Peer Bullying Dilemma: To Report or Not to Report?

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Abstract – Bullying is a complex social behavior involving an array of contributing factors. Bullying in schools is described as a form of aggression where a more powerful or dominant student repeatedly humiliates a weaker student using methods that can range from verbal teasing to physical assault. The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence of recalled bullying incidents by individuals who had already graduated from high school. A total of 104 individuals (females=76, males=26) responded to a posted survey. When asked, 54.8% stated they had experienced some form of bullying while in a public school setting. Chi-square tests were performed to examine the relation between bullying, the individual at cause for bullying, where it took place, being able to tell someone about the bullying, and would action result if they did tell someone. The relation between the variables was significant, for who (a peer) caused the bullying $\chi^2(5, N=104)=75.07$, $p<.001$, where the bullying took place, (classroom, gym, and cafeteria: $p<.05$), and reporting the bullying, $\chi^2(3, N=104)=6.44$, $p=.04$. Alarmingly, 47.4% felt they could not tell their teacher or coach about the bullying for fear of repercussions and additional bullying. The model was not significant for if bullying was reported, if any action be taken $\chi^2(3, N=104)=6.40$, $p=.094$. The goal of a physical education class is for children to be active, making this goal difficult to achieve if children do not actively participate for fear of being harassed/bullied. Educators play a crucial role in creating an environment that encourages all students to participate regardless of their performance level. Results provide necessary insight into the need to train future teachers, teachers, coaches, and school administrators how to better recognize, understand, and respond to bullying behavior.

Keywords: Bullying Applied Psychology

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a complex social behavior involving an array of contributing factors and often goes unreported. It is a type of aggressive behavior that can result in physical injuries, social, and emotional difficulties, as well as academic problems. A person has been bullied when he/she has been exposed repeatedly over time to negative actions on the part of one or more individuals (Olweus, 1993). Bullying is described as a form of aggression in which a more powerful or dominant student repeatedly humiliates a weaker student using methods that can range from physical assault to verbal teasing to social ostracism. Forms of bullying include: physical, verbal, and cyber and estimations show between 20-28% of children in the U.S. have been affected by some form of bullying (Stopbullying.gov., 2018).

This project used the widely accepted definition of bullying created by Olweus (1993) that states: 'A student is being bullied or victimized when he/she is exposed, repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another (p. 9)'. Olweus defined bullying as intentional and implies a power imbalance between bully and victim.

Bullying incidents have increased and bullying has been recognized as an important problem affecting the well-being of school-aged youth. Bullying is a common experience for many children and adolescents and while some harassment is typical of youth peer relations, it presents a more serious threat to youth development (Nansel, et al., 2001). Surveys indicate that as many as half of all children are bullied at some time during their school years,

and at least 10% are bullied on a regular basis (AACAP, 2018). National statistics show 28% of U.S. students in grades 6-12 and 20% of U.S. students in grades 9-12 experienced some form of bullying. Bullying is considered an aggressive behavior that portrays an imbalance of power and is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated over time (Stopbullying.gov, 2018). Bullying is a complex social behavior and is described as a form of aggression in which a more powerful or dominant student repeatedly humiliates a weaker student (Olweus, 1993). Methods of bullying can range from physical assault to verbal teasing to social ostracism. A victim can be affected physically, emotionally, or psychologically. Forms of bullying include: physical, verbal, and cyber. Examples of physical bullying include hitting, kicking, punching, biting, scratching, and being spat at. Verbal bullying examples include rumors, gossip, taunting, threats, phone calls, name-calling, and teasing (CDC.gov, 2018). Bullying can occur in-person and through technology. More recently, bullying has been linked to online aggressive behavior using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snap Chat, email, and text messaging and is known as cyberbullying. Other examples of bullying include ignoring, excluding, or isolating behaviors (Stopbullying.gov., 2018).

Bullying occurs in many places where children convene, particularly in school, outside the school, on the school grounds, and on the bus. Ttofi & Farrington (2011) reported the following likely areas for bullying to occur: classroom (29.3%), hallway or lockers (29.0%), cafeteria (23.4%), gym or PE class (19.5%), bathroom (12.2%), and playground or recess (6.2%). A study conducted by Unnever & Cornell (2003) reported students are reluctant to report bullying and that it usually occurs without detection by teachers or other school personnel. Moreover, 64% of children who experienced bullying did not report it (Antibullyinginstitute.org, 2018).

Bullying can have a negative effect on self-image and performance and can occur in many places where teachers do not see it (Nickerson et al., 2013). Evidence supports students are reluctant to report bullying and that it usually occurs without detection by teachers or other school personnel (Unnever & Cornell, 2003). When students do not feel safe in school, they tend to be less engaged (Mehta, 2013). More importantly, when bullying is not handled accordingly, it can send a message that bullying is acceptable and appropriate in specific settings such as a physical education class (Unnever, 2003). Research consistently demonstrates bullying is an escalating issue in schools. It is important to note, particularly for educators, that children feel they are in a safe and supportive environment. Konold et al. (2014) reported bullying can turn students off to what is supposed to be an opportunity for youth development, learning, and achievement. There is substantial evidence that a positive school climate is essential to establishing a safe and orderly school environment (Cohen, et al., 2009).

Children who are bullied experience real suffering that can interfere with their social and emotional development, as well as their school performance (AACAP, 2018). Research has demonstrated that pervasive bullying in schools can promote a school climate of fear and insecurity, a diminished motivation for school attendance, and poor academic performance (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Research also demonstrates a positive school climate is essential to establishing a safe and orderly environment (Thapa, et al., 2013). Bullying has shown to have a negative association with school climate and when students perceive bullying as pervasive in their school, they tend to exhibit lower levels of engagement and feel less safe and less engaged in the school experience (Mehta, et al., 2013).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence of recalled bullying incidents by individuals who had already graduated from high school.

METHOD

Questions were posed online via *SurveyMonkey®* and a total of 102 (females=76, males=26) individuals responded to the posted survey. Individuals were asked to retrospectively recall experiences encountered while they were in a public high school. All answers were self-report and online. Questions of who, where, why, and whether the incident was reported to an adult were posed. Survey responses were coded: Neutral = 0, Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Agree = 3, Strongly Agree = 4, and No Response = 9.

RESULTS

Several chi-square tests were performed to examine the relation between bullying, the individual at cause for bullying (who), where it took place (where), being able to tell someone about the bullying (report), and if action would result if they did tell someone. The relation between the variables was significant, for *who* (a peer) caused the bullying χ^2(5, *N*=104)=75.07, *p*<.001, *where* the bullying took place, (classroom, gym, and cafeteria: *p*<.05), and reporting the bullying, χ^2(3, *N*=104)=6.44, *p*=.04. Alarmingly, 47.4% felt they could not tell their teacher or coach about the bullying for fear of repercussions and additional bullying. The model was not significant for if bullying was reported, whether any action be taken χ^2(3,*N*=104)=6.40, *p*=.094. Alarmingly, 54.8% of the respondents stated they had experienced some form of bullying while in a public school setting.

DISCUSSION

Research demonstrates bullying is an increasingly prevalent and salient issue in schools. It is important to note, particularly for educators, that children should feel they are in a safe and supportive environment. The prevalence of recalled incidents of bullying in this study suggests the importance of prevention of bullying behaviors through an intervention that targets bullying behavior. A whole-school approach that involves students, teachers, administrators, counselors, as well as parents and caregivers is crucial to lower peer aggression and create a positive environment. One that promotes healthy peer interactions and encourages academic achievement. Creating a healthy climate where students feel safe will support a desire to come to school. That environment should demonstrate an intolerance for bullying behavior, ensure acceptance for reporting bullying incidents, and providing support as well as protection for students who report bullying.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of this study should be noted. The sample size was limited and therefore, may not be generalizable to other regions or environments. In addition, the survey called for self-report responses to the questions posed. Much of the bullying research methods generally uses self-report answers to assure anonymity to the individuals involved. Recall for some individuals was over a few years prior.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further investigation and additional intervention programs are warranted to better address this growing issue. Results provide necessary insight into the need to train future teachers, teachers, coaches, counselors, and school administrators how to better recognize, understand, and respond to bullying behavior. Frey, et al. (2005) suggested training teachers and other school personnel in strategies for recognizing and responding to incidents of bullying. Future research should further examine how educators can better create a culture that supports victims of bullying and relays the message that it is okay to report such bullying incidents.

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