

PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING BEHAVIOUR AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

By

Love Nwamadi (Ph.D)

Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuelumini,
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Abstract

Bullying among school children is certainly a very old phenomenon, with significant number of students being targets of the bullying. It occurs when a person or group of persons repeatedly say or do hurtful things to another person who is unable to defend himself or herself. Bullying among secondary school students can have damaging consequences to the students involved, their peers, parents and disrupt school activities if not checked. Wherein, this paper looked at the prevalence, causes, forms, and consequences of bullying behavior among secondary school students. It considered bullying among secondary school students as a major problem which is on the increase, with far dire consequences. The paper also offered some counselling implications as intervention strategies to bullying behaviour among secondary school students. One of such implications is that counselling for students with bullying behaviour should be encouraged in schools with the aim of improving students' behaviours, social skills and interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Bullying Behaviour, Prevalence, Causes, Consequences and Counselling Implications

Introduction

The school is perceived to be a place where students should feel safe and secure next to their home but the opposite is often the case. The sad reality is that a significant number of students are bullied in school. The pervading incidences of bullying behaviour among secondary school students are alarming and should not be disregarded or dismissed in a hurry. Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can have negative consequences on the general school climate and on the right of students to learn in a safe environment without fear. Bullying can also have negative lifelong consequences both for students who bully

and for their victims. What then is bullying?

Bullying is a repeated negative behaviour involving aggressive physical contact, fighting, shoving, verbal threats, mockery, grimacing or cruel gesturing, which over time are directed at a person or persons and which are carried out by one or several individuals who are stronger than the victim (Aluede, Adeleke; Omoike and Afen-Akpaيدا cited in Dorcas, 2015). Adewale (2004) described bullying as a hostile behaviour displayed by an Individual in order to harm another person or a group of people. According to him, bullies engage in the act in order to establish power and control over their

colleagues, whom they consider to be weaker. Bullying is an anti-social behaviour among students that is characterized by acts of hostility, frightening, hitting, hurting and harassing a weaker person (Ayanniyi, 2002).

Udoh (2010) described a bully as a person who instead of facing his problem with those of his own size and age, prefers to test his strength on less-able person or persons by harassing and attacking them.

A bully is also person who willfully and repeatedly exercises power over another with hostile or malicious intent (Lumsden as cited in Bonke, 2010). Sequel to this, Nickel, Krawczyk, Nickel, Forthber, Kettler, Leiberich, Muelbacher, Tritt, Mitterlehner, Lahmann, Rother and Loew (2005), further described bullying as an intentional and unprovoked abuse of power by one or more children to inflict pain or cause distress to another child on repeated occasions. It is the experience among children of being a target to violence, threats and aggression of other children who are not siblings and not necessarily age mates (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Smith (2016) described the act bullying as an unprovoked attack that causes hurt of a psychological, social or physical nature on victims. Bullying is typically repetitive and involves a power imbalance between the bully and victim where the victim is unable to defend himself from the bully (Rigby, 2001).

Bullying behaviour according to Olweus (2013) is a repetitive violent behaviour that occurs over time in relationships characterized by an imbalance in power and that can be manifested in many different ways. It is the systematic abuse

among peers or a process of intentional and repetitive aggression, characterized by acts involves direct or indirect intimidation, oppression insults, harassment, exclusion and/or discrimination (Caravita, Sijtsema, Rambaran & Gini, 2014). The behaviors that characterize bullying (gossiping, calling names, hitting, pushing, provoking, socially isolating, spreading rumors, among others) are deliberate, intentional and repetitively promulgated by an individual or group of people and impinge on others considered weaker in their social position or who have little capacity to defend themselves from aggression, considering power differences among peers (symbolic domination), (Bowes, Arseneault, Maughan, Taylor, Caspi & Moffitt, 2009). According to Sullivan (2000), bullying is a conscious and willful act of aggression and / or manipulation by one or more individuals against another individual or group. It takes on multiple forms that can be categorized as verbal, physical and relational (Coloroso, 2003). Bullying is a repeated action rather than a one-time occurrence (Sanders & Phye, 2004).

Olweus (1993) explained that bullying is evident when it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend him- or herself. Bullying is therefore characterized by two conflicting parties that are imbalanced in terms of power, physically and / or mentally (Oyaziwo, 2006). It can last for a short period of time or continue for years, and is an abuse of power by those who carry it out. Bullying is either pre-meditated or opportunistic and may be

directed towards one victim or occur serially and randomly (Sullivan, 2000).

Victims of bullying therefore experience injury or distress in the face of repeated attacks against which they are unable to defend themselves. The ultimate outcome of bullying behaviour is empowerment and gratification for one party and suffering or distress for the other (Oyaziwo, 2006). Kim (2004) saw bullying as a long-standing violence, physical or psychological, carried out by an individual or a group and directed against an individual, who is not able to defend himself in the actual situation, with a conscious desire to hurt, threaten or frighten the individual or put him under stress.

Basically, two parties or categories of people are involved in bullying behaviour namely, the bully and the victim. There could be a third party known as the bystander or witness (Neto, 2005). These are discussed briefly;

The Bully: The bully also known as the aggressor is the architect or the initiator of the bullying behaviour. The bully derives joy or satisfaction in inflicting pain on others. According to Neto (2005), bullies are generally characterized by the following antisocial behaviours or attitude: impulsiveness, high opinion of self, popularity among peers, proneness to violence, supportiveness of violence, less satisfaction with the school and family, readiness to fight, tendency to take drug or alcohol.

The Victim: The victim, otherwise known as the bullying target, is the student who is

exposed to repeated negative actions on the part of one or more students (Neto, 2005). The victims are usually oppressed and subjected to pain and stress by the bullies because the former in one way or the other seem less important and less advantaged than most of the students. The bullying victims are associated with the following characteristics: physical weakness, lower self-esteem, passiveness in social activities, shyness, depression, anxiety, lack of social skills and friends, tendency to avoid school and social activities (Neto, 2005; Zirpoly, 2009). Victims of bullying do not usually reveal their ordeal apparently because they feel embarrassed, afraid or even doubtful if the school authority will come to their aid. However, there is another category of person we could talk about when referring to bullying behaviour; the witness or bystander

The Witness or Bystander: The witness or the bystander refers to the category of students who are usually present in the bullying environment but do not directly get involved. According to Neto (2005), the bullying witness can be classified as *helpers* if they partake in bullying behaviour; *supporters* if they support the bullies; and *defenders* if they defend or protect the victims and call the attention of adults to help out.

Forms of Bullying Behaviour

Generally, bullying occurs when one or more persons repeatedly say or do hurtful things to another who has problem defending himself or herself. Bullying behaviour among students in secondary schools takes various forms. It can be

direct or indirect. Direct bullying usually involves hitting, kicking, inflicting injury or making insults, offensive and sneering comments or threats. Repeatedly teasing someone who clearly shows signs of distress are also recognized as bullying. Indirect bullying on the other hand, is the experience of being excluded from a group of friends, being spoken ill of and being prevented from making friends (Coloroso, 2002). Crick, Nelson, Morale, Cullerton-Sen, Casas and Hickman (2001) stressed that three forms of bullying exist: physical, verbal and relational. The physical bullying involves behaviours whereby the perpetrator (bully) might punch, hit, intimidate and/ or steal money from the victim. Verbal bullying includes behaviour such as the perpetrator making rude remarks and / or name calling toward a victim. While the relational bullying also known as indirect bullying involves psychological harm and manipulation where the perpetrator might spread rumours, backbite and/ or exclude the victim from the peer group (Gadin & Hammarrstrom, 2005).

Prevalence of Bullying Behaviour

Bullying among school children occurs worldwide. It takes place in small schools, large schools, single sex schools and co-educational schools. It occurs in both primary and secondary schools. Dorcas (2015) observed that there is a high prevalence of bullying behaviour especially among secondary school students wherein students are often bullying others verbally and physically by teasing, harassment, name-calling, fighting and shoving them. In a cross-sectional study carried out on senior and junior

secondary school students in Northern Nigeria, Egbochukwu (2007) reported that one out of four students in a class has been bullied, and one out of five is a bully.

In a somewhat first ever nation-wide situational analysis survey of school violence in Nigeria conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education (2007), it was revealed that physical bullying and verbal bullying accounted for 85 and 50% respectively of the bulk of violence against children in schools. Aluede (2011) observed that there is a rate of bullying among secondary school students in the Southern region of Nigeria with about 79% of students being bullied every term. Umoh as cited in Dorcas (2015) found out that bullying is more prevalent in the rural areas than urban areas in Eastern Nigeria with about 90% of students being bullied by their classmates or seniors in other classes. The situation is still the same in other countries of the world. For instance, in the United State, about 30% of 6th through 10th grade students had been involved in bullying incidents (Nansel, 2001). A survey published in "Pediatrics in Review" reveals that in Norway, 14% of school children are either bullies or victims. In Japan, 40% of secondary school students responded that they have been bullied, while in Australia and Spain, the problem prevails among 17% of the students. In Britain, statistics shows that about 1.3 million children are involved in bullying (Wet, 2005).

Causes of Bullying Behaviour

Studies have identified several factors influencing bullying behaviour among secondary school students. These factors

causing bullying behaviour can be however be categorized into five;

- a) Societal Factor: This comprises events, experiences, observable behaviours and actions which influence the behaviour of the child over time. They include parental neglect, parenting styles, family instability, family type, and acts of aggression within the home or in the society, family stress, rejection, isolation, and exposure to violent movies, marginalization, child abuse, antisocial acts and inconsistent reinforcements (Asonibare, 2018).
- b) Biological Factor: Scientific researches have proved that some individuals behave aggressively due to malfunctioning of the body organs or imbalance in the production of body hormones. Aggressive behaviours such as bullying can also be attributed to poor state of mental health, emotions, irrational thought processes and irritability (Jekayinfa, 2004).
- c) Peer Group Influence: Secondary school students spend most of their time with their peers and age-mates than they do with their parents and teachers. Salawu (2003) described a peer group as the group that the child interacts and plays with within his/her immediate environment which has considerable influence on the child's behaviour and decisions. According to him, while in the group, the child enjoys a free world, more independent in thought and action and he/she has freedom to

discuss matters of interest, which may be contrary to the interest shared by adults. Wherein, the peer of a child exhibit bullying behaviour, the tendency for such child to becoming a bully will be high.

- d) Environment Factors: Environmental influences such as teachers' attitude, behaviour and supervisory routines play a crucial role in determining the extent to which bullying will manifested in a classroom or a school. Lack of appropriate resources within schools is also associated with higher levels of school bullying. Bullying often occurs when there is little or no supervision, such as school playground or there is lack of attention and warmth toward the child (Engler, 2013).
- e) Psychological Causes of Bullying Behaviour: there are strong arguments that bullying behaviour are caused by some psychological variables such as low self-esteem, locus of control, emotional intelligence and inferiority complex (Chin-Siang, Chien-Ping, Shuet-Wen, Chiew-Yen, ZhenHui & Chooi, 2018).

Consequences of Bullying Behaviour

It has observed that bullying among secondary school students can have damaging consequences if not checked, to the students involved, their peers, parents and disrupt school activities. Bullying behaviour is an alarming issue of concern among stakeholders in education, essentially because the school is an institution designed for teaching and

learning, and this task can only be successful in a conducive environment devoid of intimidation, harassment, insecurity and fear.

Bullying behaviour is an anti-social behaviour and has resulted in intimidation, fighting, gangsterism and cultism among which makes the school environment unconducive for learning. The situation is so critical that some students tend to feel less safe and unsatisfied with school life in a school where high level of bullying behavior is displayed by other students. For such students, and particularly victims of bullying, the school is no longer a place of concentrated work and learning.

Victims of bullying often suffer from long-term psychological problems like loneliness, diminished self-esteem, psychosomatic complaints and depression. The fear of being bullied has caused victims to skip classes or absent themselves from school, and some cases they drop out of school. Bullying behaviour has also resulted in negative consequences which affects the educational and social life of students. Often, students are being suspended or expelled from school due to acts of bullying.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that bullying is a serious problem facing the school system today. Bullying behaviour is an anti-social behaviour characterized by intentional and continual acts of aggression towards a person or persons (the victim), who cannot defend himself, and this usually involves an imbalance of power between the bully and the bullied. It

has resulted in intimidation harassment, insecurity, fear and lifelong psychological consequences for both students who are bullies and for those who are bullied.

Counselling Implications

1. Counselling for students with bullying behaviour should be encouraged in schools with the aim of improving students' behaviours, social skills and interpersonal relationships.
2. Since bullies tend to show little empathy for their target, school counselors will need to provide interventions to improve students' level of compassion and empathy. This may include activities that foster sensitivity for the feelings of others. Role reversal techniques where students' role play situations in which they place themselves in the position of others may help increase empathic understanding.
3. Counsellors should employ intervention strategies such as teaching bullies positive behaviour through modeling, coaching, prompting, praise, social skills, conflict management, anger management, character education, signing anti-teasing or anti-bullying pledges in order to reduce bullying incidents in schools.
4. Counsellors should pay greater attention to students both in the classroom and at the playground so as to identify students with bullying behaviour in order to offer practical help to change their behaviour.

5. The counselors should provide all children the opportunities to develop good interpersonal skills and create a social context, which is supportive and inclusive, in which bullying behaviour is not tolerated by the majority.
6. Deliberate efforts at establishing/strengthening counselling services in schools must be initiated with a view to protecting children from violence. Therefore, preservice and in- service capacity of guidance counselors and school psychologists must be prioritize.
7. The counselors could use peer support as a strategy in handling bullying. According to Robinson and Maines (2017), peer support is employed when bullying has been observed or reported. It involves the following steps:

Step One: Interact with the victims: Do not question the victim or the bully about the incident but try to know those who are involved.

Step Two: Convene a meeting with the people involved: This includes the bully, the victims and some bystanders or colluders. A group of six or eight is better.

Step Three: Explain the problem: Tell the group about the way the victim is feeling. You can use poem, story writing or drawing to buttress your points. Do not discuss the details of the incidents or blame any member of the group.

Step Four: Share responsibility: Do not attribute blame but acknowledge that the group is responsible and can do something about the incident.

Step Five: Ask the group for their ideas: Each member of the group should be encouraged to suggest ways by which the victim could be helped to feel happier.

Step Six: Leave it up to them: The counselor ends the meeting by passing over the responsibility to the group and encourages them to solve the problem. He/she should arrange to meet with them again to see how things are going (follow-up).

Step Seven: The counselor should meet the group again about a week later and discuss with each student, including the victim, on how things have been going. This allows the counselor to monitor the bully and keeps the young people involved in the process.

References

- Adewale, A. A. (2004). *Incidences of bullying in primary and secondary schools in Ogun State*. Lagos: Successful Publishers Ltd.
- Aluede, A. A (2011). Managing bullying problems in Nigerian secondary schools: Some counseling interventions for implication. *Afr. Symposium*. 11(1):138-145.
- Aluede, A., Adeleke, F., Omoike, D., & Afen-Akpaide, J. (2008). A review of the extent, nature, characteristics and effects of bullying behavior in schools. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*. 38(2):1-5.

- Asonibare, (1998). Modifying maladaptive behaviour in schools. In A. I. Idowu (Eds.) *Guidance and Counselling in Education, Ilorin*.
- Bonke, A. O. (2010). Bullying behaviour, its associated factors and psychological effects among secondary students in Nigeria. *The Journal of International Social Research*, 3 (10), 498-509
- Coloroso, B. (2003). *The bully, the bullied and the bystander*. NY: Harper Collins Publishers
- Crick, N. R., Nelson, D. A., Morale, J. R., Cullerton-Sen, C., Casas, J. F. & Hickman, S. E. (2001). *Relational victimization in childhood and adolescence: I hurt you through the grapevine*. In J. Juvonen., A. Nishina & S. Graham (Eds). *Peer victimization in schools: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized*. New York: Guildford. Pp. 196-214
- Dorcas, O. F. (201). Bullying in Nigerian secondary schools: Strategies for counseling intervention. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 10(4), 435-443
- Egbochukwu, E. O. (2007). Bullying in Nigerian schools: Prevalence study and implications for counselling. *J. Social Sci.* 14(1):65-71.
- Federal Ministry of Education (2007). The national strategic framework for violence free basic education in Nigeria. Abuja: Federal Ministry of Education.
- Gadin, K. G., & Hammarrstrom, A. (2005). A possible contributor to the higher degree of girls reporting psychological symptoms compared with boys in grade nine. *European Journal of Public Health*. 15, pp. 380-385.
- Hawker, D. S. J. & Boulton, M. J. (2000). Twenty years of research on peer victimization and psychological maladjustment: A meta-analytic review of cross-sectional studies. *Journal of child psychology and Psychiatry*. 41, 441-455
- Salawu, B. (2003). *Sociology concepts and theories*. Ibadan. Cresthill Publishers Ltd.
- Jekayinfa, A. A. (2004). *Types, causes, and effects of gender-based violence: Challenges for social studies education Nigeria*. Gender Indemac Ltd.
- Kim, S. (2004). *A study of personal and environmental factors influencing bullying*. Ludwig Maximilians University, Munchen.
- Neto, A. A. (2005). Bullying- aggressive behaviour among students. *Journal de Pediatria. Brazilian Multi-Professional Association for Children and Adolescent Protection. Discourse* 1:13- 21.
- Nickel, M. K., Krawczyk, J. Nickel, C., Forthber, P., Kettler, C., Leiberich, P., Muelbacher, M., Tritt, K., Mitterlehner, F. O., Lahmann, C., Rother, W. K., & Loew, T. H. (2005). Anger, interpersonal relationships, and health related quality of life in bullying boys who are treated with outpatient family therapy. A randomized, Prospective, controlled trial with 1 year follow-up. *Pediatrics*. 116, 247-254.
- Olweus, D. (2013). Annotation: Bullying at school: Basic facts and effects of a school based intervention program. *J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry*, 3:1171-1190.
- Oyaziwo, A. (2006). Bullying in Schools: A Form of Child Abuse in Schools. *Educational Research Quarterly*. 30 (1), 37-49.

- Rigby, K. (2001). *Stop the bullying: A handbook for schools*. Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Sanders, C., & Phye, G. (2004). *Bullying: Implications for the classroom*. New York: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Smith, P. K. (2016). The silent nightmare: Bullying and victimization in school peer groups. *The Psychologist: Bulletin of the British Psychological Society*, 4, pp. 243-248.
- Sullivan, K. (2000). *The anti-bullying handbook*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Umoh, S. H. (2000). Managing the problems of the Nigerian adolescents through counselling. A paper presented at a workshop organized by the Federal Polytechnic, Offa, Kwara State.
- Wet, C. (2005). The nature and extent of bullying in Free States secondary schools. Retrieved on September 18, 2006 from <http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-1/bullying.htm>
- Zirpoly, T. J. (2009). *Bullying behaviour*. Pearson Allyn Bacon Prentice Hall. Retrieved from <http://www.education.com/ref/article/bullyingbehaviour>.