Journal of Child and Family Studies (2023) 32:1882–1894
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-022-02470-3

ORIGINAL PAPER

Relational Peer Victimization as a Predictor of Academic Engagement

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Accepted: 2 October 2022 / Published online: 5 November 2022

Abstract

Peer victimization can be detrimental to youth. This study examines a particular type of peer victimization, relational peer victimization, and its effect on students' engagement in the classroom. We specifically investigate the longitudinal relationship between relational peer victimization and academic engagement in a sample of 204 Black 3rd through 5th grade elementary school students by utilizing multiple informants: students and their parents reported on relational peer victimization, and teachers reported on students' academic engagement. Our findings showed convergence between student and parent reports of relational peer victimization and revealed that experiencing relational peer victimization during the beginning of the school year (fall) negatively predicts teacher reported academic engagement towards the end of the school year (spring). Our study suggests that relational peer victimization is a critical issue that educators and researchers should consider when trying to foster academic engagement. There is also a need for further research regarding the role that families play in providing support to Black relationally victimized youth.

Keywords Relational peer victimization · Relational aggression · Academic functioning · Academic engagement · Peer victimization

Highlights

- There was moderate correlation between parent and student self-reports of relational peer victimization, suggesting that family members communicate about school-related victimization incidences.
- We ran separate regression models to examine whether parent or student self-reports of relational peer victimization differed in their associations with teacher reported academic engagement.
- Both regression models demonstrated that relational peer victimization predicted lower academic engagement, even after controlling for overt peer victimization, overt aggression, and relational aggression.

It is important for educators, families, and stakeholders who are concerned with fostering youth's social and emotional wellness to understand one of the most detrimental aspects of peer relationships: peer victimization. Peer victimization is defined as experiencing mean behaviors (i.e., aggression) imposed by a peer (Turner et al., 2011). Peer aggression entails a broad continuum of behaviors that could happen on one occasion, repeatedly, and/or in the context of a power imbalance. Peer bullying, by contrast, is distinctly defined as ongoing, repeated aggression that occurs in the context of a power imbalance (Jia & Mikami, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2020; Olweus, 1993). Our study focuses on students' experiences given the broader definition of aggression, as opposed to solely the more extreme end of peer bullying (Finkelhor et al., 2012; Cornell et al., 2013).

Peer victimization can occur in several forms, such as physical, verbal, and relational. For instance, physical or verbal aggression (i.e., hitting, pushing, verbal threats, teasing, name-calling) constitute overt peer victimization (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Turner et al., 2011). Relationally

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aggressive behaviors (i.e., manipulative tactics that harm social reputation and interpersonal relationships through rumor-spreading, social exclusion, and ignoring) constitute relational peer victimization (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).

For youth, the experience of being victimized by peers has lasting effects on their social, emotional, and academic functioning (Bogart et al., 2014; Brendgen et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2005; Turner et al., 2011). Scholars have found that peer victimization in the classroom negatively impacts learning conditions, grades, and test scores (Jenkins & Demaray, 2015; Ladd et al., 2017; Mundy et al., 2017; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2005; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2008). Therefore, it is beneficial to conduct a thorough investigation on the effect that peer victimization has on students' academic outcomes. Our study calls attention to elementary school students' experience as victims of relational peer aggression. Understanding whether or not relational peer victimization has an effect on elementary school students' academic outcomes is necessary, especially since this is an important period for their academic and social development (Collins and van Dulmen 2006; Glew et al., 2005; Morrow et al., 2018; Siegler et al., 2012).

We investigate relational peer victimization and its association with academic engagement in Black elementary school students. We define academic engagement as the behaviors that indicate that a student is invested in a lesson or activity during classroom instruction (Appleton et al., 2008; Nguyen et al., 2016). We focus on relational peer victimization in elementary school because it is prevalent during these years and in middle school, and scholars have found it to be extremely harmful to youth's social and emotional wellbeing (Casas & Bower, 2018; Rubin et al., 2015). Furthermore, in the context of our sample of Black elementary school students, scholars have found relational aggression and victimization to adversely affect their broader classroom climate and quality of peer relationships (Leff & Waasdorp, 2013; Waasdorp et al., 2010; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2009; Storch et al., 2003; Waasdorp et al., 2019).

Relational Peer Victimization in School and Social and Emotional Wellbeing

The consequential effects of relational peer victimization go beyond damaging peer relationships. For instance, victims develop a range of unpleasant feelings that can adversely affect their ability to interact socially (Cole et al., 2010; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Below, we discuss a few factors related to relational peer victimization that may result in negative experiences at school.

Relational peer victimization is often associated with a variety of negative emotional responses. Hoglund's (2007) study on middle school students revealed that relational peer victimization is linked to internalizing problems (i.e., symptoms of depression and anxiety), which negatively affected students' performance in school. When students experience frequent instances of relational peer victimization, such as rumors or social exclusion (relational peer victimization), they may feel a lower sense of belongingness and withdraw from attracting attention to themselves (see Casper & Card, 2017; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005). Several studies have also demonstrated that relational victims worry about receiving negative evaluations from peers since their social reputation is often targeted (Early et al., 2017; Sinclair et al., 2012; Storch et al., 2003). Moreover, relational peer victimization can provoke avoidant behaviors (e.g., avoiding social interactions), and feelings of loneliness, anger, and sadness (Kawabata et al., 2013; Putallaz, et al., 2007). Due to the negative effects relational peer victimization has on students' social and emotional wellbeing, it is also beneficial to understand how it affects different populations of youth.

The Need for Studying Relational Peer Victimization in Diverse Urban Elementary Schools

Our study focuses on Black elementary school students from a large, "urban intensive" school district (Milner, 2012). "Urban intensive" refers to a densely populated area with a diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic composition, and we highlight this distinction in order to better understand complex social and economic inequalities found in large urban school districts (See Milner, 2012; Milner et al., 2015). Few studies have examined whether disaggregated types of peer victimization (i.e., overt or relational) predict academic outcomes in samples of low-income, racially diverse elementary school students from urban intensive school districts (Hong et al., 2014; Morrow et al., 2014; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Nakomoto & Schwartz, 2011).

In the limited research that has been conducted on this topic, peer victimization has been linked to poorer academic outcomes. Peer victimization predicted less academic engagement among Latinx youth who attended elementary school in a low SES urban environment (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2011); however, this study did not examine the disaggregated forms of peer victimization. In a study of 5th graders (35% White, 32% African American, 17% Latino/a) drawn from low SES schools, Morrow and colleagues (2014) found that experiencing a sub-behavior of relational peer victimization (specifically social manipulation) was associated with poorer academic achievement, but there was no significant association

found between the other forms of victimization examined (e.g., physical or verbal; Morrow et al., 2014). Taken together, these studies emphasize the need for better understanding disaggregated forms of peer victimization, namely relational peer victimization, and how they relate to academic constructs such as engagement.

Defining Academic Engagement

DiPerna et al. (2002) conceptualized academic enablers (i.e., specific non-academic behaviors and skills) that contribute to long-term academic performance, including interpersonal skills, study skills, motivation, and engagement. The academic enabler that we examined in our study is academic engagement, which can be operationalized based on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional domains (Appleton et al., 2008; Christenson et al., 2012; DiPerna et al., 2002; Fredricks et al., 2004; Greenwood et al., 2002; Nguyen et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). We focus on the behavioral aspect of academic engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Nguyen et al., 2016). The behavioral domain of academic engagement assesses for appropriate conduct, attentiveness, and active participation (e.g., speaking up in class, volunteering to help with/or demonstrate tasks, and asking task-related questions). This aspect of academic engagement has been positively linked to long-term academic performance, motivation, study skills, and psychological wellbeing in school (Christenson et al., 2012; DiPerna et al., 2002; DiPerna et al., 2005; Lein et al. 2016; McClelland & Cameron, 2011).

The Present Study

To extend and replicate prior studies (e.g., Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2011; Morrow et al., 2014), our study draws from multiple informants to examine whether elementary school-aged, Black students' relational peer victimization during the start of the school year (fall) is associated with their teachers' reports of academic engagement towards the end of the year (spring). Our study's aims are to:

1. Examine the extent to which student self-reported relational peer victimization predicts academic engagement, taking into account student self-reported aggression (both relational and physical forms) and overt peer victimization.
2. Examine the extent to which parent reported relational peer victimization predicts academic engagement, taking into account parent reported aggression (both relational and physical forms) and overt peer victimization.

Methods

Participants

The current sample originated from two public schools within a large urban district. All students in our sample qualified for free or reduced lunch, which serves as an indicator of low socioeconomic status. Two hundred and four students from twelve 3rd through 5th grade classrooms (50% female; 46% in 3rd grade, 33% in 4th grade, and 21% in 5th grade) participated in this study. The student sample represented a 98% response rate (e.g., youth assent, parent permission, and self-report survey completion for measures administered in the fall). Ninety-four percent of the student sample identified as Black, with 3% identifying as other (e.g., Latinx or Multiracial). The average age of students was approximately 10 years old ($M = 9.73$, $SD = 0.95$). The teacher sample consisted of twelve 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade classroom teachers, and their survey response rate for fall and spring measures of students' academic engagement ranged from 83 to 87%. The survey response rate for students' parents, which were administered in the fall, yielded 60% ($n = 126$). We did not collect demographic information from parents or teachers.

Data was collected as part of a school-based, universal peer aggression prevention program, PReventing Aggression in Schools Everyday (PRAISE; see Leff et al., 2010 for details regarding the preliminary trial of PRAISE). The effects of this intervention are not a focus of the present study, and therefore intervention status was controlled for in all analyses. The institutional research board (IRB) and the corresponding research board of the participating school district provided their approval for all aspects of our study.

Measures

Demographic information

Students reported their grade level, age, and race/ethnicity.

Forms of peer victimization and aggression

Parent report Parents reported on their child's aggression and peer victimization using the parent form of the Child Social Behavior Questionnaire (i.e., CSBQ Parent-form; Crick, 2006). The CSBQ Parent-form (full scale is available upon request) mirrors similar child and teacher report CSBQ measures of peer aggression and victimization. On a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *never true* to 5 = *almost always true*, parents reported on their agreement about the extent to which their child experienced relational peer victimization (three items) and overt peer victimization (three items), and the extent to which they agreed that their child engaged in relational aggression (five items) and overt

aggression (four items). As an example, items for relational peer victimization included, "your child gets left out of the group when someone is mad at them or wants to get back at them," "your child is the target of rumors or gossip in the playgroup," and "your child gets ignored by other children when a kid is mad at them." The CSBQ Parent-form has demonstrated high internal consistency and validity in prior studies (Ostrov & Bishop, 2008; Tackett & Ostrov, 2010). In the current sample, it demonstrated strong reliability for each subscale: relational aggression ($\alpha = 79$), overt aggression ($\alpha = 0.91$), relational peer victimization ($\alpha = 0.80$), and overt peer victimization ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Student self-report

Student self-report items for relational aggression, overt aggression, and overt peer victimization were adapted from the Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools (MDS3) climate survey (full scale is available upon request). This measure has demonstrated validity and reliability in previous studies (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Morin et al., 2015; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015), and all subscales demonstrated adequate reliability in the current sample; respectively, relational aggression (four items; $\alpha = 0.73$), overt peer victimization (six items; $\alpha = 0.89$), and overt aggression (six items; $\alpha = 0.85$). Students rated their relational aggression (e.g., "I spread rumors or lies about someone"); overt aggression (e.g., "I hit, slapped, or kicked someone"); and overt peer victimization (e.g., "Someone pushed or shoved me") on a three-point frequency scale (e.g., 0 = *never*; 1 = *1 time*; 2 = *2-3 times*; 3 = *4 or more times*).

For relational peer victimization, students responded to five items from the Social Experience Questionnaire (i.e., SEQ; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Items included, "How often does a kid who is mad at you try to get back at you by not letting you be in their group anymore?" and "How often does a classmate tell lies about you to make other kids not like you anymore?" Students responded to each item using a five-point frequency scale (1 = *never*; 2 = *almost never*; 3 = *sometimes*; 4 = *almost all the time*; 5 = *all the time*). The SEQ has been validated for use in measuring peer victimization in elementary school student populations (see Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005; Desjardins et al., 2013; Storch et al., 2003) and demonstrated strong reliability in the present sample ($\alpha = 0.83$).

Academic engagement

Teacher report The eight-item engagement subscale from the Academic Competence Evaluation Scales- Teacher form (i.e., ACES-Teacher form; DiPerna & Elliot, 2000) served as our measurement tool for academic engagement. Instead of student self-reports, teachers served as our reporters of students' academic engagement as they may offer more objective accuracy in observing the extent of students' participation and attentiveness during instruction (Appleton et al., 2008; DiPerna & Elliott, 2000). Using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *never;* 2 = *seldom*; 3 = *sometimes*; 4 = *often*; 5 = *almost always*), teachers reported on the behavioral domain of academic engagement (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004; Nguyen et al., 2016), including eight items related to students' proactive involvement in the classroom (e.g., "participates in class discussions"; "volunteers to read aloud"; "asks questions when confused"). The engagement subscale of the ACES-Teacher form demonstrated high internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = 0.98$). Construct validity, convergent validity, and divergent validity have also been demonstrated for this measure (see DiPerna & Elliot, 1999).

Procedures

Prior to data collection, trained research assistants visited participating classrooms to introduce the PRAISE program and related pre- and post-intervention measures. Informed consent forms for student and parent participation were sent home for parental review and signature. Students provided their written assent on the consent form following signature by his/her parent. Teachers provided verbal consent. Consented and/or assented parents, teachers, and students voluntarily completed each measure in the fall (October/November) and again in the spring (April/May). Students filled out the measures in their classrooms with research staff reading each question and response option aloud. Teachers and parents filled out paper questionnaires on their own and returned them to research staff. All procedures were in line with our approved IRB protocol.

Data Analytic Plan

We evaluated two regression models to explore the aims of our study. In addition to our regression analyses, we analyzed descriptive statistics for student and parent measures, and for teacher reported spring academic engagement. We also assessed for convergence between each student and parent report using bivariate correlations. We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 27.0) for all analyses.

For our first research aim, we investigated whether students' self-reported relational peer victimization predicted teacher reported spring academic engagement after controlling for several factors, such as their gender, grade, fall teacher reported academic engagement, intervention

status, and their fall self-reports of overt peer victimization, overt aggression, and relational aggression. Our second aim was to test for the same relationship, but with parent measures. We dummy coded gender (e.g., girls served as the reference category), grade (e.g., third graders served as the reference category), and intervention status (e.g., students who did not participate in PRAISE were the reference category). Our decision to use overt peer victimization and aggression status (relational and overt) as control variables was based upon reviewing previous studies that suggested that victims of relational aggression may retaliate by using either form of aggression, as well as experience overt peer victimization (Casper & Card, 2017; Yeung & Leadbeater, 2007; Ostrov & Godleski, 2013; Ostrov, 2010; Roecker-Phelps, 2010).

We ran two separate models for student and parent reports for several reasons. First, it allows for examining the unique perspective of these individuals, given that some studies have indicated that relational peer victimization often occurs solely in peer group interactions, so instances may not be apparent to caregivers and educators (Casper & Card, 2017). Second, physical and verbal peer victimization (characterized as overt peer victimization) is usually observable and perceived as more harmful and warranting of adult intervention, whereas adults are more likely to let students resolve relational peer issues on their own (e.g., Demaray et al., 2013; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015). Finally, examining parent and student measures separately can reveal the severity of peer issues by elucidating the extent to which concerns about relational peer victimization transfer between school and home contexts (De Los Reyes et al., 2019; De Los Reyes et al., 2015). This is especially informative for elementary school-aged students, who may spend more time with their parents as compared to older adolescents, and thus communicate more about issues with peers (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005).

Results

Descriptives

The means and standard deviations for each informant are demonstrated in Table 1. Scores on relational peer victimization ranged from one to five, with a mean score of 2.33 ($SD = 1.13$) for student self-reported relational peer victimization, and a mean score of 2.12 ($SD = 0.93$) for parent reported relational peer victimization. Independent samples *t*-tests demonstrated significant gender differences in parent reported relational peer victimization, where parents reported higher relational peer victimization for girls ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.99$) than boys ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 0.8$), t $(124) = 2.72$, $p < 0.01$. Student self-reported relational peer victimization did not demonstrate significant mean differences between girls ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.19$) and boys ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.06$), t $(197) = 1.52$, $p = 0.129$. In addition, a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) did not yield any significant grade level differences for student self-reported (F $(2, 197) = 1.09$, $p = 0.339$) or parent reported relational peer victimization (F $(2, 123) = 0.03$, $p = 0.97$).

For the outcome variable (spring academic engagement), teachers' reports of students' spring academic engagement ranged from 8 to 40, with a mean score of 27.37 ($SD =$ 8.27). There were significant gender differences in teacher reported spring academic engagement, with girls receiving higher teacher reported engagement ($M = 29.02$, $SD =$ 8.34) than boys ($M = 25.44$, $SD = 7.75$), t $(166) = 2.88$, $p < 0.01$. ANOVA results showed no significant grade level differences for teacher reported spring academic engagement (F $(2, 166) = 0.72$, $p = 0.489$).

To examine if there were discrepancies between students with or without parent data, we conducted independent samples t-tests. Results confirmed that there were no significant differences in students' self-reported relational peer victimization between those with corresponding parent survey data ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.18$) and those without parent survey data ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.03$), t $(198) = -1.4$, $p = 0.163$. Similarly, there were no differences in teacher reported spring academic engagement between students with parent data ($M = 27.83$, $SD = 8.41$) and without parent data ($M = 26.56$, $SD = 8.01$), t $(167) = -0.964$, $p = 0.337$.

Lastly, bivariate correlations between and within student self-reported and parent reported measures are shown in Table 2. Parent reported and student self-reported relational peer victimization indicated a significant positive correlation that was moderate ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$). Contrarily,

Table 1 Peer victimization, aggression, and engagement descriptive statistics

Variables assessed	Student self-report	Parent report	Teacher report
Fall relational peer victimization	2.33 (1.13)	2.12 (0.93)	–
Fall overt peer victimization	0.79 (0.79)	2.2 (0.99)	–
Fall relational aggression	0.58 (0.73)	1.88 (0.7)	–
Fall overt aggression	1.27 (0.92)	1.57 (0.82)	–
Spring academic engagement	–	–	27.37 (8.27)

Standard deviations are shown in parentheses

Table 2 Correlations between student and parent reported variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Student report							
1. Relational peer victimization	–	–					
2. Overt peer victimization	0.12	–					
3. Relational aggression	0.21**	0.75**	–				
4. Overt aggression	0.63**	0.29**	0.24**	–			
Parent report							
5. Relational peer victimization	0.47**	–			–		
6. Overt peer victimization	0.52**	0.18	0.16	0.45**	0.74**	–	
7. Relational aggression	0.13	0.16	0.12	0.02	0.27**	0.13	–
8. Overt aggression	0.23*	0.32**	0.29**	0.11	0.41**	0.36**	0.67**

Correlations depict student and parent reports in the fall

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$

correlations between student and parents' respective measures of overt peer victimization, overt aggression, and relational aggression were not significant, and thus did not reveal convergence.

Regression Analyses

Research aim 1

For the first research aim, we tested whether students' self-reported relational peer victimization in the fall of the school year predicted their academic engagement in the spring. Results for this regression analysis are shown in Table 3. In this model, the combination of all predictors accounted for 58% of the variance ($F\ [8,\ 149] = 25.50$, $p < 0.001$). While holding all other variables constant, students' fall reports of their relational peer victimization negatively predicted teachers' perceptions of their academic engagement in the spring ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$). None of the aggression control variables or overt peer victimization significantly predicted academic engagement; intervention status ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$) and fall teacher reported academic engagement ($\beta = 0.72$, $p = 0.001$) revealed a significant and positive association.

Research aim 2

Our second aim was to test whether parent reports of student relational peer victimization predicted teacher reports of academic engagement in the spring. See Table 4 for complete results of this analysis. All predictors in this model significantly accounted for 68% of the variance ($F\ [8,\ 95] = 24.72$, $p < 0.001$). Results revealed a negative relationship between parent reported relational peer victimization and teacher reported academic engagement ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.01$). Of note, neither student or parent reports of overt

Table 3 Student self-report model: multiple regression predicting spring teacher reported academic engagement

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	*β*
Student model			
Constant	9.35	2.93	
Gender (Girls as reference)	−1.01	0.96	−0.06
Grade (3rd as reference)	−0.22	0.60	−0.02
Fall teacher reported academic engagement	0.72	0.06	0.72***
Intervention status	2.70	0.98	0.16**
Overt aggression	1.00	0.70	0.11
Relational aggression	0.64	0.94	0.06
Overt peer victimization	−0.88	0.89	−0.08
Relational peer victimization	−1.35	0.60	−0.17*

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Table 4 Parent report model: Multiple regression predicting spring teacher reported academic engagement

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	*β*
Parent model			
Constant	11.18	3.73	
Gender (Girls as reference)	−2.30	1.08	−0.14*
Grade (3rd as reference)	0.48	0.66	0.04
Fall teacher reported academic engagement	0.69	0.06	0.71***
Intervention status	2.53	1.03	0.15*
Overt aggression	0.17	0.84	0.02
Relational aggression	−0.61	0.96	−0.05
Overt peer victimization	0.67	0.72	0.08
Relational peer victimization	−2.4	0.81	−0.28**

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

aggression and victimization, or relational aggression predicted academic engagement. Similar to the model in the first research aim involving student reported variables, intervention status and fall teacher reported academic engagement were significant. In addition, gender was also significant, suggesting that being male negatively predicted spring academic engagement ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

Our study builds further evidence that relational peer victimization is linked to lower academic engagement (e.g., Morrow et al., 2014) in a sample of Black students from two urban elementary schools. In both regression models separately assessing student and parent reported variables, relational peer victimization had the strongest effect in negatively predicting spring academic engagement. This finding is robust since similar results were found across informant groups, and the analyses controlled for overt peer victimization and both forms of aggression status (i.e., relational and overt). When interpreting the results of bivariate correlations, the significant association between relational and overt victimization suggests that youth in these schools are likely experiencing both forms of victimization. But, given our findings that only relational peer victimization was associated with lower academic engagement, it stands to reason that if a child is struggling with engagement specifically, it is more likely due to relational forms than overt forms. This provides an avenue for intervention and additional research.

The results of our correlational and regression analyses suggest there is alignment between student and parent reports of relational peer victimization. Therefore, our study reveals that experiences with relational peer victimization may be communicated across home and school contexts, which is consistent with prior research that recommends the use of multi-informant research methods (De Los Reyes et al., 2019). These results expand prior research suggesting that parents may not be aware of the extent to which their children witness relational aggression (e.g., Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2009). A possible interpretation for our convergent findings may be that students in our sample were more likely to speak with their parents about their peer experiences when relational peer victimization became severely distressing.

In addition to our results demonstrating parental awareness about students' relational peer victimization, we found that relational peer victimization was a significant factor in diminishing students' academic engagement. We did not investigate specific underlying factors for this relationship. However, relationally victimized students may be unable to cope or find adequate support from adults, which could lead to emotional difficulties that inhibit their engagement in the classroom (see Desjardins & Leadbeater, 2011; Kotchick et al., 2020). In their work with middle school students, Kotchick and colleagues (2020) showed that maternal support was fundamental to mitigating the relationship between relational peer victimization and depressive symptoms. Yet additional research with Black elementary school students, such as those in our sample, is needed to understand what facets of familial support are protective against negative academic outcomes related to relational peer victimization.

Our results also suggest that when relational peer victimization damages peer relationships, its impact extends to the classroom. Relational peer victimization involves exclusion, gossip, and destroying one's social standing; such actions undermine an inclusive and collaborative classroom environment necessary for academic engagement (Cappella et al., 2014; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005). Notably, we used the teacher form of the academic engagement subscale from the ACES (DiPerna & Elliot, 2000). Items for this subscale specifically evaluated for students' display of participation and level of contribution to classroom tasks and discussions, which is aligned to the behavioral domain of academic engagement (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004). Studies on the topic of academic engagement, specifically around the behavioral element of engagement, have underscored the importance of supportive and inclusive relationships among peers in fueling students' participation and interest (Cappella et al., 2014; DiPerna et al., 2002; Liem & Martin, 2011). Yeung and Leadbeater (2010) found that teachers can alleviate the negative effects of relational peer victimization in the classroom, such as conduct problems and attention problems, by establishing a supportive environment. It is noted, though, that teachers and other adults may not detect and intervene on relational peer victimization if students do not directly report instances of it (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Pas et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2002). Overall, considering our findings and prior research, teacher training and classroom interventions should consider strategies to promote behaviors that create an equitable learning environment.

Furthermore, we also take into account the social context of our student sample. In our sample, students attended schools in a large urban area. Specifically, our sample consisted of 94% Black students from schools that served low-income students. Students from communities that have been historically and systematically marginalized in terms of immigration, racial, gender, disability, cultural, ethnic, and/or socioeconomic status (SES) have unique experiences that influence their relationships with peers, teachers, and their academic functioning. Harsh discipline, inadequate culturally relevant curricula, and limited access to rigorous academic materials negatively impact student engagement and performance in

urban schools that serve low-income students (Bell & Puckett, 2020; Brannan & Kaufman, 2020; Hughes, 2010; Odgers & Adler, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). We did not focus exclusively on gender, but one finding from our regression model on parent reports showed that boys had lower teacher-reported academic engagement. Scholars who have examined Black boys' experiences at school have highlighted racial discrimination, inequitable discipline practices, and a lack of feeling valued and important in academic settings as barriers to their academic engagement (Carey et al., 2022; Greer et al., 2022; Wint et al., 2022).

Limitations

Findings need to be explored longitudinally among a larger sample of racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse youth. Given the homogenous sample in this study, results cannot be generalized. In our sample of Black elementary school students, parent and student self-reports allowed for an in-depth examination of relational peer victimization. Even so, peer informants could provide additional insights into the associations between relational peer victimization and academic engagement.

Another limitation of the study is its focus on the behavioral domain of academic engagement, specifically using teacher reported ratings of student participation and attentiveness in the classroom. Future studies could supplement teacher perceptions with objective measures of behavioral engagement (e.g., *Behavioral Observation of Students in Schools;* Shapiro, 2004) or achievement (e.g., test scores and grades) to assess different aspects of academic functioning. Further, it could be the case that relational peer victimization has a different effect for each domain of academic engagement, so future studies could also broaden the scope of engagement by examining other forms, such as cognitive and emotional engagement (e.g., Appleton et al., 2008).

Implications

When considering intervention efforts related to relational peer victimization among Black elementary school youth, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; Schlund et al., 2020) offers a reputable model for intervention efforts. One approach supported by CASEL is transformative Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which takes an equity-oriented approach to students' social and emotional development (Jagers et al., 2019). Transformative SEL is not exclusively for students, but also for educators, and it takes on a social justice approach by assisting students and teachers in developing their self-awareness, their belief in their role as advocates for social justice, and their sense of community and belonging (Jagers et al., 2019). A transformative SEL approach can enhance teacher education opportunities aimed at building collective efficacy (i.e., educators' beliefs that they can act as change agents on behalf of students' learning), learning about and challenging power dynamics, and optimizing teaching with a focus on student-centered, culturally relevant, and culturally sustaining approaches (e.g., Carey et al., 2018; Gibson, 2005; Jagers et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2014). This framework has been shown to bolster students' academic engagement and nurture positive student-teacher relationships (Owens et al., 2022); the latter is associated with students' improved social skills and can alleviate the negative impact of being the victim of aggression (Benhorin & McMahon, 2008; Thomas et al., 2011).

It is possible to reduce relationally aggressive behaviors among students through teacher training and coaching (see Bradshaw & Waasdorp, 2019; Pas et al., 2019). Incorporating this with aspects from a Transformative SEL framework can improve relationships between teachers and students, and it can help raise teachers' awareness of any racialized and gendered biases about what constitutes aggressive behaviors and appropriate disciplinary action (Edwards, 2021; Villodas et al., 2019). Historically, Black students have received higher rates of punitive disciplinary measures; the ways in which adults at school respond to peer aggression affect students' relationships with peers and their feelings of safety at school (Edwards, 2021). Yet additional research is needed to understand what Black students from urban elementary schools in low SES communities find to be helpful from their teachers in addressing relational peer victimization (e.g., Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015).

Establishing a learning environment that affirms youth's lived experiences and makes them feel heard and empowered is aligned with Transformative SEL, and for students who come from communities that have fought against their marginalization, this is invaluable (Barnes, 2019). In a systematic review of social emotional learning programs for urban schools, McCallops et al. (2019) concluded that cultural responsiveness plays an indispensable role in improving students' mental health, and subsequently their relationships and academic functioning at school. This signals that helping students navigate peer conflicts, aggression, and victimization requires a deeper reflection of systemic inequities and understanding how teachers' and students' cultural beliefs influence bystander responses and coping mechanisms (Knox et al., 2021).

In addition, supplemental intervention programs that aim to reduce peer victimization can be implemented to reinforce problem-solving, conflict-resolution, and emotion regulation skills. For example, KiVa, a Finnish anti-bullying school-based intervention whose core anti-bullying strategies are engrained within the school's culture, has been successful in

reducing rates of relational bullying victimization in elementary schools (Salmivalli et al., 2011). WITS (Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it Out, and Seek help), a Canadian school-based intervention whose strategies are reinforced through regular academic lesson plans, has also been successful in reducing relational peer and bullying victimization (Leadbeater et al., 2003; Leadbeater & Sukhawathanakul, 2011; Leadbeater et al., 2021). Unfortunately, although relational peer victimization prevention programs offer necessary support for victims, they are not readily available to all elementary schools. Further, no existing peer victimization interventions have been validated in Black elementary school populations. Notably, there are programs that have shown promise in reducing relationally aggressive behaviors among racially diverse, elementary-aged students, especially girls, including the Friend to Friend Program (Leff et al., 2015; Leff et al., 2016) and Sisters of Nia (Aston & Graves, 2016; Belgrave et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2018), however, they do not focus on relational peer victimization. This remains an important area of future study and intervention. In summary, we can conclude that strategies for improving educational outcomes such as academic engagement among ethnically and socioeconomically diverse populations should involve substantial, transformative social and emotional components, including a goal to reduce relational peer victimization (Jagers et al. 2019).

Funding The research study described in this manuscript was supported by a grant from theInstitute of Education Sciences (IES) within the Department of Education. This research was made possible, in part, by the support of our partnering School District. Opinions contained in this report reflect those of the authors anddo not necessarily reflect those of the School District.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical Approval All data collection procedures were inaccordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from teachers, parents, and/or legal guardians. Assent was obtained from children.

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