Correlates and buffers of school avoidance: a review of school avoidance literature and applying social capital as a potential safeguard

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ABSTRACT
School avoidance has increasingly become a major issue among adolescents. Research shows that students who avoid school are significantly more likely to experience numerous problems including school dropout, mental health problems, and, even, suicide. Bullying victimization is known to be one of the leading causes of school avoidance. Previous studies have assessed bullying and school avoidance; however, no study has applied the concept of social capital as a buffer to avoidant tendencies. The current article outlines a review of the significant correlates related to school avoidance, and applies a micro-level version of social capital as a possible safeguard. Specifically, three components of social capital are discussed: participation in activities, closeness to peers, and closeness to adults at school. Also, theoretical and practical implications are discussed to address prevention strategies and future research ideas to combat this issue.

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Introduction
School avoidance has gradually become a severe adolescent issue (Wilkins, 2008) and an interdisciplinary public health problem, which can lead to detrimental outcomes. School avoidance refers to adolescents intentionally skipping classes or school altogether (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Buhs, Ladd, & Harold, 2006; Wimmer, 2010). According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), individuals who avoid school are more likely to have long-term emotional issues, such as depression and anxiety, poor academic achievement, and dropping out of school (DeVoe & Chandler, 2005; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruin, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001). Extreme consequences include suicidal tendencies, which have also been correlated with lack of school attendance (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 1994). Furthermore, finding methods to counteract these effects is imperative to reduce the frequency of this issue.

Research reveals that there are many correlates of school avoidance from bullying victimization to demographic characteristics (Chandler, Nolin, & Davis, 1995; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Randa & Wilcox, 2010; Vidourek, King, & Merianos, 2016). The purpose of the current research is to critically analyze the correlates of school avoidance and address how social capital may serve as a buffer to this growing problem. Social capital refers to the idea that social networks create group cohesion and trust which allows groups and communities to function more efficiently (Coleman, 1988). Since bullying and fear of victimization are known to be significant correlates of school avoidance, it is presumed that social capital would help combat this problem as prior research reveals that some...
forms of social capital can reduce bullying incidents (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Gottfredson & DePietro, 2011). Types of social capital that are addressed in the current review are participation in school activities, closeness to peers, and closeness to adults at school. Considering an abundance of literature addresses these elements concerning bullying, it is presumed that these factors may also significantly affect school avoidant tendencies.

**Literature review**

**School avoidance**

School avoidance has been extensively studied in social science literature (Ferraro, 1995; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Liska, Sanchirico, & Reed, 1988; Mayer, 2009; Radar, May, & Goodrum, 2007; Randa & Wilcox, 2012). This coping mechanism has been used interchangeably with school absenteeism, truancy, school refusal, and school phobia by social scientists (Hanson, Sanders, Massaro, & Last, 1998; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Johnson, Falstein, Szurek, & Svendsen, 1941; Kirkpatrick & Lodge, 1935; Mercer, 1930). These factors related to school avoidance may stem from additional issues such as family problems, neighborhood disorder, or mental health problems.

A number of studies have investigated school avoidance among adolescents (Denny, Clark, & Watson, 2003; Ferraro, 1995; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Liska et al., 1988; Mayer, 2009; Radar et al., 2007; Randa & Wilcox, 2010). Some of the main correlates associated with school avoidance are school bullying and fear of victimization (Astor, Benbenishty, Zeira, & Vinokur., 2002; Bastian & Taylor, 1991; Buhs et al., 2006; Hoover & Hazler, 1991; Pearson & Toby, 1991). Research reveals that fear of victimization can serve as a mediator between bullying victimization and school avoidance as avoidant behavior is typically exhibited after preceding victimizations (Liska et al., 1988; Randa & Wilcox, 2010). Consequently, these previous victimizations exacerbate fear. The following section addresses how bullying victimization affects fear of victimization and school avoidance.

**Bullying victimization, fear of victimization and school avoidance**

Prior studies revealed that bullying victimization was one of the primary correlates of school avoidance (Astor et al., 2002; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Randa & Wilcox, 2010; Swahn, Bossarte, Palmier, Yao, & Van Dulmen, 2013). Bullying victimization refers to repeated victimization through physical, verbal (Olweus, 1994), or cyber (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) means. This form of abuse has been significantly correlated with many negative effects, which include depression, anxiety, peer isolation, suicidal tendencies (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997), and school avoidance (Hutzell & Payne, 2012). Kochenderfer and Ladd's (1996) study on kindergarten children found that students who were bullied by their peers were significantly more likely to exhibit antisocial tendencies and avoid school. In addition, their research concluded that school maladjustment increased dramatically with the introduction of school bullying. Hutzell and Payne (2012), using National Crime Victimization data from the School Crime Supplement (SCS), also found at the adolescent-level that students who were bullied had significantly greater odds of school avoidance compared to students who had no history of victimization. It is presumed that victims choose to evade potentially dangerous or intimidating situations compared to facing their bully. By doing so, it is suspected that their anxiety becomes heightened and their susceptibility to avoiding school increases.

Research has indicated that bullying victimization does not only include physical, verbal, and cyber harassment. As a form of covert bullying, exclusion may create an atmosphere in which students feel insecure or awkward as they are considered outcasts by their peers. As a result, this form of emotional bullying is presumed to increase depression and low self-esteem. Hutzell and
Payne’s (2012) study also found that students who were deliberately excluded from school activities were also significantly more likely to avoid specific areas in and around school compared to students who had not experienced bullying. Similarly, Vidourek et al. (2016) used the School Crime and Safety Survey and examined over 5,000 school-aged students between 5th and 12th grade. Their findings revealed that ‘students who were bullied were approximately six times more likely to report fear at school and six times more likely to report school avoidance than students who were not bullied’ (Vidourek et al., 2016, p. 126). In addition, they found that individuals who were previously victimized were significantly more likely to report avoidance and fear future victimizations than those who had no experiences of victimization.

Fear of victimization is known to be a powerful mediator between bullying victimization and school avoidance. Liska, Sanchirico, and Reed’s (1988) research, using residents of 26 major cities through the National Crime Survey, examined social behaviors associated with fear of victimization (Liska et al., 1988). The results revealed that avoiding situations increased fear of victimization which created a reciprocal effect between fear and school avoidance (Liska et al., 1988). The findings indicated that students avoid certain areas at school due to fear which is caused by prior bullying experiences. Similar results were found with adults in regard to fear of victimization. May, Radar, and Goodrum (2010) found that Kentuckians who feared victimization and expected their neighborhood had high rates of crime were significantly more likely to exhibit avoidant tendencies. In addition, individuals who had low socioeconomic statuses and had been a victim of property crime were also considerably more likely to demonstrate avoidant tendencies. Furthermore, Randa and Wilcox’s (2010) study, using a national survey of adolescents, found that students who frequently feared victimization were more likely to avoid specific places at school and the school environment altogether. Overall, previous studies have demonstrated that prior victimization exacerbates fear which, in turn, increases the likelihood of avoidant behavior (Astor et al., 2002; Randa & Wilcox, 2010).

Other factors associated with school avoidance include school disorder (Mayer, 2009), bullying victimization off school grounds, gang presence (Randa & Wilcox, 2010), peer rejection, and lack of peer acceptance (Buhs et al., 2006). These factors may tap into feelings of fear and dread which increases an individual’s propensity to avoid school. In addition, peer rejection and lack of peer acceptance may warrant school avoidance due to social awkwardness, low self-esteem, and insecurity. Overall, chronic peer harassment significantly impacts risk perception, which in turn leads to a higher likelihood of school avoidance (Astor et al., 2002; Ferraro, 1995; Hoover & Hazler, 1991).

**Alternative findings regarding bullying victimization and school avoidance**

A relationship has been established between prior victimization, fear of victimization, and school avoidance; however, other studies have indicated that these findings were not so definite (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2001). For instance, Addington, Ruddy, Miller, and DeVoe’s (2002) research examining the National Crime Victimization Survey (Bastian & Taylor, 1991) indicated only a marginal correlation between adolescents avoiding school activities and fear of ongoing victimization. Children who were bullied were significantly more likely to fear future victimizations compared to non-victims and were significantly more likely to be attacked in the future. However, victims were not always more likely to avoid school. Furthermore, Attwood and Croll (2006) found similar results from the British Household Panel Survey and interviews conducted on truants in secondary schools. The results suggested a low association between prior victimization and avoidant tendencies among adolescent students. A stronger association was found with lack of parental monitoring, poor school relationships and low socioeconomic status on nonattendance in school. Additional research by Chandler, Nolin, and Davies (1995) on school avoidance evaluating the National Household Education Survey (1995) consisted of sixth through twelfth-grade students. The results showed that school avoidance differed by grade level. Younger students were significantly more likely to avoid school due to
fear; however, this result was not consistent for all students (Chandler et al., 1995). In addition, several additional demographic characteristics showed disparities related to avoidant behaviors including race and type of school. Therefore, school avoidance may be specific to certain age groups, races, or types of institutions. Furthermore, the school environment itself may also contribute to school avoidance.

School avoidance may differ in regard to locations in school that are less supervised such as hallways, bathrooms, schoolyards, or classrooms. Areas of minimal supervision may be seen as more attractive places for bullies to target victims. For instance, two studies using the *National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement* (1999 and 2007) data found different results in regard to school avoidance. Addington and colleagues (1999) found that students did not avoid activities or classes due to peer harassment; however, Hutzell and Payne (2012) found that students were significantly more likely to avoid certain places at or around school due to bullying victimization. The differences in the two studies were based on the location within the school. It may be that students are less likely to avoid classes or activities, but more inclined to avoid certain places such as bathrooms or hallways, which are often unsupervised.

Additional research also found support for place-specific bullying, in which poor supervision in classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds were common places for students to be harassed and bullied by others (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Rapp-Paglicci, Dulmus, Sowers, & Theriot, 2004; Sapouna, 2008; Whitney & Smith, 1993). These areas may have minimal supervision or may be monitored less by school administrators and staff; therefore, bullying incidents may occur more often in these settings.

Logically, one could argue that youth are less likely to avoid school or group activities if they have a support system, developed through social capital, among their teachers and peers who can ultimately serve as a buffer to bullying victimization. In fact, research revealed that friendships and peer support could buffer bullying victimization (Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Individuals who had strong and reliable friendships were less likely to be bullied and fear victimization (Hodges et al., 1999). Victims may view these friendships as protection against bullies if the friends are strong and can overtake the bully. In addition, children who have familial support were more likely to tell their parents about the abuse and were better able to cope with the victimization (Holt, Kantor, & Finkelhor, 2009).

**Academic achievement and school avoidance**

Low academic achievement is another factor that can potentially increase school avoidant tendencies. Academic achievement and bullying victimization has been studied extensively (Iyer, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Eisenberg, & Thompson, 2010; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Patton, Wooley, & Hong, 2012); however, limited research has examined the relationship between academic achievement and school avoidance. Currently, there are disparities in studies in regard to academic achievement and bullying victimization. Some research indicated that future goals and achievement reduced the negative consequences of bullying victimization (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). However, additional research revealed that bullied students were more likely to have academic problems compared to non-bullied students (Juvonen et al., 2011; Ladd et al., 1997). Juvonen and colleagues (2011) and Ladd and colleagues (1997) found that academic progress significantly declined due to peer harassment. In regard to school avoidance, Swanson, Valiente, and Lemery-Chalfant (2012) found that school avoidance was a mediator for academic achievement while controlling for home risks and institutional relationships. Specifically, having poor relations at school encouraged avoidance which in turn led to poor academic performance. However, these relationships may be counteracted with positive relationships within the home and school environment. Overall, the research indicates that academic achievement is significantly related to bullying victimization and potentially school avoidance.
**Contextual factors and school avoidance**

A number of contextual factors were also identified to influence school avoidance such as school mobility and perceived neighborhood safety. Problems associated with school mobility include poor academic performance and school dropout (Kerbow, 1996; Temple & Reynolds, 1999). School mobility refers to the number of times a student has changed schools (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2010). School dropouts may increase due to the lack of school bonds and attachments formed within the school. Prior research showed that school mobility impacted children of lower socio-economic status, minorities, and parents with little education (Gasper et al., 2010; Temple & Reynolds, 1999). Children who frequently change schools and homes were more likely to be socially isolated and lonely, which are comparable to traits of bullied victims (Farrington, 1993). Gasper and colleagues (2010) research also revealed a correlation between school mobility and bullying victimization and supported the notion that changes in schools can be detrimental to children due to a lack of school attachments. Furthermore, children who frequently changed schools were also more likely to come from disadvantaged areas. Therefore, neighborhood characteristics may influence bullying and school avoidance more so than school mobility.

Another characteristic related to fear of victimization and avoidance was perceived neighborhood safety. There was a prolific amount of research supporting the notion that perceived community disorder resulted in a higher fear of crime (Ferraro, 1995; LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992; Melde & Esbenson, 2009; Rountree & Land, 1996). Students who came from communities with high levels of social disorganization and neighborhood disorder were more likely to fear victimization (Alvarez & Bachman, 1997; May & Dunaway, 2000; Melde & Esbensen, 2009). In relation to school avoidance, the literature revealed that individuals were more likely to establish avoidant behaviors in areas where they perceived crime was high (May et al., 2010). As schools are generally embedded within communities, bullying victimization may be considered a routine activity in socially disorganized and unsafe neighborhoods (Hong & Espelage, 2012). This form of victimization then crosses over into the school environment which creates school disorder. Alvarez and Bachman (1997) found that schools with greater disorder significantly influenced students’ fear of victimization. Furthermore, additional literature on bullying victimization and disorder revealed that disorder was greater in areas where there was less supervision (Astor et al., 1999; Greeff & Grobler, 2008) and protection such as hallways (Greeff & Grobler, 2008), school cafeteria (Astor et al., 1999), restrooms (Sapouna, 2008), and school parking lots (Astor et al., 1999). In summary, the literature indicates that contextual factors

**Demographic characteristics and school avoidance**

Research addressing school avoidance, prior victimization, and fear of victimization revealed interesting findings related to demographic characteristics. It is important to address both prior victimization and fear of victimization as these factors can significantly influence avoidant tendencies. Some of the initial findings in regard to demographic characteristics concern gender and race. Several studies have found that females are more likely to fear victimization compared to males (Alvarez & Bachman, 1997; May & Dunaway, 2000; Schreck & Miller, 2003). One primary reason that females fear crime can be due to socialization. Women are socialized to fear crime especially rape; therefore, fear becomes an instinctual part of life (Warr, 1985). Even though females tend to fear crime more so than men, males tend to have defensive behaviors and are more likely to carry weapons to school than females (Kuntsche & Klingemann, 2004; May, 1999; Wilcox, May, & Roberts, 2006). Conversely, females tend to exhibit avoidant behaviors (May, Radar, & Goodrum, 2010). Additional research claims, however, the opposite effect of female avoidant behavior. For example, Welsh (2001) found that females were less likely to display avoidant behaviors compared to males, and Hutzell and Payne (2012) research revealed that there were no significant differences between male and female avoidant tendencies. The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) also
concluded that gender was unrelated to school avoidance. School avoidance may not be gender specific because of the many similarities between males and females. For instance, poor academic achievement, victimization characteristics, and lack of peer acceptance generally affect both genders. Even though these factors may not affect males and females in the same way, these characteristics are found to impact both genders. Therefore, boys and girls may avoid school for the same reasons in regard to bullying victimization. In addition, the reactions to bullying that cause school avoidance may also not be gender-specific. It may be a natural reaction for any individual, not just one gender.

There were also mixed results in regard to race and avoidant behaviors. Some research revealed that there was a negative relationship between Non-Whites and school avoidance (Randa & Wilcox, 2010). Prior studies indicated that Non-Whites were less likely to have avoidant and defensive behaviors and lower perceived risk than Whites (Randa & Wilcox, 2010; Rountree & Land, 1996). However, other research revealed that Non-Whites were more likely to fear crime due to segregation, the percentage of Non-Whites, and areas with large population sizes (Liska et al., 1988). In addition, prior studies have indicated that minorities were more inclined to avoid and drop out of school than Whites (Addington et al., 2002; Chandler et al., 1995; Townsend, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard, & King, 2008) and exhibit defensive behaviors more often than avoidant tendencies. Additional research claimed that there were no differences among races in regard to school avoidance (Welsh, 2001). Variations in the literature may be contributed to deviations in sample sizes, survey items, and variable application. More research needs to be completed to understand the extent of avoidant tendencies among races. For example, scholarship on cultural and regional differences among races may shed new insight on avoidant tendencies among adolescents. Also, parental perceptions of other races may also contribute to inconsistencies in the current literature.

Age has also revealed to be an indicator of school avoidance (Addington et al., 2002; Chandler et al., 1995; Randa & Wilcox, 2010). Prior research revealed that bullying victimization decreased with age. Therefore, students who were in high school were less likely to be bullied and fear victimization compared to their counterparts (Burrow & Apel, 2008; May & Dunaway, 2000). For instance, Alvarez and Bachman’s (1997) research using SCS data indicated that younger individuals were significantly more likely to be previously victimized compared to older students. As victimization and fear of victimization decline with age, older students are also significantly less likely to avoid school (Randa & Wilcox, 2010). Consequently, it can be assumed that individuals that are older and in upper-grade levels are less likely to avoid school. However, research by Addington and colleagues (2002) revealed that older adolescents were more likely to avoid certain locations in and around school compared to younger students. Overall, there was not a consensus on age disparities; however, the majority of research highlighted that older students were less likely to avoid school due to minimal bullying victimization and perceived risk.

**Summary of correlates**

Prior literature suggests that there are several direct and indirect variables related to school avoidance. Two of the most critical predictors are bullying and fear of victimization (Astor et al., 2002; Bastian & Taylor, 1991; Buhs et al., 2006; Hoover & Hazler, 1991; Pearson & Toby, 1991). In addition, mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, isolation, and suicidal ideation which result from bullying victimization may further exacerbate school avoidance (DeVoe & Chandler, 2005; Nansel et al., 2001). Other variables associated with school avoidance include low academic achievement, neighborhood factors, specific places within schools, and demographic characteristics (Addington et al., 2002; Randa & Wilcox, 2010; Temple & Reynolds, 1999; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). The following section addresses Coleman’s (1988) version of social capital in addition to applying three specific forms of social capital to bullying victimization and school avoidance: participation in school activities, closeness to peers, and closeness to adults at school.
Conceptual framework

Social capital

Prior studies have shown associations between social capital and school victimization in addition to social capital and delinquency (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Kirk, 2009; Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2003). Therefore, it was hypothesized that social capital could also be applied to school avoidance as bullying is one of the main avenues to avoidant tendencies. Moreover, the concept of social capital was deemed the most appropriate concept or theory to be applied to this review due to the strong cohesive unit that is formed through social capital networks.

Social capital has been defined and revised over decades. Currently, there are both community and individual-level concepts of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Hanifan, 1916; Putnam, 2000). For the current review, I was guided by Coleman’s (1988) concept of social capital. Coleman’s (1988) concept refers to a structure of social networks preserved through trust and group cohesion, and concentrates on individual-level components including strong social ties, trust, reciprocity, and social norms. Specifically, Coleman (1988) stated ‘social capital is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors whether persons or corporate actors-within the structure’ (Coleman, 1988, S98). Therefore, for social capital to be present, a structure (i.e., social groups, community organizations, or activity clubs) must be established, and the ‘actors’ must execute certain actions and uphold the group standards for the structure to thrive. Coleman’s (1988) primary components of social capital include obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Obligations and expectations, established by the group, consist of trustworthiness between group members and the maintenance of these standards. Secondly, information channels refer to trustful relationships formed between group members. Group members are expected to be reliable and reciprocate actions performed by other members. Finally, social norms relate to the values and rules created by the group.

The social capital features applied in the current review are participation in activities, closeness to peers, and closeness to adults. The existing literature highlights these areas as inhibitors to school bullying, fear of victimization, and delinquency. Ideally, these components would also affect the propensity to avoid school as they share many of the same qualities. By using these elements as proactive measures, it is assumed that social capital would proliferate and avoidant tendencies would decline due to the trust and cohesion formed within these bonds.

Participation in activities

Previous research has found that certain types of extracurricular school activities significantly reduce the probability of engaging in risky behaviors (Cooley, Turner, & Beidel, 1995; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000); however, victimization experiences may increase due to the vulnerable social environment. For example, Peguero (2009) found those who were more involved in in-class school activities had significantly higher odds of victimization; however, students involved in sports had minimal victimizations. Sports may be viewed as popular and socially acceptable activities compared to academic groups which may be perceived as weak and undesirable. In regard to avoidant behaviors, Welsh (2001) found that students who had a high level of school involvement were significantly more likely to avoid school; however, positive peer associations decreased school avoidance. Avoidant behaviors may increase with higher levels of school involvement because of the increase in bullying opportunities. However, friendships and positive peer groups may counteract these avoidant tendencies by acting as a barrier to bullying. Therefore, the peer relationships within these activities may be the more significant component compared to the group itself.
Closeness to peers

The second form of social capital that has been examined in previous research was closeness to peers. Due to the trust that is formed in social networks and the significant impact that peers have on each other, positive social networks are imperative for school students (Hodges et al., 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). Adolescents gain a certain degree of social capital and identity through peer acceptance and friendship networks. These networks are presumed to build trust and group cohesion. These friendships and support systems may serve as a buffer against bullying victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997) especially if those friends are seen as strong and reliable (Hodges et al., 1999). Friends who are deemed as protective and dependable are presumed to deter victims from avoiding school since these friends are perceived as a safety barrier.

Closeness to peers is similar to Lin’s (1999) social capital concept of expressive return. Lin (1999) discussed instrumental and expressive return in reference to outcomes of social capital. Instrumental action refers to three types of returns: economic, political, and social. Expressive action involves maintaining resources produced by social capital. The principle is to access and mobilize others who share interest and control of similar resources so that embedded resources can be pooled and shared in order to preserve and protect existing resources‘ (Lin, 1999, p. 40). The main idea was that social capital was formed through group members who share the same interests. In addition, the resources of the group must be maintained and preserved for social capital to be upheld. Therefore, in reference to closeness to peers, support groups of bullied victims supply expressive return by retaining friendships and standing up to bullies. Maintaining close relationships with peers who were considered effective support systems were expected to serve as buffers to bullying victimization and potentially decrease school avoidant tendencies.

Minimal research exists on the concept ‘closeness to peers’ as a form of social capital (Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999; Hodges et al., 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Sacco & Nakhaie, 2007; Sutton & Smith, 1999). Information that does exist is related to fear of victimization and delinquent tendencies. Sutton and Smith’s (1999) research on English children found that peers had an influential role in regard to bullying victimization. Victims tend to be at the mercy of bystanders who either encourage or stop the victimization. Peers were also known to affect fear of victimization (Brookmeyer et al., 2006; Sacco & Nakhaie, 2007; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). For example, Sacco and Nakhaie (2007), using the Canadian National Survey on Children and Youth, researched social capital and fear of school victimization related to parents, friends, and teachers. The findings revealed that the closeness of students was found to help decrease fear. If students felt strongly connected to other classmates, then school was viewed as a safe environment. Overall, prior research revealed that peer groups are essential in the lives of adolescents and have the power to potentially negate school bullying.

Closeness to adults at school

The final form of social capital addressed is closeness to adults (LinkManagerBM_REF_boxjvDFUFitzpatrick, Piko, Wright, & LaGroy, 2005 Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011; McNulty & Bellair, 2003). Closeness to adults can refer to frequency and time spent with these adults, bonds, and connections with teachers, level of comfort with teachers and other adults at school, or teachers’ perceptions of students (Fitzpatrick et al., 2005; Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011; McNulty & Bellair, 2003; Wilkins, 2008). Rosenfeld, Richmond, and Bowen’s (2000) national study of school students found that students who had a high amount of support from parents, friends, and teachers were less likely to have problem behaviors. In addition, these students had higher attendance compared to students who did not have support. Students may feel safer in these nurturing environments which, as a result, lead to higher attendance rates. Furthermore, a positive classroom environment can serve as a shield against bullying victimization (Espelage & Swearer, 2009; Hodges et al., 1999) which is also known to affect school avoidance. Supportive environments, created
through school administrators, teachers, and staff, were also known to prevent bullying environments and reduce violence (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010). These school environments may be more caring and nurturing or may have smaller class sizes. With smaller classes, teachers can monitor classrooms more efficiently. Even though the majority of research related to closeness to adults at schools is related to bullying victimization and delinquency, it is believed that these studies are also applicable to school avoidance as many of these issues are precursors to avoidant behavior. The following section addresses a number of theoretical and practical implications that can be drawn from this review.

**Implications**

**Theoretical implications**

The theoretical implications inferred from this article are related to Coleman’s (1988) concept of social capital. Social capital is formed through social networks built on group cohesion and trust. Coleman (1988) explained that individual-level social capital could be obtained through obligations/expectations, information channels, and social norms. If these commitments are upheld, then strong social networks are formed. In regard to schools, it was expected that strong school connections would build social capital and serve as a buffer against bullying victimization, and as a result decrease school avoidant tendencies. Juvenile research shows that social capital has been measured as a number of forms including extracurricular activities (Peguero, 2009; Tillyer, Fisher, & Wilcox, 2011), academic groups (Peguero, 2009), church and religious functions (Fitzpatrick et al., 2005), adolescent interactions (McNulty & Bellair, 2003), parental trust (McNulty & Bellair, 2003), closeness to teachers (Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011) and volunteer groups (Peguero, 2009). In regard to the current review, findings from prior literature indicates that participation in school activities, closeness to peers, and closeness to adults at school are important components to reduce bullying victimization and school avoidance. Thus, it is imperative that school administrators, teachers and parents work together to create strategies to build social capital among students. For instance, social capital could be formed through after-school activities or school assignments. Students who work on projects together are forced to work effectively and build trusting relationships with each member of the project. As a result, it is expected that social capital could be created through this network due to the obligations and expectations set forth by the group. This form of social capital has not been previously addressed but may provide insight into how school assignments potentially impact school avoidance. A student may be less likely to avoid school even if they are bullied due to obligations and expectations of the school project.

In regard to Coleman’s (1988) version of social capital, it is imperative that future researchers address each of the elements of this concept: obligations and expectations, information channels, and group norms. The majority of social capital research discusses only one of these items such as closeness to teachers (Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011), adolescent interactions (McNulty & Bellair, 2003), or church functions (Fitzpatrick et al., 2005); however, if researchers assess multiple versions of these elements, stronger implications can be made in relation to Coleman’s (1988) concept. Furthermore, social capital should be tested regarding cyber activities to understand if Coleman’s (1988) concept is relevant to cyber-activity. The majority of school avoidance literature focuses on traditional bullying; however, cyberbullying should also be assessed to comprehend how this form of harassment influences school avoidance. Since cyberbullying is indirect and completed through different social media outlets, adolescents may not avoid school for this reason. However, if students are traditionally bullied and cyberbullied, then this combination may further exacerbate avoidant tendencies. As more research is conducted on this subject, stronger theoretical implications can be made in regard to how theory plays a role on school avoidance.
Practical implications

Several practical implications are also drawn from this review in regard to bullying victimization, school avoidance, and social capital. One of the main implications is establishing prevention programs to help eliminate bullying victimization before it begins. Additional suggestions include building strategies to reduce bullying, addressing alternative strategies to school avoidance, and conducting more empirical studies related to school avoidance.

One of the most well-known prevention programs is the Olweus bullying prevention program. The Olweus bullying program implements four forms of intervention: school-wide, classroom, individual, and community (Hazelden Foundation, 2007). School-wide intervention refers to training for school staff and intense supervision in schools. Classroom intervention includes meetings with parents and other classrooms. Thirdly, individual-level intervention consists of meetings with bullies, victims, and parents. Finally, community-level intervention refers to active community involvement such as building school strategies with community help and actively participating in anti-bullying awareness campaigns. This program also encourages teachers and school staff to serve as role models and promotes non-hostile punishments for unacceptable behavior (Olweus & Limber, 2000). In addition to bullying programs, high academic performance should also be considered a vital component to avert school avoidance. Given that bullying victimization can negatively impact school performance, highlighting the value of education may make children feel more obligated to attend school to ensure high grades. Furthermore, it is the duty of parents to place a strong emphasis on college so that children understand the positive outcomes of maintaining a high GPA. By implementing these strategies in elementary schools, the expectation is that bullying behaviors will be prevented in the future by eliminating bullying behavior before it begins. Ideally, these multi-faceted approaches would inhibit school avoidance by targeting the main issue of bullying.

If bullying victimization is already established, then several measures should be taken to discourage this activity in the future. For instance, empathy-training programs for bullies should be applied to combat bullying. These programs allow offenders to acknowledge and understand the extent of bullying victimization and increase awareness about the severity of bullying. As bullying victimization can lead to suicide, empathy-training programs should concentrate on the harmful effects and reasons for bullying. In addition, principals should implement zero tolerance policies for bullying victimization and encourage parents to talk to their children about the serious implications of bullying. By understanding the root of the victimization and the extreme consequences associated with bullying, bullies can gain more knowledge of this form of harassment and will, hopefully, think twice before engaging in the future.

Regarding the individuals who suffer from bullying, victims need to learn alternatives to school avoidance when encountered with stressful situations. Proactive strategies should be established that encourage victims to seek help from school counselors, administrators, and teachers instead of avoiding the situation altogether. Prevention programs should also discuss support systems for students. Creating support systems may provide a sense of security for victims. These support systems may consist of friends, family, or school personnel. In summary, if these types of programs are not established and do not target students who are victims of bullying, school avoidance rates may significantly increase. As a result, victims may engage in more harmful behaviors such as drug use, alcohol consumption, self-harm, or may drop out of school entirely.

Next steps

There is a definite need for research to be expanded in several areas related to school avoidance. First, future researchers should further investigate the topic of social capital and discuss additional outcomes of social capital including testing different varieties of group activities such as sports and academic groups or examine how activities outside school influence school avoidance. In addition
to examining different forms of social capital, future researchers should also delve into the relationship of school type and religious schools on school avoidance. Exploring differences between public schools and private schools may give better insight into how school types influence school avoidance. Previous research has found that youth in public schools were more likely to fear victimization and avoid school due to higher institutional disorder (Alvarez & Bachmen, 1997; Vidourek et al., 2016). If school bullying is also high in public schools, then it is expected that avoidant tendencies will be exacerbated. Therefore, future researchers should examine differences in disorder between public and private schools to better understand if school type significantly influences bullying victimization and school avoidance. Moreover, future researchers should consider the differences between religious and non-religious schools to understand if this factor affects bullying victimization and school avoidance. The differences in the school context may reveal interesting and unique findings due to religious or moral differences.

**Summary of implications**

Overall, several implications were concluded from this review. First, the three components of social capital discussed in this article, participation in school activities, closeness to peers, and closeness to adults, should be implemented by school officials to decrease school avoidance as prior research clearly supports the notion that these social networks significantly impact bullying victimization and school avoidance (Gottfredson & DiPietro, 2011; Hodges et al., 1999; Welsh, 2001). Next, additional measures of social capital need to be addressed to understand which components of social capital are most applicable to school avoidant behavior. In addition, prevention and intervention measures are both critically important to combat bullying victimization to reduce school avoidance. Furthermore, bullies need to be targeted to decrease school bullying and school avoidance. Finally, future research ideas were discussed to address future directions for prospective studies.

**Conclusion**

Considering suicide rates for adolescents have soared in recent years, it is imperative to acknowledge the problem and discover strategies to reduce this epidemic. The main premise of this article was to highlight the relationship of social capital, bullying victimization, and school avoidance; and recognize better ways to thwart these behaviors in the future. Other areas discussed were theoretical and practical implications and ideas for future research to address proactive strategies and current programs on bullying victimization and how they can apply to school avoidance.

Prior literature reveals that bullying, fear of victimization, academic achievement, contextual factors, and demographic characteristics significantly influence school avoidance among adolescents. More often, students may be affected by more than one predictor which further aggravates the problem. One of the primary goals of this article was to present possible buffers to school avoidance for parents, school administrators, and peers to utilize. Participation in school activities, closeness to peers, and closeness to adults were found to counteract the negative effects of bullying and are expected to also inhibit avoidant tendencies. It is important for future researchers to continue to examine this area to ascertain additional correlates of school avoidance and further explore methods to combat the problem. In conclusion, as more scholarship is completed in this area, stronger implications can be made on the nuanced effects of social capital, bullying victimization, and avoidant behavior.

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Notes on contributor

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