

# Is There a Missing Link Between Bullying and School Engagement in LGBQQ Students?

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## Introduction

- There are growing concerns for LGBQQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Queer, and Questioning) students' well-being, growth, and resilience in school environments.
- LGBQQ students experience higher rates of victimization (Ybarra et al., 2015), homophobic bullying (Birkett & Espelage, 2015), and psychological distress (Robinson et al., 2013) than heterosexual students.
- Although being bullied has been linked with decreased school engagement (Espelage et al., 2014; Totura et al., 2014), less research has been conducted that examines whether or not LGBQQ students who are victimized report decreased school engagement.
- School and family factors such as social support from teachers, peers, and parents may impact the outcomes of bullying with LGBQQ students (Espelage & Swearer, 2008); however, less research has examined whether social support could buffer the negative effects of bullying toward LGBQQ students.

## Purpose

- Given what is known about bullying in schools (Sharkey et al., 2015), it is imperative that school professionals gain an understanding of factors that minimize the effects of victimization and bullying. This study investigated the following questions:
  - 1) Do LGBQQ students and heterosexual students differ in the degree to which victimization predicts school engagement?
  - 2) Do levels of perceived social support moderate the relationship between LGBQQ students' reports of victimization and their school engagement?

## Method

### Participants

- There were 1,160 students (58% Caucasian) from 76 countries, including the U.S. (48%) from grades 6 to 12.
- There were 520 males (45%), 582 females (50%), 38 transgender (3%), and 20 students (2%) who didn't disclose. Students in the sample identified as straight (38%), lesbian/gay (25%), bisexual/queer (24%), questioning (10%), and 3% didn't disclose. For the analyses, the sample consisted of 975 students (363 students in the heterosexual group and 612 students in the LGBQQ group).

## Method (cont')

### Measures

- **Verbal Physical Bullying Scale (VPBS;** Swearer, 2001): Assesses students' involvement in verbal or physical victimization.
- **Adapted Version of The Authoritative School Climate Survey** (Cornell, 2013): Assesses both students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, and student's perceptions of received or available supportive behaviors from teachers or adults at school using the School Engagement and Supportive Climate subscales.
- **The Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey** (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, 2012): Assesses students' perceptions of received or available supportive behaviors from their peers at school and their family using the Family/Peer Support scale.

### Procedures

- All measures were completed electronically on Qualtrics Survey Software as a part of the Born Brave Experiences Evaluation Study—Phase 1 (January 2013 to March 2014).
- Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the relationships among multiple variables. Analyses were conducted using Mplus Version 7.11 with Full Information Maximum Likelihood estimation.

## Results

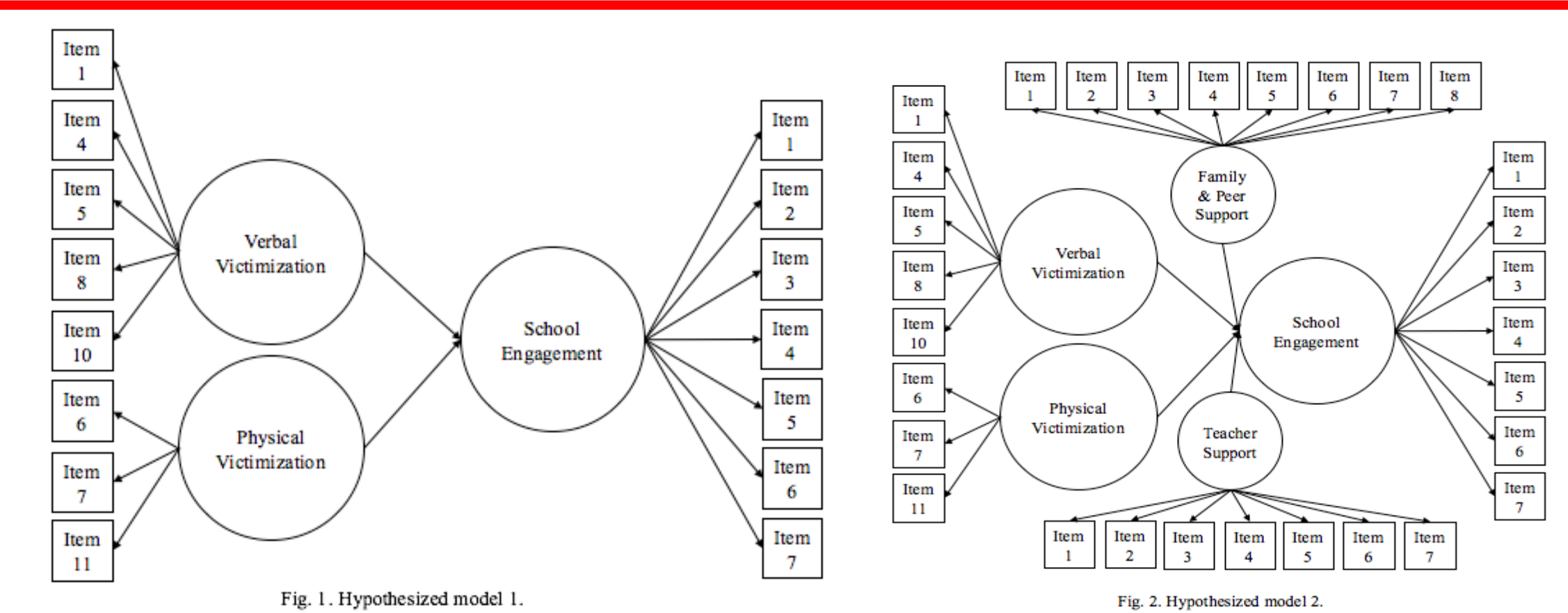
### Question 1

- The model in Figure 1 examined the predictors of physical/verbal victimization on school engagement for both groups.
  - Measurement invariance was used to verify that the factors measure the same underlying latent variable between groups. Metric variance held over Configural variance  $\chi^2_D(12) = 10.604$ ,  $p = .563$ , and the model fit well, CFI = .943, RMSEA = .059, SRMR = .072, but strong factorial invariance was not met,  $\chi^2_D(12) = 43.133$ ,  $p < .05$ . This suggests the items load on the factors the same for both heterosexual and LGBQQ groups, but the groups have different means on items.

### Question 2

- The model in Figure 2 examined the same predictors for only the LGBQQ group, but additionally included family/peer and teacher social support as predictors of school engagement. Interactions between the latent family/peer and teacher support and physical/verbal victimization factors were further investigated. Models with latent variable interactions do not provide fit statistics, so loglikelihood differences and AIC were investigated.
  - The model without the interaction had somewhat poor fit with the data, CFI = .831, RMSEA = .071, SRMR = .092, but the inclusion of the four interaction terms improved the model fit,  $\chi^2_D(4) = 10.487$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $AIC_{NoInt} = 42678.836$ ,  $AIC_{Int} = 42665.862$ .

## Results (cont')



### Question 1

- For heterosexual students, school engagement was not significantly predicted by physical victimization ( $b = .09$ ,  $p = .59$ ) and by verbal victimization ( $b = -.11$ ,  $p = .52$ ).
- For LGBQQ students, school engagement was significantly predicted by physical victimization ( $b = .55$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and by verbal victimization ( $b = -.63$ ,  $p = .002$ ).

### Question 2

- School engagement was not significantly predicted by physical victimization ( $b = -.08$ ,  $p = .86$ ) and by verbal victimization ( $b = .26$ ,  $p = .65$ ).
- In contrast, school engagement was significantly predicted by family/peer support ( $b = 0.49$ ,  $p = .04$ ) and by teacher support ( $b = .61$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The interaction between teacher support and physical victimization was significant, suggesting that higher teacher support may reduce some of the effect of physical victimization ( $b = -.64$ ,  $p = .02$ ).

## Discussion

### Question 1

- The non-significant findings for heterosexual students could suggest that there are other factors that predict their school engagement.
- The significant findings for LGBQQ students suggest that as physical victimization increases, their school engagement increases; and as verbal victimization increases, their school engagement decreases. These findings suggest that school professionals may handle physical victimization in a way that fosters LGBQQ student's engagement.

### Question 2

- Teacher and family/peer support suppressed the effects between victimization and school engagement in the LGBQQ group. These results suggest the importance that family/peer and teacher support have on buffering victimization of LGBQQ students and promoting their school engagement.

### Limitations

- Participant recruitment occurred primarily through concert events and social media, which might limit the generalizability of the results.

### Conclusion

- Results from this study found that perceived social support is the most important predictor for LGBQQ students' school engagement.
- Practitioners should promote social support for LGBQQ students as a way to reduce the effects victimization may have on their school engagement.

