization and parental involvement were then added to the model one at a time to determine if associations between the specific forms of victimization and academic performance depended on parental involvement, and a significant interaction emerged for both forms of victimization (see Table 3). The association between relational victimization and academic performance was significant at both high ($β = −.27, p < .0001$) and low ($β = −.14, p = .01$) levels of parental involvement, with the slope steeper at high relative to low levels of involvement. As seen in Fig. 2, academic performance was highest when parental involvement was high and relational victimization was low, and academic performance was lowest when relational victimization was high and parental involvement was low. At high levels of parental involvement, academic performance was consistently higher than when parental involvement was low. Thus, it appears that parental school involvement may help mitigate the negative effects of relational victimization on academic performance.

In contrast, when probing the overt victimization and parental involvement interaction, overt victimization was not significantly associated with academic performance at high ($β = −.10, p = .10$) or low ($β = .05, p = .32$) levels of parental involvement. These results suggest that overt victimization is not related to academic performance at high or low levels of parental involvement.

Finally, gender differences in associations were examined by adding two- and three-way interactions with gender to the models. However, no significant interactions emerged ($p > .05$), suggesting that the effects of both overt and relational victimization and parental school involvement on academic performance were similar for boys and girls.

### 5. Discussion

The current study advances the literature by further evaluating associations between overt and relational forms of peer victimization and academic performance and by examining parental school involvement as a moderator of these relations. This is one of only a handful of studies to examine forms of victimization and is one of the first studies to examine factors that might mitigate the negative impact of peer victimization on academic performance, which has direct implications for prevention and intervention. Our findings suggest that relational victimization is more strongly associated with academic difficulties than overt victimization for both boys and girls. Moreover, parental school involvement was associated with high levels of academic performance, and the effects of relational victimization were not as detrimental on academic performance.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-order effects</th>
<th>Interaction effects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2 = .11$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$β$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.07*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental school involvement</td>
<td>.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt victimization (Vic)</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational victimization (Vic)</td>
<td>−.19*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overt Vic × School involvement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relational Vic × School involvement</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. * $p < .05$. 

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**Fig. 1.** Association between peer victimization and academic performance at high and low levels of parental school involvement.

**Fig. 2.** Association between relational victimization and academic performance at high and low levels of parental school involvement.
performance when parents were highly involved. Findings and their implications are discussed in turn.

Consistent with expectations and prior research (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Ladd et al., 1996; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Olweus, 1978; Perry et al., 1988; Sutton et al., 1999), peer victimization was associated with low levels of academic performance. Indeed, researchers have previously demonstrated that peer victimization is associated with psychological distress that can distract and contribute to an inability to focus and concentrate, resulting in poor academic outcomes (Buhs, 2005; Juvonen et al., 2000; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2005).

More specifically, although both overt and relational victimization were associated with academic performance at the bivariate level, regression analyses suggest that relational victimization is more strongly linked to poor academic performance than overt victimization. Although limited, a link between both forms of victimization and academic outcomes has been established in previous studies (Schwartz et al., 2005). Our findings suggest that relational victimization may be more strongly and uniquely associated with academic outcomes than overt victimization. Incidents of overt victimization may be more likely to occur outside of the immediate school context (e.g., in the community, on the bus) and thus, not have as much of a direct impact on students’ performance in the classroom. Prior evidence also suggests that teachers may be more likely aware overt aggression in the classroom (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000) and thus more successful at reducing these behaviors among students, consequently limiting the impact of this form of victimization on academic outcomes. Alternatively, whereas incidents of overt victimization are likely time-limited (e.g., being hit or threatened), relational victimization may create a sustained, uncomfortable environment for a child. In other words, having rumors spread about them or being ostracized and excluded from peer groups may make children feel uncomfortable and distracted when they are continually surrounded by their peers throughout the school day.

Also consistent with expectations and previous research (e.g., Domina, 2005; Englund et al., 2004; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Stewart, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009), high levels of parental school involvement were found to be associated with high levels of academic performance. Parental school involvement conveys a message of the importance of academics, which is effective in promoting successful academic outcomes for youth (Stewart, 2008). Further, parental school involvement establishes relationships with the school to help provide additional comfort in the school environment and additional resources to further enrich the child.

More importantly, although effects were small, our findings indicated that parental school involvement can mitigate the link between peer victimization (particularly relational victimization) and academic performance. Whereas peer victimization was negatively associated with academic performance at both high and low levels of parental school involvement, academic performance was consistently higher when levels of parental involvement were high. Thus, the effects of relational victimization may not be as deleterious on academic performance when the parents are more involved. This finding suggests that parental involvement at higher levels may buffer academic risk experienced by victimized children, particularly those relationally victimized, which has important implications for prevention and intervention efforts in school settings. Parents may be able to provide support that helps to mitigate some of the psychological distress experienced by children victimized by their peers, which in turn may assist them in staying focused on their academics. Thus, fostering parental involvement for children victimized by their peers may be a critical component of interventions in schools to address these kinds of negative peer experiences. Further, highly involved parents may simply be present more often at school, which may foster more positive relationships with teachers and thus provide greater protection from repeated victimization. In turn, it is possible that teachers may react more positively to children with involved parents, thereby providing them with more support in the classroom. It is also possible that children who are victimized may receive greater support from their parents in general, including support and assistance with their schoolwork, which promotes their continued success at school.

Finally, note that no gender differences in associations were evident. Our findings are consistent with expectations and congruent with a meta-analytic review that found no gender differences in associations between peer victimization and academic outcomes (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). Thus, intervention efforts for victimized youth need to target both boys and girls.

5.1. Limitations, conclusions, and future directions

The current study has methodological limitations that need to be considered when interpreting findings. First, the parental involvement measure was created for the present study. Despite the high internal consistency associated with the measure and the pattern of associations with other variables similar to what has been found with other measures of parental school involvement, additional research validating this measure would be useful. Also, this study relied solely on teacher reports of study constructs. Future research using multiple informants of study constructs, particularly peer victimization, is warranted. Additionally, there may be some concern with the current academic performance measure, with a significant correlation between grade and academic performance evident. Although the measure was internally consistent and associations between academic performance and other study variables (i.e., academic performance and peer victimization) are consistent with previous research (e.g., Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Ladd et al., 1996; Olweus, 1978; Perry et al., 1988; Sutton et al., 1999), it would be useful for future research to utilize more objective measures of academic performance. Further, the current study included predominantly Caucasian elementary school-age students from a small Midwestern town, and findings may not generalize across all youth. There are likely many other factors that contribute to academic performance as well as parental involvement, including child cognitive ability, ethnicity, and family SES, not controlled for in the current study. Future research examining these associations while controlling for these additional factors is warranted. Finally, the current study was cross-sectional in nature. Future research examining these associations over time would be useful for determining the long-term impact of peer victimization and parental involvement.

Despite these limitations, current findings suggest the importance of parental involvement in academic performance, particularly for victimized youth. Although effect sizes were small, these data can be shared with parents and educators to encourage and promote parental school involvement. Findings suggest that prevention and intervention programs for victimized youth, especially for those who are relationally victimized, need to enlist the help of parents, including promoting parents’ active involvement in their child’s school. School counselors, social workers, and other mental health providers may need to incorporate parental involvement strategies into their interventions for improving academic outcomes and mitigating the negative effects of peer victimization. Further, school administrators and teachers are encouraged to continue to provide activities and suggestions for how parents can be involved in their child’s educational process. Of note, however, parents with higher socio-economic status (SES) and higher education levels are typically more involved than parents of lower SES (Lareau, 2000). Thus, outreach efforts to engage parents must consider and strategize how to overcome common barriers that some parents face. For example, providing childcare options and assistance with transportation may be useful. Additionally, providing food and incentives for attendance to events and meetings can be helpful for eliciting parental involvement, particularly for parents who face financial hardships. Further, researchers have consistently documented barriers to school involvement for Latino parents, particularly when language differences exist. In fact, recent research suggests that public schools often struggle to work with
immigrant families due to language and cultural barriers, cultural misunderstandings and biases, and a lack of appropriate training and resources for school personnel (Greenberg, 2012; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Turney & Kao, 2009). Moreover, although Latino parents care deeply about their children’s educational success, their involvement often remains unrecognized by school personnel due to its less conventional nature (Greenberg, 2012). Pérez Carreón, Drake, and Barton (2005) noted that Latino parents and school administrators may not share a common understanding of what parental engagement or involvement means. Thus, future research is needed that identifies both traditional and non-traditional ways in which parents of varying, races, ethnicities, and social classes are involved in their children’s school. Practically, it is also important for school staff, including school social workers and counselors, to recognize and encourage parent involvement in traditional and non-traditional ways and to be mindful of potential barriers some parents may face.

The push for parental involvement is not new, with scholars outlining school strategies for encouraging and facilitating parental involvement more than 25 years ago (Epstein, 1986; Walberg & Wallace, 1992). It is clear to school personnel and mental health providers alike that some parents do not have the time and/or motivation to be involved with their child’s educational process. However, there are many ways in which a parent can be involved with their child’s school, varying in the amount of time and commitment needed. One way in which parents can be involved with minimum effort is to discuss academic and other school related issues with their child, as there is evidence to suggest that parental discussions with their child pertaining to education-related topics is one factor of parental school involvement that is vital to academic performance (e.g., Catsby & Bevedere, 2001; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Stewart, 2008). However, the high internal consistency associated with the current and prior measures of involvement suggest that parents are either involved or not involved, and therefore overall strategies for promoting parental engagement are necessary. It would be useful for future research to evaluate parent–child discussions regarding school performance related topics and social experiences at school as a potential point of intervention. Additionally, future research examining strategies that help to motivate parents’ involvement in their children’s educational process is needed, particularly among diverse populations.

References


