Journal of Social Welfare and Human Rights
December 2019, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 9-17
ISSN: 2333-5920 (Print), 2333-5939 (Online)
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Published by American Research Institute for Policy Development
DOI: 10.15640/10.15640/jswhr.v7n2a2
URL: https://doi.org/10.15640/jswhr.v7n2a2

Defeating School Bullying: Exploring how Athletic and Non-Athletic Activities Impact Bullying Rates Experienced among Students with Special Needs

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Abstract

Past studies have indicated students who have disabilities are at a higher risk of experiencing bullying victimization in comparison to other student groups. Extracurricular activity participation has shown to establish better social outcomes for students. These positive social outcomes indirectly decrease the amount of times a student is bullied. The following study uses the National Crime Victimization Survey – School Crime Supplement (NCVS/SCS) to analyze the bullying occurrence rates experienced among students, with disabilities being a focal variable. To explore the relationship between extracurricular involvement and bullying occurrence rates, this study employs a binary logistic regression to determine if athletic and non-athletic extracurricular activities have an impact on the number of times a student with disabilities experiences bullying. Implications for future social welfare practice and research are discussed.

Keywords: disabilities, extracurricular activities, school bullying, social work

Students who identify as being a member of a minority group are more likely to be victimized in comparison to other student groups (Lehman, 2016). A minority population that is most vulnerable to experiencing higher rates of bullying is students who have disabilities (Bills, 2019; Rose, Espelage, Monda-Amaya, Shogren, & Aragon, 2015; Hicks Jennings, Berry, & Green, 2018). Since students who have disabilities are an oppressed population that are at a higher risk of being bullied, it is imperative for social welfare practitioners to explore different factors that can help decrease bullying rates. Exploring ways to decrease bullying can help school practitioners determine appropriate methods to combat bullying victimization occurrences among students who have disabilities. Studies have indicated that extracurricular involvement in school-based activities such as athletics, clubs, student government, and volunteer groups have multiple social benefits for children and adolescents. Students who are involved in school-based extracurricular activities often have more friends and feel a greater sense of social connection to their school (Brooks, Floyd Robins, Chan, 2014). Studies have also shown that having more friends and a greater sense of social connection to their school often leads to a decreased likelihood of being a victim of bullying (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014). Given the potential social benefits of extracurricular activities that prevent bullying victimization (Brooks et al., 2014; Montie& Abery, 2011; Kahn & Lindstrom, 2015; Bills, 2019), it is possible that participating in extracurricular activities may directly decrease the number of times a student with a disability experiences bullying victimization.

Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine if participating in extracurricular activities decreases the bullying rate experienced among students with disabilities. Few studies have established a direct relationship between extracurricular participation and bullying victimization rates among various student groups. There has yet to be a study that establishes a direct relationship between extracurricular activity participation and bullying victimization occurrence among students who have a disability. It is predicted that participation in athletic or non-athletic extracurricular activities will have direct relationships with the bullying frequency occurrences reported among students who have disabilities.

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Methods

Using the School Crime Supplement (SCS) survey obtained from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) public dataset, the following research questions were tested:

R₁: Do students who have disabilities experience bullying at a higher occurrence rate in comparison to other student populations?R₂: Does participating in extracurricular activities decrease the number of occurrences students with disabilities experience bullying during an academic year?

Exploratory Research Design

The National Crime Victimization Survey – School Crime Supplement (NCVS/SCS) is a nationally representative secondary dataset used in order to explore if there is a direct relationships between extracurricular involvement and bullying victimization occurrence frequencies reported by students. The NCVS employed a random sampling design to interview several households across the United States every six months over the course of three years. All of the interviews were conducted in either a face-to-face setting or over the phone through the use of close ended-questions. Middle school and high school students living in the households were interviewed about their school related experiences for the SCS data collection. Many of the experiences that were inquired about in SCS related to the participants' bullying victimization in schools and school-based activities.

Sample

Inclusion criteria required participants to be ages ranging from 12 to 18 years old. Subjects for this study were restricted to participants who stated they were victims of bullying when participating in the SCS of the NCVS longitudinal study. Participants also had to be students who were currently enrolled in a public or private school and on track to earn a high school diploma. Children that were homeschooled, completed with their high school requirements, or on a non-diploma track were excluded from the final dataset (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). **Sample demographics.** The SCS survey from the 2015 wave contained a sample of 1,980 students who reported being bullied during the 2013 to 2014 school year (N = 1,980). Out of that sample, there were 728 students who were identified as having a disability (n = 728). The gender representation of the sample was male 59% and female 41%. Ethnicity demographics of the sample included 21% identified as Hispanic/Latino/a and 78% did not. The racial demographics of the sample were White 80%, Black 13%, Asian 3%, Native American 1%, Native Hawaiian/Island Pacifier 0.4%, and two or more races 1%. The average age of the participants was approximately 15 (M = 14.73, SD = 1.95)

Measures

Independent variables. Participants were asked closed-ended survey questions pertaining to student characteristics, extracurricular activity participation, and bullying victimization frequency (See Table 1). The independent variable of interest was a yes/no dichotomous variable to determine the participants extracurricular activity involvement. The extracurricular activities included athletic teams, spirit groups, performing arts, academic clubs, student government, and community service groups. Due to small cell sizes of the number of participants who were a part of non-athletic activities, all of the non-athletic extracurricular activities were combined to form a non-athletic dichotomous variable. To differentiate the non-athletic activities from athletic extracurricular activities, the athletic activity variable remained its own category for the analysis. This allows the data analysis to differentiate athletic extracurricular activities and non-athletic extracurricular activities in order to determine if they impact the bullying frequency outcome variable differently. The extracurricular activity variables were coded 0 = No and 1 = Yes. The dichotomous disability variable was used as a moderating variable to determine if having a disability impacted the relationship between extracurricular involvement and the bullying victimization frequency reported by students. To explore the impact of having a disability has on this relationship, an interaction effect between participating in extracurricular activities and having a disability was also applied.

Additional covariates controlled for in the logistic regression included age (12-18), gender (0 = male; 1 = female), race (0 = white; 1 = not white), and ethnicity (0 = Hispanic/Latino/a; 1 = not Hispanic/Latino/a) (See Table 1).Outcome variable.

The dependent variable was an ordinal variable using a likert-scale to determine the occurrence rate of how often the student was bullied during that academic year (0 = once or twice a year, 1 = once or twice a month, 2 = once or twice a week, 3 = almost everyday). This is the scale that has been utilized by the U.S.

Department of Justice since the 2007 data collection of the NCVS/SCS (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). Due to small cell sizes, the ordinal bullying occurrence rate outcome variable was collapsed by combining answers 0-1 and 2-3 (See Table 2). This left a final dichotomous outcome variable (0 = once or twice a month or more, 1 = once or twice a week or more). Control variables. Additional control variables in the study included age, gender, and ethnicity. Age was a continuous variable ranging from 12 to 18. Gender was a dichotomous variable in which participants classified as male or female. Ethnicity was a dichotomous variable in which participants classified themselves as Hispanic/Latino/a or not Hispanic/Latino/a. Race was a categorical variable in which participants identified as White, Black, Asian, Native American, Island Pacifier, or two or more races. Due to small cell counts, each race could not be analyzed separately in the logistic regression. This variable was then collapsed to non-minority and minority. Non-minority was classified as white and minority was classified by all other races.

Analysis

In order to test for association between variables of interest, Chi-square testing was applied. Next, a binary logistic regression was applied in order to further explore the relationship between both athletic and non-athletic extracurricular involvement and bullying victimization frequency among students, while controlling for demographic variables. In order to specifically investigate how having a disability impacted this relationship, a dichotomous disability variable was employed as a moderating variable and an interaction effect. Since this study was exploratory, each relationship in the Chi-Square testing, binary logistic regression, and the overall model fit was tested for statistical significance using a significance level of p< .05 (Cohen, 1968; Harlow, 2016). Nagelkerke R² was tested to determine the variance of the overall model.

Table 1: School Crime Supplement (SCS) Survey Questions Used

Student Demographics	
Do you have a disability?	0 = No
	1 = Yes
What is your gender?	0 = Male
	1 = Female
Are you Hispanic/Latino/a?	0 = No
	1 = Yes
What is your race?	1 = White
	2 = Black
	3 = Native American
	4 = Asian
	5 = Native Hawaiian/Island Pacifier
	6 = Two or more races
What is your age?	12-18 years (Continuous)
Athletic Extracurricular Activity Participation	
During this school year, have you participated in any of the following activities?	Athletic Teams: $0 = No, 1 = Yes$
Non-Athletic Extracurricular Activity Participation	
During this school year, have you participated in any of the following activities?	Spirit Groups: 0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Performing Arts: 0 No, 1 = Yes
	Academic Clubs: 0 No, 1 = Yes
	Student Government: 0 No, 1 = Yes
	Community Service: 0 No, 1 = Yes
Bullying Occurrence Rate (Original)	
How often did bullying incidents occur?	0 = Once or twice a year,
	1 = Once or twice a month,
	2 = Once or twice a week, or
	3= Almost everyday
Bullying Occurrence Rate (Collapsed; Combing 0, 1 & 2, 3)	
How often did bullying incidents occur?	0 = Once a month or less
	1 = Once a week or more

Results

Chi-Square Tests

Having a disability and bullying occurrence frequency. An ordinal scale with four levels was used to determine bullying occurrence frequency (0 = bullied once or twice a school year, 1 = bullied once or twice a month, 2 = bullied once or twice a week, 3 = bullied once or twice a day). Using the original bullying occurrence rate four level scale, Chi-square testing was run to determine if there was a relationship between bullying frequency and having a disability. Results indicated a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2(3) = 172.867$, p< .001) (See Table 2).

Table 2: Chi-Square Test - Having a Disability and Bullying Occurrence Rates

			Bullying Occurrence Rate				
			Once or twice a year	Once or twice a Once or twice Once or Almost ear a month twice a week every day			
Participant Disability Status	No Disability	Count	1037 82.8%	144 11.5%	67 5.4%	4 0.3%	1252 100%
	Disability	Count	556 76.4%	15 2.1%	105 14.4%	52 7.1%	728 100.0%
Total		Count	1593 80.5% 100.0%	159 8.0% 100.0%	172 8.7% 100.0%	56 2.8% 100.0%	1980 100% 100%

Pearson Chi-Square: $\chi^2(3) = 172.867^a$, p< .001

Source: National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement; Year 2015 Wave

Due to small cell counts for response 0 = once or twice a school year, and response 3 = bullied once or twice a day, the bullying occurrence variable was collapsed by combining answers 0, 1 and 2, 3 (See Table 1). Using the new collapsed outcome variable, Chi-square testing was run to determine if there was a relationship between bullying occurrence frequency and disability when using the dichotomous bullying occurrence scale (0 = bullied once a month or less, 1 = bullied once or twice a week or more). Results indicated a statistically significant relationship between having a disability and the bullying occurrence rate outcome variable ($\chi^2(1) = 114.144$, p< .001). Students with disabilities were significantly more likely to experience a higher frequency of bullying. When comparing the two groups, 5.7% of students without a disability were bullied on a weekly basis or more, in comparison to 21.6% of students with disabilities being bullied on a weekly basis or more (See Table 3). These findings indicate the participants with disabilities were bullied at a higher frequency than the participants without disabilities.

Table 3: Chi-Square Test - Having a Disability and Bullying Occurrence Rates (Collapsed)							
			Bullying Occurren	Total			
		Bullied once a	Bullied once a week or more				
			month or less				
Does participant	No	Count	1181	159	1252		
have a disability?		No Disability	94.3%	5.6%	100%		
	Yes	Count	571	157	728		
		Disability	78.4%	21.6%	100%		

Pearson Chi-Square: $\chi^2(1) = 114.144^a$, p< .001

Source: National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement; Year 2015 Wave

Extracurricular involvement and bullying occurrence frequency. Since extracurricular activity involvement is the independent variable of interest, Chi-square testing was also conducted to explore the direct relationship between bullying occurrence frequency and extracurricular involvement. Using the dichotomous bullying occurrence outcome, athletic extracurricular involvement had a statistically significant relationship with bullying occurrence frequency ($\chi^2(1) = 4.724$, $\rho = .033$).

In percentages, 10.6% of students who did not participate in athletic extracurricular activities experienced bullying more than twice a week, while 14.3% of students who participated in athletics experienced bullying more than once or twice a week. These results demonstrated that the students who participated in athletic extracurricular activities reported higher bullying frequencies than the students who did not (See Table 4).

Table 4: Chi-Square Test - Participating in Athletics and Bullying Occurrence Rate

	1	1 8	Bullying Occurrence Bullied once a month or less	e Rate Collapsed Bullied once a	Total
Did student participate in extracurricular activities?	No	Count % Did not participate in athletics	1337 89.4%	159 10.6%	1496 100%
	Yes	Count % Did participate in athletics	415 85.7%	69 14.3%	484 100%

Pearson Chi-Square: $\chi^2(1) = 4.724^a$, p< .033

Source: National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement; Year 2015 Wave

Non-athletic extracurricular involvement also had a statistically significant relationship with bullying occurrence frequency ($\chi^2(1) = 21.046$, p< .001). When viewing the percentages associated with the Chi-square test, 9.1% of students who did not participate in athletic extracurricular activities experiences bullying more than twice a week, while 16.0% of students who participated in athletics experienced bullying more than once or twice a week. This indicates students who participated in non-athletic extracurricular activities reported higher bullying frequencies than students who did not participate in non-athletics (See Table 5).

		Bullying Occurrence Rate Collapsed				
			Bullied month		Bullied once a week or more	
Did student participate in	No	Count		1176	118	1294
non-athletic extracurricular activities?		% Did not partice non-athletics	ipate in	90.9%	9.1%	100.0%
	Yes	Count		576	110	686
		% Did participate athletics	in non-	84.0%	16.0%	100.0%

Pearson Chi-Square: $\chi^2(1) = 21.046^a$, p< .001

Source: National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement; Year 2015 Wave

Control Variables. Additional covariates included race, ethnicity, and gender. Chi-square testing was conducted on each of these variables separately in order to determine if they had a relationship with bullying occurrence frequency. Race did not have a statistically significant relationship with bullying occurrence frequency ($\chi^2(1) = 3.412$, p = .065). Ethnicity did not have a statistically significant relationship with bullying occurrence frequency ($\chi^2(1) = 3.489$, p = .062). Lastly, gender did not have a statistically significant relationship with bullying occurrence frequency ($\chi^2(1) = 2.308$, p = .133).

Binary Logistic Regression

A binary logistic regression was performed to ascertain the relationship that participating in extracurricular activities and having a disability had on the outcome variable of bullying occurrence frequencies.

Additional control variables included age, gender, race, and ethnicity. The overall model for the binary logistic regression was statistically significant ($\chi^2(9)$ = 124.291, p< .001). The regression model explained 12.1% (Nagelkerke R²) of the variance in bullying occurrence frequencies. Having a disability indicated a positive statistically significant relationship with bullying occurrence frequencies when used a moderator (p< .001, OR = 4.368). Thus, students who had a disability were approximately 337% or 4.36 times more likely to experience being bullied on a weekly basis or more (See Table 6). When testing the interaction effect between having a disability and participating in athletic extracurricular activities, there was not a statistically significant relationship with bullying occurrence frequency (p = .381, OR = .725). When testing the interaction effect between having a disability and participating in non-athletic extracurricular activities, there was also not a statistically significant relationship with bullying occurrence frequency (p = .791, OR = 1.100). The results failed to the reject the null hypothesis and participating in either athletic or non-athletic extracurricular activities did not have an impact on the frequency in which students with a disability experience bullying. Other significant variables in the model that increased the likelihood of being bullied at a higher rate included age (p = .017, OR = .910), gender (p = .039, OR = 1.360), and ethnicity (p = .046, OR = 1.488). Older students, female students, and Hispanic/Latino/a students were bullied at higher frequencies (See Table 6).

Table 6: Binary Logistic Regression Results Students who Reported being bullied - N = 1,980

Predictor	В	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	OR
Age	095	.040	5.649	1	.017*	.910
Gender (ref. female = 1)	307	.149	4.260	1	.039*	1.360
Race (ref. minority $= 1$)	398	.204	3.819	1	.051	.672
Ethnicity (ref. Hispanic/Latino/a = 1)	.397	.199	3.999	1	.046*	1.488
Disability (ref. yes = 1)	1.474	.215	47.069	1	*000	4.368
Athletic Extracurricular (ref. yes = 1)	.241	.309	.607	1	.436	1.272
Non-Athletic Extracurricular (ref. yes = 1)	018	.308	.003	1	.953	.982
Disability*Athletic Extracurricular Interaction (ref. 1)	321	.366	.769	1	.381	.725
Disability*Non-Athletics Extracurricular Interaction (ref. 1)	.096	.360	.070	1	.791	1.100

Discussion

Disability and Bullying Rates

Consistent with past literature (Rose et al., 2015; Hicks et al, 2018), the findings of this study demonstrate that children with disabilities experience higher rates of bullying victimization than students who do not have a disability. The outcomes of the Chi-square test and the binary logistic regression were most consistent with the findings of Farmer et al. (2012). Using a general linear model, Farmer et al. (2012) found that students with disabilities were 4.8 times more likely to be bullied, while the findings of the binary logistic regression employed in this study found students with disabilities were 4.3 times more likely to be bullied than their peers. Although Farmer et al. (2012)'s results derived from a different sample and used a different statistical approach than those applied in this study, both methodological approaches resulted in similar outcomes demonstrating students who have disabilities are more than 4 times more likely to be bullied. The consistencies between Farmer et al. (2012) and this analysis further conclude the need to focus attention on students with disabilities when studying social issues related to bullying. Several past studies demonstrate that students who are apart of minority or oppressed populations are at a higher risk of being bullied than students who are not apart of a minority or oppressed group (Barlett& Wright, 2017; Lehman, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2014; Misawa, 2018)

However, the findings of this study add to past findings by demonstrating that students who have a disability are at an even higher risk of experiencing bullying victimization than any other minority student population. In support of the findings of Rose et al. (2009), the significance values in these results indicated the students who had a disability experienced bullying at higher occurrence rates than the other minority demographics included in the logistic regression. When examining the results of this analysis, having a disability resulted in a stronger relationship with bullying victimization than the student's gender, age, race, and ethnicity.

The students who had disabilities were more likely to be bullied on a weekly basis, as apposed to a monthly basis, in comparison to other demographic characteristics. Chi-square testing revealed that approximately 26% of students in this study who had a disability were bullied at least once a week, while only 5% of students without a disability were bullied once a week. Overall, these findings conclude that having a disability not only puts students at a higher risk for experiencing an instance of bullying, but it also puts them at higher risk of experiencing those bullying instances at higher frequencies.

Extracurricular Activities and Bullying Rates

Although past studies have indicated that the benefits of participating in extracurricular activities has an indirect relationship with bullying victimization, results from this analysis indicate that there was not a direct relationship between extracurricular activity involvement and bullying victimization occurrences for students who have disabilities. Past studies have found that extracurricular activity involvement increases socialization outcomes among students with and without disabilities, resulting in an indirect relationship bullying rates (Martinez et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2015). The positive benefits associated with participating in extracurricular activities (e.g. higher levels of social connectedness and having better relationships with peers) resulted in less bullying instances. Montie and Abery (2011) also provided a theoretical framework explaining how the social benefits of being included in extracurricular activities would reduce bullying among students with disabilities. Using the theoretical framework presented by Montie and Abery (2011) and past empirical studies, it was hypothesized that participating in extracurricular activities would have direct relationship with bullying victimization frequencies. Specifically, it was predicted that participating in extracurricular activities would decrease the number of bullying victimization instances experienced by the students in this sample. However, the results of the binary logistic regression revealed that there was not a direct relationship between participating in extracurricular activities and the frequency the students reported bullied over the course of one school year. Both of the p-values of the non-athletic and athletic extracurricular activity independent variables indicated that there was a not statistically significant relationship with bullying victimization frequency outcomes.

Limitations

As all studies, this study was not without limitations. One predominate limitation is the varied disability categories were not differentiated. Although, the students in this study were on diploma track, meaning they all had mild to moderate disabilities, it does not account for diversity presented of each disability cluster. Since a student who has a physical disability would have unique experiences in comparison to students who have an intellectual or learning disability, it is possible that these varied disability categories would be impacted by extracurricular activities and their relationship with bullying occurrences at different levels. Small cell size of answers 0 and 3 in the ordinal variable presented an additional limitation. To eliminate small cell sizes, answers 0,1 and 2,3 were combined and a binary logistic regression was ran in lieu of an ordinal logistic regression. By combining answers, this could have potentially interfered with the internal validity of the analysis because the answers were not the exact answers provided by the participants.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Although extracurricular involvement has demonstrated relationships with bullying in past literature, the direct relationship between extracurricular involvement and bullying experiences has yet to be determined for students who have disabilities. As the number of activities being offered to students with disabilities increases, the more vital it is observe how extracurricular involvement impacts bullying occurrences. Since students with disabilities face higher bullying victimization rates than any other student group, it is crucial that bullying researchers continue investigating this relationship.

Implications for Social Welfare Practice

As demonstrated by this study and several past studies, students who have disabilities are at the highest risk for experiencing bullying in comparison to all other student populations. Given this bullying risk, it is possible that the bullying experienced by students with disabilities is occurring in their extracurricular activity setting. Implications for practice include providing bullying prevention education to teachers and students in order help eliminate bullying. Since it is possible that bullying is occurring in extracurricular activity settings, as well as the classroom, school practitioners must ensure the individuals running the activities are providing a safe and inclusive environment for the students who have disabilities. Additionally, this study was a school-based study that derived data pertaining to school-based extracurricular activities.

The extracurricular activities examined were not specific to disability accommodations and inclusivity. It is possible that students with disabilities would be bullied less if school-based activities promoted inclusive practices that are tailored specifically for students who have disabilities. In support of Lehman (2016), minority students participating in extracurricular activities that are designed for the majority populations may cause the minority populations to be bullied more often. Implications for future practice include advocating for activities that are more inclusive for students who have special needs. It is imperative for school practitioners to advocate for a universal design approach for the extracurricular activities offered to general student populations.

Implications for Social Welfare Research

Past studies have demonstrated concurring results related to the bullying victimization frequencies experienced by students who have disabilities (Rose et al., 2015; Farmer et al., 2012). To decrease bullying rates, several studies have demonstrated that extracurricular activities are a possible solution to help eliminate bullying occurrences among oppressed populations due to their social benefits (Basch, 2011). However, contrary to the theoretical frameworks presented in past findings, this study determined that participating in extracurricular activities did not have a significant relationship with bullying frequency when used as an interaction effect with having a disability. Therefore, a direct relationship between extracurricular activity participation and bullying occurrence rates was not established by this study. Due to the null findings derived from this analysis, it is possible that more inclusive extracurricular activities designed specifically for children who have disabilities would be needed in order to decrease bullying. Given the null results of this study, it is important to recognize that this study only analyzed school-based extracurricular activities. The activities analyzed included the integration of both students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Many school-based extracurricular activities are not designed specifically to meet the needs of all disability related accommodations, thus making it possible that they do not benefit students with disabilities in the same way they benefit the general student population. Inclusive extracurricular activities that use specific integration tactics tailored for students with disabilities may produce different bullying outcomes than the activities provided among the general student population. It is possible that activities tailored specific to special needs populations would influence the results. Implications for future bullying research include examining activities that are specifically designed for students with disabilities. Since previous research has indicated several indirect relationships between extracurricular involvement and bullying victimization (Lehman, 2018; Basch, 2011), it is possible that there are other direct relationships between extracurricular involvement and bullying victimization. Based on prior research, extracurricular participation has several social, relational, physical health, and academic benefits for students who have disabilities (Bills, 2019; Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Prior research has also demonstrated that bullying victimization results in negative impacts related to social, health, and academic outcomes (Hicks et al, 2018; Hymel& Swearer, 2015; Dupper, 2013). This study explored if extracurricular involvement can directly decrease bullying; however, it did not explore how extracurricular involvement can moderate the negative outcomes faced by students with disabilities who have been bullied. Implications for future research include exploring how extracurricular involvement can the impact social, health, and academic outcomes among students with disabilities who are a victim of bullying.

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