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Bullying in School

Nahla Mansour Al-Ali and Khulood K. Shattnawi

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Abstract

Bullying in school is a significant problem worldwide and is one of the most common antisocial behaviors among adolescents and children. Despite implementing anti-bullying prevention programs in almost every school within the United States, Europe, and some initiatives in low-income countries, yet bullying is more pervasive problems in schools than any other problems. This chapter provides a review of research and evidence on school bullying: understanding the definition of bullying in school, and the size of the problem, the consequences of bullying, academic correlations, who is at risk, students' perceptions of bullying and the evidence school-based programs to reduce and prevent bullying.

Keywords: bullying, peer victimization, students, academic performance, prevention, mental consequences

1. Introduction

Bullying has been defined by many scholars and organizations differently. The classical definition is first proposed by Olweus [1] as "intentional and repeated acts that occur through physical, verbal, and relational forms in situations where a power difference is present." Olweus states that "A student is being bullied when he or she is repeatedly exposed and over time, to *negative actions* on the part of one or more students." The negative action is "One that intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort on another" [1]. Thus bullying is likely to occur when there are differences in power between the bully and the victims when the victim is unable to defend against bullying behavior. Bullying behavior can be direct, including face-to-face confrontation; such as hitting, damaging, kicking, and other types of physical harm; and indirect involving a third party, such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, and other types of psychological harms or even online (cyberbullying) [1–3].

Most definitions of bullying have similarities regarding the features of bullying such as being repeated over time, intent to inflict harm, an imbalance in power, and all highlight the chronicity of bullying. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defined bullying in school as "any unwanted aggressive behaviors by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated" [3].

A new emerging type of bullying called electronic aggression or cyberbullying. Bullying through electronic media becoming a critical concern through the increasing virtual interactions among adolescents and children. This type of bullying is known as an aggressive online behavior in the digital space and defined as repetitive, aggressive behavior using technology through cell phones and social media. Students who experienced cyberbullying bullied through email, chat rooms, instant messages, websites, or texting [4, 5]. This type of bullying is different from the traditional bullying in that it is difficult for school staff and administrators to control because it happens outside schools and mostly in the forms of anonymous messages posted online through social media. Students who experience cyberbullying have similar consequences as traditional bullying [5, 6].

2. Why bullying is a public health problem

Bullying in school is the most common type of violence among adolescents, recognized as a serious concern for students and has become a public health problem and global concern. Although the prevalence of bullying is difficult to estimate because of the different measures used throughout the studies, researchers have agreed that bullying is a pervasive and significant problem in our schools today. In 2016 nationwide survey, 20.8% of students report being bullied [7]. In 2015 survey of students ages 12–18, 21% reported being bullied at school, 13% reported being made fun of, called names, and insulted; 12% were the subject of rumors; 5% were pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on; and 5% of students were socially excluded. In the same survey, 4% of students experienced threatened with harm, 3% were forced to do things they did not like to do, and finally, 2% reported that their belonging was damaged on purpose [7]. In the same survey, females (23%) more than males (19%) reported being bullied and females (15%) were more than males (9%) being the subject of rumors. However, male (5%) more than female (3%) students reported threatened with harm. Black students (25%) and white students (22%) more than Hispanic students (17%) reported being bullied in school [7].

The rate of bullying throughout the survey studies ranged from 9 to 98%. The bullying rates from 80 studies for students age 12–18 year was 35% for traditional bullying and 15% for cyberbullying [8]. Only 36% of children were bullied reported the bullying, and 64% did not report it [9]. Among high school students in 2015, 16% reported cyberbullying, and 20% are bullied on school propriety. For middle school students, 24% are cyberbullied, and 45% are inside the school. From 2007 to 2016, the rate of cyberbullying is doubled from 18 to 34% [3]. Students with special needs are two to three times more likely to be bullied than the normal students. Moreover, they found to report feeling unsafe in school compared to their normal peers [10].

Ethnic minorities are more likely to be bullied than others, African-American students (24.7%) more likely to report being bullied than Hispanic students (17.2%), followed by Asian student (9%). About 74 and 36.2% of students were verbally and physically bullied because of their sexual orientation, and 55.2 and 22.7% of students were verbally and physically bullied because of their gender expression [10]. The analysis of students from 19 countries (low-and-middle income countries) that participated in the Global School-based Students Health Survey (GSHS), 34.2% of students reported being bullied in the last month, 55.6% of them had been victimized 1 or 2 days, and 7.9% all 30 days in the last month. The prevalence of bullying for each country ranged from 20 to 61% [11].

2.1. Health consequences of bullying

Scientific research indicated that experiencing bullying has short and long-term psychological and emotional impact on both victims and perpetrator [5, 12, 13]. Victims of bullying reported poor mental and physical health, more symptoms of anxiety, depression; feeling sad, being loneliness; vomiting; sleep disturbance; nightmares; body ache; a headache; abdominal pain, and frequent illnesses. This, in turn, increases students' absenteeism either from direct physical or indirect psychological impact [12, 14].

Students, whether they are bullies, a victim, or bystanders, report a suicidal behavior. Among students age15–29, suicide is the second leading cause of death [15]. Students who experienced bullying are two times at risk for have suicidal ideation, and 2.6 times more likely to attempt suicide than other students who did not experience bullying [16]. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 17.7% of school-aged students had attempting suicide within the past year [17]. Depression, violent behavior, and substance abuse are among the most mediated factors between bullying and suicide [12, 18].

2.2. School bullying and academic achievement

Bullying in school not only affects students' physical, emotional and psychosocial lives, it is also found to affect their academic achievements and their classwork directly. Theoretical and empirical literature has been supported the direct association between bullying and student' academic achievements [5, 19–23]. A study among secondary level students shows that traditional as well as cyberbullying has a significant negative impact on students' academic performance when controlling the socioeconomic status of the student [24]. Other findings among students of 13–18 years old revealed that academic achievement negatively correlated with bullying [25]. The research examined the achievement scores of 46 schools and found that peer harassment was negatively correlated with achievement and that students who are teasing they miss school and missing educational opportunities [26]. A recent study among primary school children revealed that verbal bullying among female students was associated with poor academic performance on writing skills. Physical bullying was negatively associated with performance on numeracy, and writing for both males and females. Students who report being verbally and physically bullied had poor achievements in reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and punctuations [23].

Research to date indicates that bullying can seriously affect adolescents' psychosocial functioning, school adjustment particularly academic performance. Peer victimization and low academic performance often correlated because children who are chronically victimized experience negative emotional and psychological outcomes that can inhibit their engagement in the classroom and thus affected their academic achievement. Although small percentages of students are chronic victims of bullying in school, but also temporary victimization can seriously impaired students' academic performance and achievement [5, 21, 27–29].

Results of longitudinal studies highlight strong correlations among peer victimization and lower grade-point averages and lower teacher-rated academic engagement across middle-school years [29]. Students who experienced bullying has 2–3 times negative school perception than those who did not involve in bullying activities [30]. Data from three African countries including participants aged 12–16 year, who participated in Trend study in mathematics and sciences. The results show that bullying is a significant problem in the three countries and is among the most common factors associated with low academic performance [31]. From Arab country, students who report being bullied have symptoms of depression and anxiety and poor academic performance [32].

Research also assessed the mediating and moderating factors that influence peer victimization, and suggested that bullying contributes to poor academic achievement through mediating influences of internalizing behaviors, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem [33]. Victims of bullying are often blaming themselves for being bullied which in turn develop a negative self-perception that affects their concentrating on school work, and become potential to have lower grades and perform poorly on standardized tests [13]. The most commonly investigated factors as having a moderating role in the relationship between bullying victimization and academic performance were friendship quality, peer social support, school maladjustment, and school disconnect [21, 22].

Findings from a nationally representative sample of 7th and 8th-grade students suggest that classmate support was negatively related to victimization and positively related to academic performance for both boys and girls [34]. On the other hands, having friends with high prosocial behavior, and low social anxiety reduces the risk of victimization and enhances academic performance [35]. Bullying and a violent school culture are also interfering with students' academic performance and negatively affect their social and emotional well-being [35, 36].

3. Who is at risk for bullying

There is no specific profile of students who involved in bullying [37]. Findings of previous studies illustrate that there are many factors impact the occurrence of bullying in the schools, ranged from the students' sociodemographic, schools size, number of students, and students' perception of bullying [19, 26, 33, 38]. Several studies investigated the characteristics of those who involved in bullying both bullies and victims. The result showed that preschool aggressiveness, low socioeconomic status, and poor family relationships increase the probability of involvement in bullying cycle at later stages [26, 33, 39]. The results of Meta-analysis study, in which the students were categorized according to certain characteristics (either as victims,

bully, and bully-victim), found that student who bullies others has a negative attitude toward other, trouble with academic and social cognition, and come from low-income family. Victims, on the other hand, were more likely to have the characteristics of bad self- recognition, lack of social skills, isolated and rejected by peers. Victim of bullying viewed as being passive or submissive victims, often quite, careful, sensitive and may easily cry, are unsure of themselves, having low self-confidence and a negative self-image [33].

Previous research found that gender of students is one reason that students get bullied, and females students more likely of being harassed by their peer [26, 29, 39, 40]. Ethnic and racial background were also identified as a reason for being bullied, minorities and Asian Americans students more likely to be a target of bullying behaviors than others. Students from lower socio-economic status are at a higher risk of being bullied [17, 41].

The research took into consideration the mental health issue as the characteristics of those involved in school bullying. One of these critical issues is self-esteem. Although the idea that low self-esteem is a prominent characteristic of the victims, some results contradicted this idea. Some who says it is both for the victim and bully and other supported that bullies often showed lower self-worth, but higher social acceptance [12, 40]. Some research assessed self-esteem as a protective factor from involvement in bullying behaviors. Family factors such as employment status of parents show significant association with being at risk for bullying, a result of cross-sectional study among Greek students of 16–18 years old show that students of low school performance and unemployed father were more likely to be a perpetrator. Students, who have unemployed mother have the chance of being either as a victim or perpetrator of bullying [40]. An analysis of data on 5th and 9th-grade students in 1000 schools in Colombia, investigates variables associated with bullying such as socioeconomic status, family characteristics, and community characteristics. Results revealed that male students, low level of family empathy, family violence, community violence, hostile aggressiveness, and supporting beliefs in the community are associated with bullying [19].

4. Students' perception of bullying

Although bullying in schools has gained the attention of research over the last three decades, there are some inconsistencies of how students perceive bullying [37]. The research found that students perceive the bully as one who has characteristics such as feel superior, seeking the attention of another, giving the way the victim behaved or look (e.g., wearing glasses, types of hairstyles or clothes), or act in a manner that makes others irritable. Moreover, students perceived the way the victim look, talk or dress as an essential leading factor for bullying. Being odd, such as wearing different clothes, eating different food, listening to different music, and having strange behaviors perceived as an exclusive characteristic associated with the victim of bullying [19, 26, 33, 38, 42].

A recent study found that students described a bully as "one who is a coward underneath, lacks respect for other people, wants to show power, wants to impress others, and wants to feel superior". Students perceived victims of bullying as "having low self-esteem, talking or sounding different than others, shy, and having no friends" [37]. Both victims and bullies,

male and female students, agreed that being poor and fat were the main reasons for being bullied. Male students who are physically weak and shorter girls were also perceived as the main reasons for being bullied. Students also perceived the bully as having a bad manner and always making trouble in classrooms [38–40, 42].

5. School-based intervention to prevent and reduce bullying

The mission of any bullying programs is to prevent bullying before it occurs. However, the research on preventing bullying is still emerging. In the light of increasing prevalence of bullying in schools, schools must improve school climate by emphasizing on strengthening the educational system to reduce the bullying [35]. The school climate is defined as the physical structure, social and emotional environment, including school safety measures, comfortable means, and harmonic relationships between students and school staff [10]. In this context, health and well-being of students should be a priority to the mission of public education.

A research review for bullying prevention programs suggested many practical strategies for bullying prevention and reduction [1, 13, 14, 18, 21–23, 29, 35, 43–58]:

- School policies must emphasize on enhancing the social and emotional climate of the school by replacing detention with meditation and improving students mental resilience.

- Schools must put policies in place to help their students developmental resilience to communicate appropriately with each other and to develop effective coping skills and find the meaning of their lives.

- Promoting collaboration among different professionals and school staff (teachers, school administrators, school counselor, social workers), criminal justice practitioners, and researchers to identify the environmental, social and emotional factors that enhance bullying reductions in the schools.

- Implementing a comprehensive, evidence-based bullying prevention program is crucial to reduce and prevent bullying in schools. Use surveillance data, at all levels local, state, and national to identify school needs.

- Using positive behavioral support system and behavioral managed skills, in the classroom and in the school to identify cases of bullying.

- School policies should reflect a zero tolerance for weapons, discrimination, harassment, and gang activity.

- The anti-bullying policies should be implemented consistently to assure students safety in all school locations.

- Developing and enforcing curriculum that is culturally responsive and sensitive to all students' diversities. Bullying definition, types of bullying, who get bullied, and strategies to stop bullying should be integrated into the curriculum.

- Design an educational program to helping students develop skills in conflict resolution, negotiations, listening, communication, and decision making.

- Technical, psychological, social and cognitive interventions are recommended to prevent cyberbullying, such as technical web-protection including blocking cyberbully, changing the password, deleting messages, training of students as cyber mentor-safety, designing cybersafety resources for parents, and cyberbullying professional development programs for schools.

- Anti-bullying school programs should benefit from implementing peer interventions. Peers who have high self-efficacy, more likely to defend negative behavior and they are more likely to act in the bullying situation.

- Schools need to create a culture of intolerance for violence by enforcing all school policies consistently and fairly.

- Schools must develop a professional preparation and development program for teacher and staff to help them teaching mental resilience.

- School-based bullying programs should benefit from the mental health resources in schools (including the counselors, school psychologists, and social workers) in recognizing and understand the relations between the mental health of students such as depression, and anxiety and attendance and bullying problem.

- Schools have to implement a systematic protocol for the early identifications of students facing challenges and crisis.

6. Conclusions

Bullying in schools is a widespread problem around the world, and no community is immune from this problem, despite the anti-bullying initiatives that implemented almost everywhere. Research on bullying has provided rigger evidence about the nature of bullying, the factors contributing to bullying, the characteristics of a bully and the victim, the physical, social, mental and academic consequences of bullying. Research also suggested many practical strategies that help in preventing and reducing the incidence of bullying in schools. Effective prevention bullying programs must define bullying in a clear way to the community and include as its core team, students, school staff, parents and other community members. In order to have a safe environment for students to learn, and to grow up, students must learn how to communicate with each other, resolve conflicts effectively, and learn how to be empathetic to others.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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