Consequences of Bullying on Students Affected by this Phenomenon

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Abstract

Schools have always been considered a place where values like peace, harmony, and wisdom predominate. However, this image has gradually changed over the past years. In recent decades, bullying has become a major issue for the school system, thus becoming a main concern primarily for teachers, parents, and most importantly, students themselves. (Rigby, 2013) Bullying is defined as a behavior that occurs when an individual or a certain group of individuals seek to violate, persecute, or intimidate others through their strength or power (Sullivan, Cleary & Sullivan, 2005). Bullying arises everywhere, and it can be performed by anyone against any person, for reasons beyond merely race and gender. It may be present in any environment where human beings interact, and schools in Albania are no exception. Bullying is not simply a part of growing up, and the only way to diminish involved people's neglect on this problem, is by making them aware of the destructive effects it has on their emotional state and on societal values as well. A wide scope of research on the effects of bullying indicates how detrimental and harmful it is for students who go through it (Sullivan, 2004). In most situations, victims do survive, but this social issue marks their lives forever. Bullying can affect everyone implicated in it: victims, aggressors, and spectators. It is associated with various negative consequences that lead to mental health problems, substance use, and in more extreme cases, suicide. Nevertheless, it is important to note that many children are very resilient and overcome this experience relatively unaffected, both physically and psychologically (Rigby, 1996). The main objective of this paper is to examine the effects that bullying has on students involved in this phenomenon. To accomplish this goal, a systematic literature review was undertaken to identify the effects on victims, aggressors, and spectators.

Keywords: *bullying, victims, bully, bystanders, consequence*

1. Introduction

In some cases, people consider bullying as a part of life, a part of growing up, and an opportunity to stand up for yourself. Some students will naturally not accept being bullied, and will stand against it. Others lack the courage and will passively accept it. As a result, the latter end up feeling lonely, unhappy, and frightened. It often causes them to lose confidence and interest in school. At the same time, these effects may also be symptoms that students exhibit when being abused by bullies.

Bullying can impact all parties involved—those who are bullied, those who bully, and those who witness bullying. Bullying is linked to many negative outcomes, including impacts on mental health, substance use, and suicide. It is important for parents or teachers to talk to children, in order to determine whether bullying—or something else—is a concern of theirs.

The main objective of this paper is to examine the effect that bullying has on students involved in this phenomenon. The following research questions guide this exploration:
1. What are the effects on victims?
2. What are the effects on bullies?
3. What are the effects on the bully-victims category?

A thorough review of international literature was carried out to understand the amount of information and the level of insight there is on bullying as well as how it impacts people engaged in this behavior. This review includes advanced research on databases like Education, Psycinfo, MCH Library, stopbullying.com, and Google. A number of keywords were used in this study, such as: "bullying in school", "bullying and gender differences", "effect of bullying in schools", and "the relationship between bullies and victims."

2. Effects of Bullying on Victims

2.1 School abandonment

Bullying victims may miss school for entire days or even abandon it. According to Field (2007), about 160,000 students in American schools miss school every day out of fear of being attacked or humiliated by other students. They suffer a drastic fall in grades in all subjects. Studies have shown a strong relation between being a victim of bullying and lack of desire to go to school. For example, a study of 1,422 students aged 12-15 years reported that 15% of them had skipped school because of bullying (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996).

2.2 Psychological problems

Researchers have detected the fact that that victims of bullying often develop internal anger. As a result, they experience depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, suicide attempts, fear, anger, tension, low self-esteem, social isolation, loneliness, and problems in interaction with adults or other children. They may go through negative emotional states, such as shame, insecurity, unhappiness, and social exclusion. Some victims become resentful and aggressive; consequently, they bully others. Victims may suffer lack of concentration at school, resulting in lower academic achievement. In addition, they undergo intense feelings of anxiety and nervousness before going to school every day.

There is proof that the negative effects of bullying are long-term. The above mentioned problems often become part of the victims' adult lives as well. To support this, Contry Sheriff Brown (2008) affirmed that adults who were victims in the past are characterized by high levels of depression and low self-esteem compared to adults who have never experienced bullying.

A study conducted in the Netherlands in 2012 in which 4,811 participants were engaged, found that students who were victims of bullying had suicidal tendencies and those experiencing indirect bullying, such as spread of rumors against them, were more endangered than those who were publicly and directly bullied. These students may attempt suicide because spreading rumors against someone is psychologically damaging and painful for that person. For example, if a student is absent from school for a week for health reasons (i.e. illness), bullies might spread the word of her being absent due to a potential pregnancy. The most probable result is that her peers will also tease her. Depending on the student's personality, this might lead to strong feelings of embarrassment and anxiety, and in a more extreme scenario, the student might also try to commit suicide to escape from these feelings. Research conducted by Field in 2007 found that 40% of students who committed suicide had been victims of psychological bullying.

2.3 Physical problems

Victims of bullying may experience physical problems such as bedwetting or lack of appetite. They often express chronic somatic complaints such as head and stomach aches. Furthermore, they may suffer from lack of concentration at school and have nightmares during sleep.

2.4 Sense of exclusion

Bullying can make students feel unwelcome and excluded from their peers in class (Quiroz, 2008). The victims' emotional states are filled with anxiety and fear and they spend most of their energy worrying about where and when the next bulling episode will occur. This affects their studies because instead of focusing on learning, they focus on finding ways to protect themselves from aggressors. They can abandon school activities and school areas where the chances for bullying to appear are higher. For example, if a student practices football, and he/she experiences bulling during this activity, there are high chances that the student might choose to stop participating in that activity, as a way to escape from this undesirable experience. Typically, victims are very lonely at school; they report that they have no close friends in class (Olweus, 1993). An experiment with interesting outcomes is that when the victims were given a social problem to solve, they were able to find a good enough solution, which proves that their social issues do not stem from lack of knowledge but rather the belief that they are unable to create friendships and deserve to be violated.

2.5 Tension in relationships with others

Bullying may result in termination of relationships with family members. Often, when victims encounter loneliness and isolation from classmates, they reflect their frustration at home as well. One form of expressing their irritation is by developing problematic relationships with their parents, who are not aware of the fact that their child is a victim of bullying. Parents might interpret this discourteous behavior as disrespect towards them, while the child is simply engaging in it as a way to convey how depressing his/her psychological state is. The primary outcome of this situation is the weakening of family bonds. Parents might adversely react to a child's disrespectful behavior. A fragile parent-child relationship further isolates the victims since they not only lack social interaction at school, but find no support at home either (Whitted & Dupper, 2005; Selekman & VESSEY, 2004).

De Beyer (2009) claims that male victims tend to bully their younger siblings at home. While at school, they are abused by students who are physically stronger than them. Influenced by this, they violate siblings who are physically weaker. This way, they also undermine relations with the younger members of the family.

3. Effects of Bullying on Bullies

Not only does bullying have negative effects on the victim, but on the aggressor as well. Studies show that these students are more likely to engage in strife, theft, and abuse of alcohol and narcotic substances. Additionally, long-term focused studies show that such individuals are very likely to commit crimes in the future.

It is important to note that not all students who perform bullying have behavioral problems or engage in illegal activity. Some of them are very popular at school and maintain very good relationships with teachers and other adults.

3.1 Antisocial behavior

It is evident that bullying can have stringent consequences, such as arrest or conviction. In a study performed in Norway and Sweden, Olweus (1993) a strong relationship between being a bully at school and involvement in criminal activities in adulthood was found. Sixty percent of the victims who had been involved in bullying in grades 5-9 were convicted at least once for criminal issues at the age of 24 years. Another study conducted in British schools, reported that boys who were aggressors at the age of 14 have the tendency to maintain this attitude at the age of 18-32 years, and are likely to have children who become aggressors as well (Farrington, 1993). Aggressive behavior carried on in adulthood is very probable to be transformed into criminal activity, which could lead to immediate arrest or even imprisonment of the individual (Quroz, 2006). Hence, it is crucial that bullying is thoroughly studied, in order for effective measures to be taken against it. A high level of criminality in the society will be a disturbing consequence of ignoring bullying.

3.2 Impact on relationships

Bullying adversely affects rapports between individuals. Oliver, Hoover, and Hazler (1994) showed that chronic bullies continue to engage in this behavior even in adulthood, which makes it difficult for them to develop and maintain positive social or romantic relationships. Schults (1993) and Siegel (2005) found that the type of aggressive behavior that continues into adulthood can show up in the form of child abuse, domestic violence, and criminal activities.

Researchers believe that these individuals consider abusing their spouse and/or children as a normal attitude because they have never been convicted for it in the past.

3.3 Aggression and psychological problems

Moretti and Steward claimed that aggressors risk being involved in other forms of violence, such as sexual harassment, abuse of the elderly, violence in the work environment, etc. They may experience various mental health problems, such as depression, insecurity, low self-esteem, loneliness, and anxiety (Olweus, 1993). According to Kuther (2003), attackers fail to learn how to cope with undesirable situations, manage their emotions, and communicate effectively. They find it very difficult to develop empathy and emotional maturity.

Quiroz (2006) demonstrated that students who are actively engaged in bullying believe they are in full control of the situations generated by their violent actions. They also perceive their targets to be the only ones who suffer. Aggressors can be considered by surrounding individuals as manipulative and unpleasant. They might be socially excluded and

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expelled from school and thus lose valuable time they could spend participating in educational activities.

3.4 Relying on bullying as a solution

Sometimes students act aggressively because they themselves are victims of bullying. These students do not permanently remain victims. Instead, their patience often surpasses the limit and turns into active aggression (Douglas, 2002). The victim emulates the behavior of the person who has abused him/her. Studies show that this category of students – being aggressors and victims simultaneously – is the most endangered with the highest undesirable consequences.

4. Effects of Bullying on Bully-Victims

Bully-victims, or those students who are both victims and aggressors, are at high risk of experiencing psychological anguish. The following studies depict why this category is a unique group of students who may require specialized support and intervention.

5. Lack of Empathy

The bully-victim category is considered the most problematic group between those involved in the phenomenon of bullying (Macklem, 2003). The lack of ability of these individuals to feel empathy and to care for others is related to their antisocial behavior. One of the earliest studies by Endresen and Olweus (2001), which examined aggressive behavior and empathy among students aged 13-16 years in Norway, came to the conclusion that students who were both victims and aggressors were offered little of empathy or concern from others and were the least likely to undertake charitable actions. Lack of benevolence to and from others generates a critical need for specialized care and assistance towards the members of this category.

6. Depression and Anxiety

Studies have shown that bully-victims are at greater risk of psychosocial impairments in the form of depression and anxiety. Juvonen, Graham and Schuster (2003) examined 1,985 students in the sixth grade and discovered that this group reported higher levels of depression and loneliness in addition to substantial levels of social anxiety. Another study conducted by Brunstein Klomek (2007) concluded that male chronic victims and aggressors were more likely to experience depression and suicidal attempts than male individuals who were not involved in aggressive behavior. Female students of the same category were 32 times more depressive and 10-12 times more likely to consider suicide as a potential solution than non-aggressive females. These disturbing results show that this is the subcategory of individuals involved in bullying to the study of which the highest amount of specialized resources should be allocated, in order to improve the social and psychological well-being of students.

7. Discussion

Bullying is a problem perceived as new in our society. This phenomenon has been given focus only in recent years, given the problems that it conveys. Many researchers argue that bullying has considerably grown in importance, thus becoming a significant concern not only for the individuals involved, but also for the society in general.

Bullying can have long-term negative consequences, both for the victim and the aggressor. A number of studies reviewed by Hawker and Boulton (2013) have acknowledged that victims of bullying experience several different emotional problems and are more likely to go through isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, inability to concentrate, loss of interest in school, higher involvement in fights, loss of money or personal items etc.

On the other hand, studies conducted by Haynie (2011), Nansel (2001), and Solberg and Olweus (2009), have clearly reported emotional problems such as aggressive and antisocial behavior among the aggressors.

Studies by Professor Olweus suggest that bullying can lead to involvement in criminal behavior in later years. His research revealed that 60% of men who had been aggressors from sixth to ninth grade were convicted for at least one crime in adulthood compared to 23% of men who had not been aggressors. Furthermore, 35% to 40% of the former aggressors had had three or more convictions at the age of 24 years compared with 10% of men who had not been

aggressors.

Schools are complex organizations with various functions. Obviously, their primary purpose is academic education, but apart from this, schools are expected to contribute in socialization. Besides equipping students with the skills they need for academic achievement, they should also enable the accomplishment of other student needs ranging from basic needs for warmth and shelter, to more complex social and emotional needs. In fact, it is often compulsory for schools to comply with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model (Maslow, 1968), thus providing the fulfillment of a broad spectrum of needs, starting from the basic necessities positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy to those at the top, such as the need to know, explore, understand, as well as be able to integrate in groups.

If students are filled with worry and fear about their safety in school environments, they will allot a smaller amount of effort to the important processes of learning and socializing. Therefore, bullying and its two adverse outcomes – violence and fear – considerably reduce time spent engaging in more healthy and productive activities: learning and cooperation. This creates a climate of fear and intimidation, which leads to many students feeling unsupported and not welcome at school (Henkin, 2005; Sanders & Phye, 2004).

Some successful methods of preventing bullying at school are Bullying Prevention Programs. These consist of regular series of actions which are defined and governed by school personnel, geared towards reducing and preventing the occurrence of violent behavior at school. In order to create a safe school environment and to provide support for these programs, a close collaboration of school staff, parents, and community members are essential.

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