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Child Welfare and Children in the Education System: Prioritizing the Need for Statewide Anti-bullying Policies

by Angelique Day, MSW and Suzanne Cross, PhD, ACSW, LMSW

*"...I was bullied a lot, and often cried and hated going to school."
Undergraduate Student, Michigan State University
[a reflection on her experience in high school]*

Abstract

This study was conducted to explore the responses of 380 students enrolled at Michigan State University who had experienced bullying in high school as victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. Findings included significant predictors of bullying behavior. For example, male students were more likely to bully than their female counterparts; and bystanders who witnessed bullying incidents were more likely to become both victims and/or perpetrators of bullying. The MSU students offered recommendations for policymakers to create anti-bullying legislation with enforcement guidelines and other methods of improving school culture to reduce future bullying incidents.

Introduction/Background

Across the State of Michigan, considerable academic, social and political attention has turned to the development of policies that promote human rights. Prevention of bullying and being harassed in school is one of the most important rights for children. The experience of being bullied has important psychosocial, behavioral, and health consequences with an immediate impact on school achievement and social development. There is also a potential for long-term negative effects that persist into adulthood (Fitzpatrick, Dulin & Piko, 2007). Bullying creates a climate of fear and disrespect for youth who are bullied. They are more likely to

be depressed, lonely, anxious, experience low self-esteem, feel ill, and have suicidal ideations or, in some cases, commit suicide (HRSA, 2005). Previous researchers have reported that victimization does the most damage to those who felt isolated during high school (Newman, Holden, & Delville, 2004). The perpetrators of bullying behaviors are more likely than others to get into frequent fights, vandalize or steal property, drink alcohol, smoke, be truant from school, drop out of school, and carry a weapon (HRSA, 2005). Other characteristics of bullies include impulsiveness, lack of empathy, lack of conformity to rules, and positive attitudes toward violence (HRSA, 2005). The bystanders, both directly and indirectly involved, may suffer from emotional turmoil related to the bullying incidents they observed or heard about from their peers (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008; NASW, 2003)

In Michigan, during the past four consecutive legislative cycles, bullying legislation has been introduced and received limited action in various committees, with all efforts ending in dead bills. In 2003, The Michigan Child Death Review Team investigated the deaths of three adolescents who were residents in the State of Michigan and had committed suicide as a direct result of significant struggles with bullying at their schools (MDHS, 2005). It is most unfortunate that the deaths of these young people were unable to have an impact and to prompt meaningful legislative action. Regrettably, bullying has not gained support for legislative action as has other

legislation targeted to increase the safety of Michigan's children. As of June 2007, 35 states have enacted laws that address harassment, intimidation and bullying at school. It is estimated 77 percent of the 38 million students enrolled in public schools across the county are protected under the jurisdiction of these state laws (Srabstein, Berkman, Pyntikova, 2008; Sutton, 2007). The question to be addressed is, "How prevalent does the occurrence of bullying have to be to warrant legislative attention in Michigan?"

This retrospective study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of bullying during high school among a select group of undergraduate students enrolled at Michigan State University. Also, the extent of implementation of anti-bullying policies and perceived deterrent of bullying behavior as a result of these policies were explored. The responses from students included earnest recommendations for policymakers as well as administrators and other school personnel as to how to decrease bullying behaviors in high schools.

Methods

Sample

The sample for the study included 380 undergraduate college students recruited from nine social science general education courses offered at Michigan State University (MSU). Not all students who participated in the study may have graduated from high schools located in Michigan, and it is likely some would be described as out-of-state students. The MSU institutional review board approved the study for the academic year of 2007-2008. The data were collected at the beginning of the class period for each participating course within a three-week timeframe in the fall semester of the 2007. Consent forms and the survey instruments were disseminated at the time of data collection. The students participated in the study voluntarily, and informed consent was assumed by the return of the surveys. Of the subject sample, 66 percent were female, and 78 percent were White. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the non-white students included African American (10%), Latino (5%), Asian (3%), American Indian (2%), and other (2%). Sixty-three percent of the students who participated in the study had graduated from high school less than two years prior to participation in the study. See Tables 1 and 3 for more detailed information on sample

characteristics of victims and perpetrators of bullying behavior.

Measures

The survey instrument contained 19 questions designed to elicit both quantitative (multiple choice) and qualitative (open-ended) responses. The survey was self-administered, with a timeframe of ten to fifteen minutes for completion. The instrument was designed to assess each student's experiences as a victim of bullying, as a witness to a bullying incident, and/or in the role of the perpetrator of bullying in high school. Prior to completion of the survey questions, the request was made for students to first consider the definition of bullying. Bullying was defined as "the attempt of one individual to gain power and control over the life of another. A person is being bullied when they are exposed, repeatedly, and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more persons" (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). The responses were primarily categorical, and the questions were taken from standardized instruments that were implemented in prior studies to assess bullying and victimization among adolescent populations (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). The questions required the participants to respond to the frequency and types of bullying they experienced and/or witnessed. Also, they were asked where bullying most frequently occurred during the school day and if they told anyone of the bullying incidents. Next, they were asked if action was taken as a result of informing another individual of the incidents. Lastly, the students were asked if the high schools they attended had adopted any formal anti-bullying policies.

Analysis

SPSS statistical software was used to analyze the data. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were collected for each of the major groups of students impacted by bullying – the victims, the perpetrators, and the bystanders. Due to inconsistent patterns of responses in the dataset around the questions, "Did you experience bullying in high school?" and "What kinds of bullying did you experience in high school?" the first question was dismissed from the analysis, and the responses from the second question were used to determine which participants were victims of bullying in high school. Because the responses were nominal in nature, Pearson's Chi Square tests were used to explore relationships between participant characteristics on

victimization, perpetration, and the witnessing of bullying incidents. Effect sizes were calculated using Cramer’s V to give a more concrete impression of the statistically significant results (Cohen, 1994).

Qualitative data from the surveys were entered verbatim into a Microsoft Word program. A team of researchers independently reviewed the collective set of responses and coded the document for themes. The team then met to utilize the constant comparative method for consensus on the emergence of themes. This method improved the integrity of the data by increasing internal reliability of the findings (Barbour, 2008).

Limitations of the Study Design

One limitation of the present data is the retrospective reporting of the experiences of victimization, perpetration, and witnessing of bullying incidents. As such, the report may reflect differences in perceptions rather than actual differences in bullying experiences. Newman et al. (2004) argue, however, that autobiographical memories may be reasonably accurate and stable. Future research may include those students currently in high school who are experiencing victimization, or students who are in the role of perpetrators or bystanders.

Results

In addition to collecting information on sample demographics, two major research questions were explored: (1) How prevalent is bullying among high school students? (2) What actions have high schools

taken to combat bullying behavior during the school day?

Quantitative Findings

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the sample, including gender, race/ethnicity, and the type and size of the high schools each student attended. Thirty-three percent of students in the study reported being victims of bullying during their high school years. This number is much larger than anticipated, as the literature review indicated bullying wanes in high school, with only nine percent reporting (Solberg & Olweus, 2003; Newman et al., 2005).

Those participants who indicated they were not bullied reported being impacted by bullying behavior in their high school environments. Eighty-seven percent of the students indicated that they witnessed one or more bullying incidents. When cross tabulations were run on the character data, none were significant. No particular demographic was associated with a student’s increased risk of being a target for bullying in high school. This finding is contrary to the literature, which states minority students are more likely to be victimized (Fitzpatrick et al., 2007).

Table 2 depicts the relationship between witnessing a bullying incident and having the experience of being bullied. Those who were witnesses of bullying behavior were significantly more likely to be targets of bullying ($X^2(2) = 10.32; P < .01$). The effect is small ($V = .165$) and explains only slightly more than 1 percent of the total variance.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Victims of Bullying Behavior

Characteristics	Total	Victims	X ² (df)	V	P <
	N (%)	N (%)			
Gender			5.26 (4) =	.083	.262
Male	126 (33)	47 (37)			
Females	252 (66)	76 (30)			
Race/Ethnicity			2.88 (2) =	.087	.237
White (non-Hispanic origin)	303 (78)	104 (34)			
Non-white	84 (22)	26 (31)			
Type of High School			2.53 (6) =	.058	.865
Public	335 (91)	108 (32)			
Private	35 (9)	12 (34)			
Size of High School			3.93 (6) =	.072	.686
Small (< 250)	25 (7)	11 (44)			
Medium (250-750)	104 (28)	36 (35)			
Large (> 750)	248 (66)	77 (31)			

Table 2. The Relationship between Bystanders and Victimization

Bystander/ Witness	Victim	
	Yes	No
Yes	118 (36)	213 (64)
No	6 (13)	42 (88)

$X^2(2) = 10.32; V = .165, P < .01$

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) for the sample of students who reported that they were perpetrators of bullying behavior in high school. Cross tabulations were run on the character data to find there were certain characteristics that were associated with being a perpetrator of bullying behavior. Males were more likely to bully than females ($X^2(2) = 53.02; P < .001$), and students attending private schools were more likely to bully their peers than their counterparts attending public schools ($X^2(3) = 11.92; P < .01$). The effect size of gender on perpetrating bullying behavior is medium ($V = .374$), accounting for more than 9 percent of the total variance. The effect size of the type of school students attend on perpetrating bullying behavior is small ($V = .117$), accounting for slightly more than 1 percent of the total variance.

Table 4 depicts the relationship between witnessing a bullying incident and subsequent perpetration of a bullying incident. Those who were witnesses of bullying behavior were significantly more likely to be perpetrators ($X^2(1) = 5.70; P < .02$). The effect is small ($V = .112$) and explains only slightly more than 1 percent of the total variance.

Table 4. The Relationship between Bystanders and Perpetrators

Bystander/Witness	Perpetrator	
	Yes	No
Yes	87 (26)	245 (74)
No	5 (10)	43 (90)

$X^2(1) = 5.70; V = .112; P < .02$

Forty-one percent of the students reported their high schools had formal anti-bullying policies in place, 17 percent had no such policies in place, and an additional 41 percent were unaware as to whether their schools had a policy or not. When students were asked if they told anyone at school about either witnessing or experiencing a bullying incident that occurred in the school environment, 43 percent reported they told friends, followed by a parent or guardian (20%), and/or siblings (12%). Only five percent reported that they were comfortable talking to an adult at school about an incident they witnessed or experienced. Twenty percent of students chose not to report an incident. When the students were asked if anything was done as a result of telling someone about the bullying incident, in 11 percent of cases, an action was taken to stop the bullying; in 14 percent of the cases, an action was taken, but the bullying persisted; in six percent of the cases, the intervention used caused the bullying to worsen, and in 41 percent of cases no action was taken to stop the bullying.

Table 3. Sample Characteristics of Perpetrators of Bullying Behavior

Characteristics	Total	Bully	$X^2(df)$	V	P <
	N (%)	N (%)			
Gender			53.02 (2) =	.374	.000*
Male	126 (33)	58 (46)			
Females	253 (66)	33 (13)			
Race/Ethnicity			.198 (1) =	.023	.656
White (non-Hispanic origin)	304 (77)	75 (25)			
Non-white	93 (23)	23 (25)			
Type of High School			11.92 (3) =	.117	.008*
Public	336 (91)	77 (23)			
Private	35 (9)	9 (26)			
Size of High School			4.43 (3) =	.108	.219
Small (< 250)	25 (7)	10 (40)			
Medium (250-750)	104 (28)	24 (23)			
Large (> 250)	249 (66)	57 (23)			

Qualitative Findings

Students responded to the following open-ended question, “What could your school have done to prevent/reduce bullying in your high school?” Three main themes emerged. (1) The need for the development of new anti-bullying policies and/or the enforcement of existing policies. (2) The development of innovative programs to prevent bullying. (3) Other types of interventions to be utilized while legally mandated anti-bullying policies are in development.

The need for the development of new anti-bullying policies and/or the enforcement of existing ones

Students offered the following suggestions related to policy development:

“Create an anti-teasing policy [including anti-discrimination & anti-bullying policies] because the bullying I witnessed usually wasn’t physical – it was mostly verbal – jokes about people, etc.”

“[For schools that had policies, they could have] been more assertive with [the implementation of] the policies.”

“I guess they could have punished the bullies more. Our school did not have an official anti-bully policy... If you want[ed] the bullying to stop, [you had to] fight back [yourself].”

The development of innovative programs to prevent bullying

Students offered the following recommendations on programs they believed would have an impact on bullying.

“My school implemented a peer mediation program that I believed helped take the edge off bullying.”

“Get even more people involved in the Safe School Ambassador Program, which was a program that contributed to decreasing the amount of bullying in high schools. If you don’t already know about the program, I highly suggest checking it out, it’s nationally used.”

“Positive Peer Intervention [similar to peer mediation and restorative justice program models].”

“There was really no program or form of advocacy about bullying when I was there [in high school]. So the implementation of some sort of program, assembly probably would’ve made a difference because I know there were others that had it far worse than me.”

Other types of interventions to be utilized while legally mandated anti-bullying policies are in development

“Other” student recommendations included the following:

“Created a pressure free environment. Often when I witnessed bullying it was a chain [reaction], kids trying to act tough to impress or make friends [by] laugh[ing] at another’s expense.”

“They could have made a more positive experience by promoting diversity.”

“Since my school was so large they could have placed more adult administrators throughout the building during busy times, like breaks between classes [having hall monitors], and lunch [including presence in the cafeteria].”

“Actually paying more attention to what was going on – they seemed too preoccupied giving out disciplinary action for other things like dress code or tardiness and ignored bullying.”

“Maybe make us wear uniforms so people weren’t teased about their clothes.”

“Teachers should be encouraged to step in and take whatever action is necessary to stop and prevent bullying in schools.”

Discussion

Based on this retrospective study, a significant proportion of adolescents are victims, perpetrators, and bystanders of bullying incidents at some point in high school. This subject sample presented no gender differences in one's likelihood to become a target of bullying. This null effect is consistent with prior research (Newman et al., 2004). Also consistent with the literature reviewed, this study found that males were more likely to be perpetrators of bullying behavior than their female counterparts (HRSA, 2005). Unique to this study were the findings that bystanders who witnessed bullying incidents were more likely to become both victims and perpetrators of bullying behavior than students who never witnessed a bullying incident.

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that the development of anti-bullying policies is warranted not only for the state of Michigan, but across the nation. It is critical to pay attention not only to the victims of bullying behavior, but also to the needs of adolescents who abuse others to gain attention and power. The vast majority of students in school who are not victims or perpetrators of bullying, but stand on the sidelines as bystanders, need direction as to how they should react as they witness these incidents. The programs specifically identified by the students in this study as critical to the reduction of bullying in their schools included peer mediation¹/restorative justice programs (Morrison, 2002) and the Safe School Ambassador Program.² They also recommended policies be implemented in their schools that include counseling services for the victims of bullying. All these programs have one commonality: the emphasis on the need to build a sense of community among students and school personnel. This community would enhance positive connections at school – shifting the school climate toward respect and consideration and away from peer to peer abuse. In addition, it would foster a rich environment to build relationships for the students to feel comfortable with school personnel. Examples of student responses which highlight their concerns in the reporting of incidences include:

“Nothing can be done if no one speaks out about the bullying situation. As much as we

may want action to take place. It all starts with the student and whether or not they are willing to talk or speak out about it.”

“If the bullying isn't reported then they can't do anything about it. Kids aren't going to report bullying if they don't want to or feel uncomfortable doing so.”

“[Reporting should] be more confidential. [It's] easier to say what happened without being named.”

It is imperative that school officials react promptly to reported incidents of bullying. If actions are not taken by school personnel, students will have no incentive to report, and may be inclined to take the matter into their own hands. Student actions may include participating in physical confrontations, avoiding school attendance, or self-harm. The following quotes depict the concerns and experiences students have faced with bullying in high school:

“...I believe often time[s], school officials turned their heads to bullying.”

“...Our school did not have an official anti-bully policy... If you want[ed] the bullying to stop, [you had to] fight back [yourself].”

“...I did however go to a private catholic middle school and I was bullied a lot, and often cried and hated going to school.”

Lessons learned: What hasn't worked?

Policies that have defined who victims are have caused several problems for lawmakers in the past, dividing political parties that argue over which victims get special rights over other victims. This issue specifically impacted the anti-bullying bills that were stalled in the State of Michigan Senate during the 2007-2008 legislative cycle. Schools that have struggled to implement anti-bullying policies in other states shared the following pitfalls: lack of time, lack of administrative support at both the school and district levels, and inadequate training (Brewster & Railsback, 2001).

Best practices: What can we learn from other states?

Of the 35 states with anti-bullying policies cited by Srabstein et al. (2008), only 16 of the statutes were perceived to have been effective in reducing bullying in their respective states. These sixteen exemplary policies, including two that have been implemented in the Midwestern states of Ohio and Indiana, share the following essential components: They were written in a comprehensive manner (Riese, 2007; Bully Police, 2008). The term “bullying” was used in the text of the policy, and included definitions of bullying and harassment. The laws were clearly cited as anti-bullying laws, not as school safety laws. There was not any major emphasis on defining victims. The statutes include recommendations for school districts in regard to what is required for a model policy. The laws all required prevention programs as well as anti-bullying training and education for students and staff, and legislators earmarked funds that schools drew down to implement them. All of the laws included a due date for the model policy, when the schools needed to have their policies in place, and when the anti-bullying programs were mandated to go into effect. The policies included protections against reprisal, retaliation or false accusations. They included protections for school districts against lawsuits upon compliance with policies. Many of the policies included accountability reporting measures that the districts made to either lawmakers or the State Education Superintendent, and consequences were assigned to schools/districts that did not comply with the law. Superior statutes required mandatory posting and/or notification of policies and reporting procedures for students and parents at the district level.³ It is recommended that Michigan policymakers review these exemplary policies and incorporate the valuable and effective aspects into the developed of anti-bullying policies to become law. Two new bullying bills have been recently introduced in the Michigan state legislature, one in each respective chamber. SB 275, “Matt’s safe school law,” was introduced in the Senate on March 3, 2009 and is now sitting in the Senate Education Committee, and

HB 4580 was introduced in the House on March 12, 2009 and was referred to the House Education Committee. Both bills are written in identical language and share bipartisan support. In their current form, neither bill includes comprehensive language as suggested by the literature. For example, these policies do not include language that would protect districts against reprisal, retaliation or false accusations; nor do they protect the districts from lawsuits that may be brought as a result of a school’s compliance to the policies.

Conclusion

Schools in Michigan have typically approached the bullying problem by utilizing zero tolerance policies, which were specifically developed to address the physical safety of students inside school walls. Issues of bullying are broader than the limited definition of physical safety. The results of this study substantiate the need for the State of Michigan to give serious consideration to a more effective approach to this serious social phenomenon. The focus of anti-bullying policies ought to incorporate not only consequences for those who bully but prevention of all types of incidents. Michigan should strive to eliminate the need to maintain preventable deaths associated with bullying and harassment as categories depicted in the Child Death Review Index (MDHS, 2005). If students are expected to learn and achieve high standards, they must be afforded opportunities to attend school in a safe learning environment without the threat of physical danger or emotional abuse. ©

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Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.studygs.net/peermed.htm>
- 2 <http://www.safeschoolambassadors.org/>
- 3 <http://www.bullypolice.org/grade.html>