

RESEARCH NOTE

TEACHERS' AND ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE BULLYING PROBLEM IN LEBANON

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Abstract – *This paper presents data arising from a study (see Rabah, 2006) on the bullying problem in a sample of nine Lebanese private schools from the perspective of school personnel. The sample comprised 151 teachers, including nine senior administrators as key informants. The data collected included copies of written school policies. The study suggests that Lebanese teachers, on the whole, exhibit a high level of understanding of the phenomenon of bullying. However, they concede that many Lebanese teachers may not recognise the behaviour in all its forms. Most of the schools in the sample moreover did not have written anti-bullying policies. Most teachers believed that they needed professional development workshops on the bullying issue.*

Introduction

The problem of school bullying has received increasing research attention in western societies over the past decade and a half (e.g., in Australia – Rigby & Slee, 1991; in England – Boulton & Underwood, 1992; in Scandinavia – Olweus, 1993; in the USA – Pelligrini, Bartini & Brooks, 1999; and in Ireland – Collins, McAleavy & Adamson, 2004). Although there is a dearth of information concerning the issue from the Middle East, awareness of the problem among educational psychologists appears to be on the rise (e.g., in Lebanon – Zein, 2001; Koleilat, 2003; and Nassar, 2005).

The importance of school personnel's perceptions

The definition of bullying is not uncontentious (Boulton, 1997). However, critical aspects of bullying, as opposed to simple altercations between youngsters, include systematic and on-going victimisation in the context of an imbalance of power where the express intent of the perpetrator is to hurt the victim (Olweus, 1993; Ross, 1996; Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Sullivan, Cleary & Sullivan, 2004). While bullying of the direct physical kind (punching, shoving, spitting, etc.) is the most

readily recognisable, bullying behaviour can occur in many guises, including indirect physical acts (e.g., taking possession of, or damaging, another child's property) and verbal actions (e.g., name-calling, mocking, teasing) (Olweus, 1993; Siann, Callaghan, Glissov, Lockhart & Rawson, 1994; Borg, 1999; Thompson, Arora & Sharp, 2002). Verbal forms of bullying appear to predominate (Olweus, 1993; Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Borg, 1999; Koleilat, 2003; Collins et al., 2004).

Research suggests that teachers play a crucial role in preventing and managing the problem of bullying (Boulton, 1997; Martin, Linfoot, & Stephenson, 1999; Nicolaides, Toda & Smith, 2002; Cooper & Snell, 2003; Garbarino & deLara, 2003; Weissbourd 2003). Teachers must, however, be able to recognise bullying in all its guises before they can become effective in this role (Olweus, 1999; Sanders & Phye, 2004). Unfortunately, they may not always do so, while conversely they may misinterpret other behaviours as bullying (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Boulton, 1997; Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Leff & Kupersmidt, 1999; Hazler, Miller, Carney & Green, 2001). At the same time, teachers generally feel a strong professional duty on their part to prevent bullying and to intervene when they come across instances of it (Borg & Falzon, 1990; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Boulton 1997). In some cases, they may feel unconfident about their ability to deal with the problem (Martin et al., 1999).

The attitudes of school personnel towards bullying are pivotal determinants of the responses of the school system to the problem (Scherer, 2003, Payne & Gottfredson, 2004). The response of teachers to the bullying phenomenon depends to a large extent on the ethos of the school as defined by its administration. School administrators may not take the issue seriously, leading to a policy vacuum (Ross, 1996; Geffner et al., 2001; Garbarino & deLara, 2003; Payne & Gottfredson, 2004; Sanders & Phye, 2004). But the existence of a lucid and practicable institutional policy on bullying appears to be a critical component of an effective anti-bullying strategy (Thompson et al., 2002; Sullivan et al., 2004).

The study

Setting

Lebanon is a cosmopolitan democracy with a mixed Turkish and French colonial heritage and a rapidly growing American cultural influence. The latter two formative factors are particularly evident in school education. For while the Lebanese state education system is modelled on the French, there has been a proliferation of American-modelled private schools and universities over the years, and Anglophone schooling is displacing Francophone as the norm. Education is highly valued in Lebanese society, with a very highly developed private school system in place that is patronised by a high proportion of school-age children (Marlow-Ferguson, 2002).

Aim

The purpose of this study was to gauge the perceptions and attitudes of a sample of Lebanese school personnel towards the bullying phenomenon with a view to devising and implementing effective professional development strategies to address the problem. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Lebanese teachers and administrators perceive bullying in general, and how much of a problem do they consider it to be in their schools?
2. What school policies are currently in place to deal with bullying, and what are Lebanese teachers' and administrators' views towards teachers' responsibilities in dealing with the issue?
3. Do Lebanese teachers and administrators believe that they need in-service training to deal with bullying, and, if so, what should this in-service training involve?

Methodology

Targeted sample

The targeted sample consisted of ten grade 1-12 Anglophone private schools with staffs of more than 50 operating within the Greater Beirut area. Two teachers at each grade level were selected randomly as survey participants, while the cooperation of a senior administrator in each school was secured as a key informant.

Instruments

The researcher developed two written questionnaires – one for the teachers and one for the administrators. Both questionnaires contained a core of items to elicit data on how teachers and administrators perceive bullying. In particular, the researcher sought information about: (i) how their definitions of bullying matched those in the literature; (ii) how seriously they regard given bullying acts; (iii) how they view their responsibilities; (iv) how they view the extent of the bullying problem at their schools; and (v) whether they believe they would benefit from in-service training on how to deal with the problem. The administrators' version contained additional items on current school policies and procedures relating to bullying. Copies of these instruments may be procured from the authors upon request.

Piloting

The survey questionnaires were piloted on two school administrators and 10 randomly selected teachers. The instruments were then amended accordingly before they were administered on the selected participants of the main study.

Participants

The received sample consisted of completed questionnaires from 151 teachers, including nine administrators from nine schools, representing a response rate of 74% of the intended sample. Most respondents were female, young (below age 40), and had fewer than 10 years of teaching experience. Three administrators wished to discuss issues arising in the questionnaire. The researcher made notes during the ensuing informal interviews, which will subsequently be referred to.

Analysis

Responses to options in closed-ended items were converted to frequencies. Responses to open-ended items, and school policies, were subjected to thematic analysis.

Results

More than 75% of the participants appeared to be aware of the definitional aspects of bullying (i.e., harasser as an individual or member of a group; systematic on-going nature of the harassment; imbalance of power between harasser and victim; and the express intention to hurt the victim). Physical bullying acts, whether direct (e.g., kicking, shoving, pulling hair, spitting; ripping clothes, and damaging property) or indirect (e.g., appropriation of possessions), were regarded as the most serious. But the respondents also generally regarded non-physical acts – such as name-calling, threatening, teasing, sending malicious notes and attempting to socially exclude other children – as serious to very serious. Teasing and ridicule were reported as being the most prevalent in respondents' schools, whereas direct physical bullying and intimidation were mostly reported as occurring only occasionally. Only 12% of the sample considered bullying to be a fairly serious problem in their schools.

While nearly all teachers agreed that teachers should intervene when they see bullying occurring, almost three quarters of teachers agreed that teachers should report all instances of bullying. A large majority (87%) agreed that teachers play a

crucial role in bullying prevention. But, then, more than 70% conceded that teachers do not notice all kinds of bullying. About equal numbers agreed and disagreed with the suggestion that teachers often deliberately ignore bullying.

All schools, except for one, reported that they had designated school personnel who were responsible for dealing with bullying and its consequences. In all schools, the administrators claimed that students who are guilty of bullying are counselled and given the opportunity to make things right. However, only six of the nine administrators said that they had a definite school policy on bullying. Two respondents referred to a written policy, copies of which were also submitted. Another respondent submitted a document pertaining to expellable offences in the playground. During the follow-up informal interview, the administrator who submitted this latter document said:

Bullying as encompassing physical and psychological is not understood as such in this environment. It is more likely understood only as physical.

A fourth administrator noted that a bullying policy was being written for the coming school year. Three other administrators claimed that their schools have informal bullying policies. For one of these, this involved a disciplinary committee. Another wrote:

Every teacher is responsible at all time to prevent any form of bullying in addition to the presence of our school psychologist and her work on social skills and counseling to both students and parents.

One of the two written policies had been in existence 'for many years now', while the other had been implemented at the beginning of the scholastic year. Two administrators wrote that the bullying policy was disseminated through school handbooks. Another noted that

Every year we provide our new teachers with clear instructions as to the importance of promoting proper social values as well as good study and social habits. The faculty holds regular meetings with the administration and this topic is always on our agenda.

One of the written bullying policies was presented in the guise of an anti-harassment policy and covered the full range of bullying behaviours. The other was a composite 'fighting and bullying' policy.

There was overwhelming agreement with the suggestion that teachers need professional development workshops on bullying and on strategies to better deal with the issue. Their suggestions for the content of such workshops, presented

here in descending order of the number of times referred to by the teachers, included explanations of the various types of bullying, how to deal with bullying, intervention strategies, and ways of recognising bullying behaviours.

Discussion

Research question 1

Despite there being considerable expert disagreement regarding the definition of bullying (Boulton, 1997), most Lebanese teachers appear to hold views that are consistent with commonly understood aspects of the phenomenon. Moreover, the Lebanese teachers who took part in this study appeared to give high weightings to all kinds of bullying. This is an encouraging sign, as teachers who recognise a variety of bullying modes are more likely to intervene (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Thompson et al., 2002) At the same time, teachers may not recognise bullying acts occurring in their own classes, although they intervene when they are aware of it (Atlas & Pepler, 1998).

Similar to the trend reported by Koleilat (2003), verbal bullying was perceived as being the most common type of bullying behaviour in the participants' schools. The overall rating of the bullying problem by the teachers in this study was quite low. While this may reflect the private school nature of the sample, it has also been reported that teachers tend to under-report bullying incidents (Rigby & Slee, 1991).

Research question 2

In this study, the Lebanese teachers' view of their responsibilities towards bullying is consistent with the results of studies by Borg & Falzon (1990) and Boulton (1997). Nearly all teachers agreed that teachers play a crucial role in bullying prevention and that they should intervene when they see bullying occurring. However, teachers do not always recognise problematic behaviours or respond to them appropriately (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). Most of the teachers sampled admitted in fact that their colleagues did not always notice bullying behaviour. The fundamental issue, therefore, is not the teachers' 'good will' with respect to reducing bullying in their schools, but their recognition of the problem in all its forms. The teachers' role in this regard is moreover largely defined by policies devised and administered by the school administration (Sullivan et al., 2004).

With regards to school bullying policies in the participant schools, the responses given can be categorised in three types:

1. No specific bullying policy, but there is a set of rules regarding proper playground behaviour and/or intimidating student behaviours (three schools).
2. Unwritten/informal bullying policy through regular meetings, student handbooks, and disciplinary committees (four schools).
3. Specific, written bullying policies (two schools).

One school actually referred to its written policy as an ‘anti-harassment policy’. This is symptomatic of a growing tendency of legal commentators in the USA to consider ‘bullying’ not as a legally recognised behaviour in itself, but to categorise it under the broader and legally sanctioned entity of harassment (Conn, 2004). Both written policies exemplified effective anti-bullying policies as defined in the literature. It can indeed be said that they are logical and easy to understand, properly formed to support the events expected and regularly reviewed with an identified team of bullying experts who implement procedures, are supportive of teachers and help to create a safe place in which to learn (Sullivan et al., 2004).

Research question 3

Teachers are the refuge to which children turn when they are facing a difficult situation. Therefore, as Weissbourd (2003) contends, they should be equipped with strategies to handle these situations. In this study, as in others (see Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Boulton, 1997; Nicolaides, Toda & Smith, 2002), teachers stated they needed workshops on bullying and on strategies to better deal with the issue.

Recommendations

The limited scope and nature of the sample indicates a need for further research in Lebanon to ascertain the full extent of both the bullying problem and of teachers’ and administrators’ attitudes towards it and means of dealing with it. However, the principal recommendation arising from this research is that professional development workshops on the bullying phenomenon need be devised and conducted. As well as focusing on the behaviours involved and on practical strategies to prevent and deal with this phenomenon, such workshops would actively encourage schools to develop, implement and disseminate formal written policies on bullying.

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