

## Bullying and Victimization Among Students With Disabilities: Effective Strategies for Classroom Teachers

Chad A. Rose, PhD<sup>1</sup>, and Lisa E. Monda-Amaya, PhD<sup>2</sup>



### Abstract

Bullying has come to be recognized as a pervasive problem in schools today. Frequently bullying is not immediately recognized or viewed by classroom teachers as problematic behavior. As more students experience bullying, questions arise as to how well teachers understand the bullying dynamic and are aware of strategies for intervening when those behaviors occur. This article is designed to give teachers, administrators, and researchers a fundamental understanding of bullying behavior and strategies for intervening in schools and classrooms.

### Keywords

bullying, behavior management, behavioral strategies, disabilities, inclusion, interventions, social skills

Bullying and victimization have emerged as persistent problems in our schools. In recognition of increases in pervasiveness of bullying incidents, many states have enacted legislation calling for school or district policies and programs to prevent or decrease the prevalence of violence, aggression, and bullying (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009).

<sup>1</sup>Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Chad A. Rose, Sam Houston State University, Department of Language, Literacy and Special Populations, Box 2119, Huntsville, TX 77341 (e-mail: [rose57@shsu.edu](mailto:rose57@shsu.edu)).

Although a number of established programs have documented success, they often fail to address students with disabilities or fail to create targeted interventions for at-risk youth (Rose, 2010). Evidence suggests that students in special education are at greater risk for victimization and may engage in higher levels of bullying than their typical peers (Estell et al., 2009; O'Moore & Hillery, 1989; Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009; Rose, Monda-Amaya, Espelage, 2011; Whitney, Smith, & Thompson, 1994).

The bullying phenomenon has been documented in adolescent culture and social relationships for decades (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). One factor that may influence this phenomenon is the media's glorification of bullying in the schools as depicted in movies, television, and animated cartoons. Most recently, highly popularized videogames (e.g., *Bully*) depict acts of aggression and bullying within a fictional high school setting. Although the victim in these situations generally emerges as the victor, real-world bullying does not always have a "storybook ending." Bullying and victimization can have devastating effects that may span the victim's lifetime (Swearer et al., 2010). Victimization also may be exacerbated by adults who view bullying as typical adolescent experiences and a student's rite of passage (Carter & Spencer, 2006; Dawkins, 1996; Thompson, Whitney, & Smith, 1994; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). These behaviors can be especially difficult for students with disabilities who may not possess the social or interpersonal skills necessary to avoid or manage victimization (Nabuzoka, 2003). Research has indicated that students with disabilities are the bullies and victims more than their typical peers (Estell et al., 2009; O'Moore & Hillery, 1989; Rose et al., 2009; Whitney et al., 1994).

Research on rates of bullying and victimization vary when examining populations of students with disabilities. Nansel and colleagues (2001) conducted a national survey in which 30% of adolescents in the United States were found to be involved in bullying as a bully, victim, or bully-victim (i.e., a student who adopted bullying as a method of combating prolonged victimization). In addition, the National Center for Educational Statistics suggested that approximately 32% of students (ages 12–18) were victimized over the 6-month period prior to being surveyed (Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2010). Foundational studies involving students with disabilities have yielded victimization (Dawkins, 1996; Doren, Bullis, & Benz, 1996; Langevin, Bortnick, Hammer, & Wiebe, 1998; Little, 2002; Llewellyn, 2000; Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; O'Moore & Hillery, 1989; Singer, 2005; Whitney et al., 1994) and bullying rates twice the national average (Van Cleave & Davis, 2006; Whitney et al., 1994). These escalated rates may be attributed to a variety of social, educational, and environmental characteristics that predispose students with disabilities to bullying.

**Table 1.** Defining Characteristics and Examples of Bullying Behaviors

Defining characteristic	Characteristic example
Imbalance of power	A social, emotional, or physical power differential between the bully and victim. For example, "the student who is exposed to negative actions has difficulty defending himself or herself" (Olweus, 1995, p. 197).
Intent to cause harm	A systematic or thoughtful intent to cause emotional or physical harm to a victim (Olweus, 1993, 1995; Rose et al., 2011).
Repetition	The victimization is repeated across victims (i.e., multiple victims) or time periods (i.e., one victim over a period of time; Garrity et al., 2002; Olweus, 1995).
Unequal levels of effect	The bullying results in a traumatic experience for the victim and the bully maintains a lack of concern or blames the victim (Olweus, 1995; Rose et al., 2011).

## Bullying Defined

Prior to examining interventions, it is important to understand how bullying is defined (also see Rose et al., 2011). Bullying behaviors are the result of complex interactions between an individual and social-ecological factors (e.g., family, peers, school, community, society; Smith, 2004; Swearer & Espelage, 2004; Swearer et al., 2009). Based on this complexity, definitions of bullying often vary, resulting in inconsistencies in research findings (Miller, Beane, & Kraus, 1998). Although definitions vary, operationalization of bullying often includes an imbalance of power, intent to cause harm, repetition of aggression, and unequal levels of effect (see Table 1).

## Types of Bullying

It has been demonstrated that bullying is unpredictable, occurs in all types of schools, is more prevalent in early adolescence, and may have lifelong consequences (Allison, Roeger, & Reinfeld-Kirkman, 2009; Swearer et al., 2010). In addition, bullying can involve proactive or reactive aggression through direct or indirect means (Doll & Swearer, 2006; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education has identified four distinct forms of bullying (Walker et al., 2004): (a) physical, (b) verbal, (c) indirect, and (d) sexual (see Table 2).

Researchers have determined that aggression follows a distinct pattern, beginning with direct aggression and transitioning into more indirect aggression as students age and mature (Björkqvist, 2001; Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1992). For example, students who have delayed

**Table 2.** Types of Aggression That May Be Defined as Bullying

Bullying type	Type clarification
Physical	Includes shoving, tripping, aggressive fighting, and damage to personal property
Verbal	Includes teasing, threats of violence, intimidation, abusive language, mimicking, and discriminatory remarks
Indirect	Includes lies, rumor spreading, ignoring, and isolating the victim
Sexual	Includes sexually explicit language and/or sexually abusive actions

verbal or social skills may resort to physical forms of aggression. As verbal and social skills develop, students tend to engage in less direct forms of aggression (Björkqvist, 2001; Björkqvist et al., 1992). However, physical, verbal, and indirect aggression can coexist in each stage of development (Björkqvist, 2001).

### *Bully Participants*

Bullying and victimization involves the overwhelming majority of the school population because involvement tends to fall on a participatory continuum (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). There are three types of participants in the bullying dynamic: (a) the bully, (b) the victim, and (c) the bystander (Marini, Fairbairn, & Zuber, 2001; Olweus, 1993; Walker et al., 2004). The *bully* is defined as the individual who exerts the emotional or physical power over the victim. Bullies can be classified into three categories: (a) the aggressive bully (instigator of the incident), (b) the passive bully (follower of the aggressive bully), and (c) the anxious bully (bully-victim; Olweus, 1993). *Victims* are typically classified into two groups: (a) the passive victim (victimized without retaliation) and (b) the bully-victim (adopted bullying characteristics to combat victimization; Olweus, 2003). A *bystander* is not directly involved in the act itself but can provide either the bully with reinforcement (*observer*) or the victim with support (*defender*; Marini, Koruna, & Dane, 2006; Olweus, 2003). Each participant plays an integral role in bullying by either engaging in or reinforcing the aggressive behavior (Rose et al., 2011).

### **Understanding Behaviors That Predispose Students With Disabilities**

Students with disabilities experience greater victimization and engage in more bullying perpetration than their peers without disabilities (Rose et al., 2009; Rose et al., 2011;

Swearer et al., 2010). Teachers should be aware of behaviors that may predispose students with disabilities to victimization and/or perpetration. Several researchers have hypothesized exacerbating factors associated with victimization and perpetration rates in students with disabilities. Table 3 lists sample scenarios to assist teachers in understanding how student behaviors might affect the continued occurrence of bullying within an educational environment.

### **Strategies for Decreasing Bullying**

Various stakeholders, from school administrators to students themselves, must take responsibility for reducing bullying in our schools. Initial structures for addressing bullying at the school level, such as collaboration and problem solving, targeted interventions, professional development, and student awareness initiatives, should be in place at each educational facility. Given the current focus on response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior supports (PBS), it is appropriate to discuss teacher-facilitated strategies within the context of a multitiered framework (Rose, 2010). The foundation for multitiered bully prevention strategies for students with disabilities is based on collaborative practices among administrators, parents, students, general education, and special education teachers (see Figure 1).

#### *Teacher-Facilitated Strategies for Student Behavior*

“Often just being different in a noticeable way” can put a student at risk for victimization (Whitney et al., 1994, p. 213). Although several factors may predispose students with disabilities to victimization (e.g., gender, academic dependency, socioeconomic status, minority grouping, disability characteristics), basic social skills instruction may decrease involvement. Overall, students with disabilities must develop a sense of self-worth and belonging in the educational and social setting.

*Engage in meaningful and appropriate social interaction.* It is frequently noted that victims of bullying, especially those with disabilities, do not possess age-appropriate social skills (Doren et al., 1996; Martlew & Hodson, 1991). Therefore, programs or strategies implemented to prevent bullying must factor in approaches for providing students with disabilities ample opportunities to learn, practice, and validate age-appropriate social skills in a safe environment (Llewellyn, 2000). Providing structured opportunities in the classroom for group and individual social interactions allow students to develop social skills through positive peer modeling. Cooperative learning groups can serve as a vehicle for teachers to facilitate students' learning and validation of age-appropriate social skills among their same-age peers. To achieve social learning through cooperative groups, teachers must systematically construct the groups by (a) assessing the social

**Table 3.** Example Scenarios of Bullying Involving Students With Disabilities

Scenario
Arthur is a first grader who has always been very shy around his peers. When others approach him to play he becomes nervous and begins to cry. Recently, a group of students have been making fun of him on the playground. Arthur may have trouble socializing with peers because of internalized behavior problems (e.g., social withdrawal), which may predispose him to victimization (Arseneault et al., 2006). This predisposition is exacerbated as group dynamics are formed and students begin to migrate into social clusters based on social, physical, or environmental similarities (Perren & Alsaker, 2006). These social clusters may exclude students with disabilities, thereby increasing the likelihood of victimization.
Shayla is a sixth grader with a behavior disorder who is included in general education classes. During passing time she purposefully bumps other students with her shoulder and then laughs. Yesterday one of the students punched her, resulting in a bloody nose. Sabornie (1994) notes that students with disabilities may act too aggressively toward peers or social stimuli. In the eyes of a bully these aggressive acts may warrant retaliation or reinforce the need for aggressive behaviors.
Payton is a third-grade student with learning disabilities. During class two students who sit near him have been making fun of his stuttering. He becomes very withdrawn in class and often puts his head down on his desk. He has not told his teacher or parents that this behavior is going on, but he has been reprimanded for failing to complete his work. Commonly, as in Payton's case, students with disabilities may be too passive during times of victimization, thereby reinforcing the bully's aggressive behaviors (Sabornie, 1994). Bullies often pursue perpetration of students who are easy targets, and if a student is instantly submissive, the bully will receive immediate reinforcement.
As they were lining up for recess, Samie shared a joke with other students from his table, which made everyone laugh. Ryan saw everyone laughing and thought they were making fun of him. He ran to the teacher to tell on his peers. Although Ryan didn't actually know what was said, he construed the incident as bullying because victims with disabilities may misread nonverbal communication or misinterpret nonthreatening cues (Sabornie, 1994). This breakdown in interpretation could potentially account for escalated rates of victimization of students with disabilities because these students may report fictional acts of bully perpetration.
While standing in line for lunch, Travis noticed two students playing as if they were going to jump each other in line. He decided to join in by pushing both students out of the way. One student hit his head on the cart stacked with trays. Conceivably, Travis did not intend on harming the other student; however, some students with disabilities who are victimized may misread social communication (Whitney et al., 1994) and rough and tumble play by acting aggressively at inopportune times (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1999). This behavior may be attributed to the increased nomination of students with disabilities as perpetrators of bullying behaviors.
As DeShaun walks home he passes three older students who stand on the corner watching the younger students go by. Each day they get in his face, stating, "Whatcha gonna do about it?" He asks them to please not bother him and tries to walk by, but they persist, pulling on his backpack and calling him names. Other kids seem to be able to just walk by, so he wonders why they always pick on him. Students with disabilities, such as DeShaun, may be at greater risk for victimization because they do not know how to avoid being victimized (Nabuzoka, 2003). If a student cannot comprehend social cues, lacks overall social skills, or does not understand how to avoid victimization, he or she may become a frequent target of bullying.

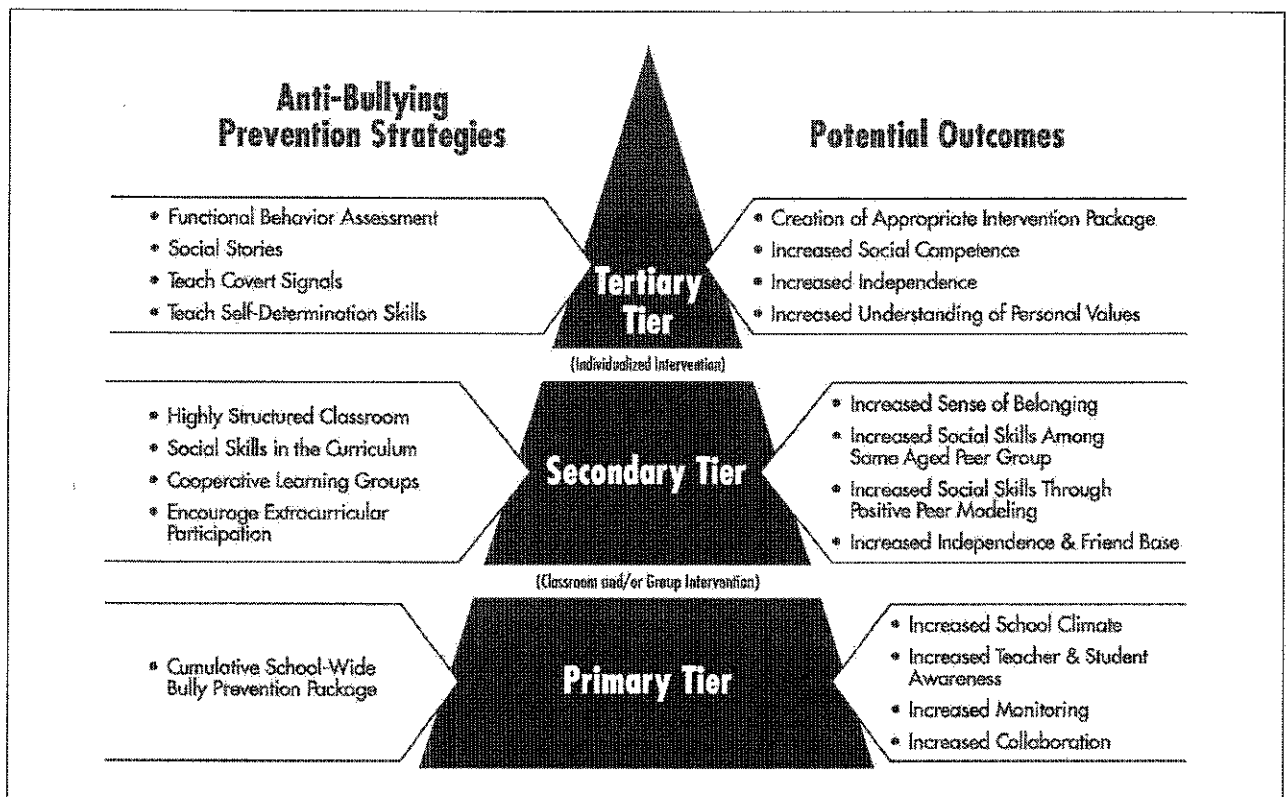
These fictionalized accounts were developed by the authors to illustrate issues presented in the professional literature. They are not based on actual people or events.

strengths and weaknesses of their students, (b) consciously pairing a positive behavior model with a student with lower social skills, (c) providing students with explicit group tasks, (d) directly reinforcing appropriate socializing behaviors, and (e) collecting data on behavioral and social outcomes. Initially, it may be beneficial for victims to practice and role-play appropriate social interactions with trusted adults or peers in their existing social networks.

*Create opportunities to increase social competence and positive interactions.* Chronic victims of bullying frequently have a low self-concept and lack self-confidence. Often, these students maintain few close friendships (Baker & Donnelly, 2001; Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2004; Swearer et al., 2010) and are not directly invited by their peers to participate in social and/or extracurricular activities (Little, 2002). However, it is important for students with disabilities to increase social competence (see Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008) and develop quality peer associations to decrease exposure

to victimization (Salmivalli, 2010). Although social skills are "behaviors that must be taught, learned, and performed," social competence "represents judgments or evaluations of these behaviors within and across situation" (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001, p. 333). Social competence includes behaviors such as decoding social cues, identifying and interpreting cues in the environment, and understanding the decision-making process (e.g., clarifying goals and response decision; Dodge, 1986). In addition, students should identify feelings in themselves and others that can guide their choices and help them interpret situations appropriately (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003).

Increasing social competence may begin with helping students understand how to capitalize on their strengths and recognize strategies for overcoming social and academic difficulties (Eisenhower, Baker, & Blacher, 2007; Hardiman, Guerin, & Fitzsimons, 2009; Llewellyn, 2000). One common method of increasing social competence among students



**Figure 1.** Intervention strategies and potential outcomes for bully prevention within a multitiered framework

with disabilities is the use of Social Stories™. “The goal [of social stories] is to increase understanding of social situations, enabling one to demonstrate appropriate behaviors, reactions, and responses” (Hanley-Hochdorfer, Bray, Kehle, & Elinoff, 2010, p. 485). Social Stories can address a variety of social situations and can be implemented by (a) identifying individual target skills, (b) creating an appropriate and complete scenario, (c) presenting the Social Story, (d) discussing the implications from the Social Story, (e) utilizing self-modeling, and (f) practicing and reinforcing the social skill in normative environment (Xin & Sutman, 2011). Although increasing social competence to combat victimization and to accumulate a stronger, more positive friend base may be difficult, teachers can foster this development among students with disabilities through the systematic use of individualized Social Stories.

*Recognize and eliminate learned helplessness in social situations and foster self determination.* Students with disabilities who are victimized often develop a sense of dependency on adults and/or peer networks (Kuhne & Wiener, 2000; Llewellyn, 2000). This sense of dependency could be characterized as *learned helplessness* in which (e.g., socialized learned helplessness) the students do not attribute social success or failure to their independent response or their own behavior. Instead, they attribute their personal success or

failure to external factors, making all situations beyond their control (Dweck & Reppucci, 1973). Socialized learned helplessness might be perceived as weakness, resulting in the victim being exploited for his or her deficits. To strengthen the perception of independence, teachers can work with students to create individualized covert signals (e.g., signal cards, gestures) to indicate a need for assistance (Chambers et al., 2007) by (a) identifying situations that may necessitate assistance, (b) working collaboratively with students to create the signal, (c) practicing the signal in educational environment, (d) reinforcing the use of the signal, and (e) fading the signal as the student becomes more independent. To extend this sense of independence, teachers should encourage extracurricular participation because participation increases the opportunity to develop positive peer relations (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Simpkins, Eccles, & Becnel, 2008), which may be construed as independence and could decrease victimization (Sabornie, 1994).

In addition to independence, it is also important to teach students self-determination (Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, & Little, 2008; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Shogren et al., 2007; Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones, & Mason, 2004). Older students in particular must learn to discuss needs, academic accommodations, and personal values with their teachers to develop more effective and efficient

methods for providing academic and social assistance. Although self-determination is a complex concept, Wehmeyer, Kelchner, and Richards (1996) proposed four essential characteristics of self-determined individuals: (a) autonomy, (b) self-regulation, (c) psychologically empowered self-initiation, and (d) self-realization. Teachers can foster self-determination through teacher- and student-directed learning strategies that (a) provide opportunities for decision making, (b) teach problem-solving skills, (c) incorporate self-management strategies, and (d) foster goal setting and attainment skills (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000; Wehmeyer et al., 1996; Wehmeyer, Shogren, Zager, Smith, & Simpson, 2010). Overall, students who are self-determined may have the capacity for more appropriate social interactions (Wehmeyer et al., 2010).

### Classroom Strategies

Teachers may perpetuate bullying behaviors in their classrooms if they are oblivious to the problem or fail to appropriately intervene. This issue is compounded by the covert nature of bullying (Miller et al., 1998) and students' reluctance to inform their teacher (Brendtro, Ness, & Mitchell, 2001; Miller et al., 1998; Sharp & Smith, 1994; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Although early intervention is the most fundamental way to decrease bullying among the school-age population (Llewellyn, 2000), this level of intervention is not always plausible because of the complex social nature of bullying. Therefore, teachers must systematically address bullying in their classrooms to prevent future occurrences, decrease the existing prevalence, and address chronic bullies and support chronic victims.

*Preventing bullying by creating a highly structured classroom environment.* Other than early intervention, the primary deterrent for bullying and problem behaviors is creating and maintaining a structured classroom with clear policies and procedures (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Although classroom prevention efforts are context specific and should be responsive to the diverse needs of students (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008), policies and procedures should include (a) a general operationalization of bullying, (b) specific behavioral expectations, (c) reporting procedures, (d) reinforcement procedures for appropriate behaviors, and (e) a general protocol for addressing reported or observed bullying. In addition, thoughtful consideration should be given to awareness training and promoting a sense of belonging by creating multiple opportunities for social interaction and decision making (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008).

*Increasing social skills through curricular interventions.* Since victimized students often lack age-appropriate social skills (Doren et al., 1996), teachers must foster these skills by embedding social skills instruction into daily academic activities. For example, during structured group time, teachers could use role-playing, social vignettes, conflict

resolution, and character education that incorporate both academic attainment and social problem solving (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). These activities can include, but are not limited to, awareness training (e.g., understanding disabilities), effective group communication, taking turns, asking questions, expressing thoughts and ideas, collaboration, and task completion. By incorporating social skills throughout the curriculum, students have the opportunity to learn, practice, and validate their skills in a supportive and comfortable environment (Baker & Donnelly, 2001; Llewellyn, 2000), which could decrease victimization.

*Addressing bullying through targeted interventions.* Based on the complexity of the bullying phenomenon, bullying and victimization may still exist within the most structured and thoughtfully planned classroom. In connecting bully prevention to PBS and RTI, targeted interventions (Bambara & Kern, 2005; Batsche et al., 2006) for chronic bullies and victims become necessary components of any quality antibullying program. Since behavior is both functional and communicative, one critical first step when providing target interventions is to conduct a functional behavior assessment to determine the function of the behavior and to create an appropriate intervention package (e.g., antecedent interventions, replacement behaviors, reinforcement strategies; Bambara & Kern, 2005; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Rose, 2010). By establishing appropriate intervention packages, teachers can be more equipped to address social deficits by facilitating student support networks to increase a sense of independence, teach self-management strategies for students to recognize behaviors that may place them at risk for increased involvement, teach socially appropriate replacement or alternative behaviors that may decrease the risk of involvement, and promote self-determination (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008) for both bullies and victims.

### A Schoolwide Problem

It is also important to recognize that teacher interventions alone are not enough to eliminate bullying in schools. Prevalence of bullying can be decreased when schools incorporate schoolwide antibullying programs. Given the current push toward multitiered intervention efforts (e.g., RTI, PBS), consideration should be given to situating bully prevention efforts into the same preventative framework. The fluidity of this framework allows students to receive services based on need (i.e., school, group, individual), and the structure allows for proactive preventative efforts for at-risk subpopulations of students (Bambara & Kern, 2005; Batsche et al., 2006; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Although commercial antibullying programs are available, effective approaches to schoolwide prevention policies should include (a) a school climate assessment, (b) increased monitoring in high-risk areas, (c) school and classroom awareness activities, (d) teacher training and professional

development, (e) students as active stakeholders, and (f) consistent progress monitoring and data collection (Swearer et al., 2009). Overall, schoolwide antibullying programs should directly address the entire student body.

## Conclusion

Bullying by and victimization of students with disabilities may be moderated by several variables (Rose et al., 2011). School, teacher, and personal factors play an integral role in preventing bullying behaviors and victimization rates. Teachers must be cognizant of disability characteristics and the prevalence of bullying within the educational environment. Furthermore, schools must adopt appropriate intervention strategies that encourage social awareness and provide individualized interventions for victims with disabilities (Swearer et al., 2009; Swearer et al., 2010), which may be situated within a multitiered environment. It is most important that schools, teachers, parents, and community agencies need to work collaboratively to promote a culturally and socially competent environment for all students. "If we want to truly reduce or stop bullying in our schools, we have to believe the behaviors can be changed" (Swearer et al., 2009, p. 1).

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