

Bullying Behaviors and School Climate Through the Perspective of Primary-School Students

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Abstract

Bullying, which is a global public health problem, has serious effects on children and adolescents. If peer-bullying behaviors among primary-school children with various effects ranging from low academic achievement, anxiety and depression to suicide and substance abuse are not detected and intervened in a timely manner, they have the risk of continuing to increase in frequency. School climate is one of the most important factors in the emergence and elimination of bullying behaviors. Therefore, it is important to examine the frequency and types of bullying behaviors among primary-school children and the views of children about school climate, to reveal the in-school factors affecting peer-bullying and to create effective intervention programs. In this study, it was aimed to determine the frequency and type of bullying behaviors experienced at primary-school level in Çankırı Province and to examine students' opinions about school climate. The sample of the research consists of 590 primary-school students selected through cluster sampling from Çankırı Province. The data of the study were collected using the Colorado School Climate Survey. Descriptive analyzes were done on the data with the help of SPSS program. The research showed that physical and relational bullying is the most common type of bullying among primary-school students, and in case of bullying, the victims most often get help from their family or an adult at school.

Keywords: *School atmosphere, Bullying, Peer-bullying, Bullying prevention*

Introduction

Bullying is defined as the intentional and systematic disturbing behavior of a socially, emotionally or physically stronger individual to a less powerful individual. Studies show that bullying behavior among children and adolescents is a global public health problem (OECD, 2020, PISA, 2019; Mullis, Martin, Foy, Kelly & Fishbeing, 2020). Bullying behaviors are distinguished from any violent behavior due to the presence of power imbalance, purposefulness, continuity and remorse in action (Figure 1).

Figure 1

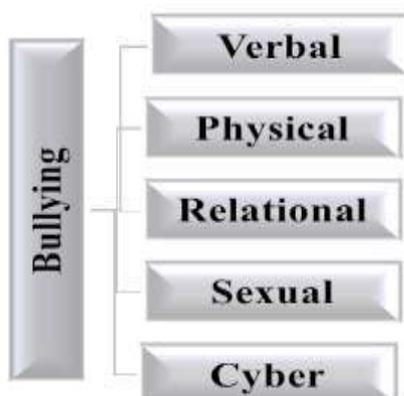
Characteristics of Peer-bullying (Özbek & Taneri, 2022)



It is possible to divide bullying behaviors into five categories as verbal, physical, relational, sexual and cyber. *Verbal bullying* include verbal attacks (name-calling, swearing, mocking, etc.) made to harm the individual. *Physical bullying* includes physical aggression behaviors (hitting, hair-pulling, damaging belongings, etc.). *Relational bullying* is one of the most common types of bullying that targets the victim's social relationships (not playing games, embarrassing, humiliating, etc.) and is hardly recognized. *Sexual bullying* includes sexually offensive behavior (sending sexually explicit videos, pictures, spreading private images of an individual etc.). *Cyberbullying* includes aggressive behavior toward the individual in the digital environment (threatening the individual on digital-gaming platforms or social-media tools, disseminating their images, etc.).

Figure 2

Types of Peer-Bullying



There are three actors in bullying: victim, bully and bystander. *Bully* is the person who exhibit bullying behaviors, *victim* is exposed to bullying behavior and *bystander* is a witness to bullying. Bullying have serious consequences (depression, anxiety, suicide, etc.) for victims, bullies and bystanders (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). School climate is the overall quality and character of school life, including teaching and learning practices, organizational structures, norms and values, and relationships (National School Climate Council, 2015). Although school is a key environment for children's academic, social and emotional development and provides many opportunities for positive experiences, it is also an environment where most bullying behaviors are likely to occur (Rodriguez Mandira & Stoltz, 2021). It is important for education that the classroom environment is conducive to student learning and that the relationships between students and school staff promote their development and well-being (OECD, 2020).

The literature has shown that comprehensive programs prepared throughout the school to change group norms and improve the school climate are effective in preventing peer-bullying (Olweus, 1993; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2010). In order to eliminate the negative effects of bullying behaviors, it is necessary to systematically identify bullying cases and implement effective intervention programs. In this study, bullying behaviors and school climate among primary-school students were examined. For this purpose, the types of bullying, its frequency, genders of bullies, place of bullying, victims' and bystanders' behaviors in case of bullying, where students feel safe and the school climate were investigated.

Peer-Bullying Statistics

When statistics are examined around the world, approximately 32% of children aged 11-15 have been bullied at least once in the last one (UNESCO, 2019). According to the data of the US National Center for Education Statistics, one out of every five students is bullied (NCES, 2019). According to the 2019 International Mathematics and Science survey (TIMSS), 29% of fourth graders were bullied once a month and 8% once a week (Mullis et al., 2020). Bullying statistics at primary-school level throughout Turkey show an increasing trend in recent years. Pişkin (2010) stated that 35.1% of the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grade students were victims, 30.2% were bullies and 6.2% were both bullies and victims, and that the bully group and bully-victim group consists mostly of boys and the victims are mostly girls. TIMSS (2019) showed that 9% of 4th grade students are bullied about once a week, which is above the average of 58 countries that took the test.

Studies reveal that physical and verbal bullying is the most common among students (Kepenekçi & Çınkır, 2003; Reisen, Viana & dos Santos-Neto, 2019). Consistent with NCES (2019) data, while female students are more bullied than male students (17% vs. 24%), male students are more likely to be exposed to physical bullying and female students to relational bullying more. Hamurcu (2020) found that male students at the 3rd and 4th grade levels are more exposed to physical bullying behaviors than female students. According to NCES (2019), 43% of students are in the hallway or stairwell at school, 42% in the classroom, 27% in the cafeteria, 22% outside the schoolyard, 15% online, 12% in the bathroom or in the locker-room and 8% on the school-bus.

Method

Research Design

In the study, which is based on the descriptive research model, it is aimed to describe in detail the peer-bullying behaviors among primary-school students and the students' views on the school climate.

Research Sample

The population of the research consists of primary-school students in Çankırı. The students of two primary-schools selected by cluster sampling from the province of Çankırı formed the sample of the study. A total of 590 students, 299 girls and 289 boys, took part in the sample. Of the students, 148 are first-year, 98 are second-year students, 126 are third-year students, and 182 are fourth-year students. 12% of the students use glasses and 4% use braces. 7.9% of the students have a chronic-illness and 1.8% have a physical disability. In addition, 24.8% of the students stated that they have a different characteristic. 74.5% of the students defined themselves as introverted and 25.5% as extroverted. The average height of the students is 127 centimeter and the average weight is 33 kilograms. Education levels of the students' mothers: 13% primary-school, 13.6% secondary-school, 28.3% high-school, 41% university and 3.9% did not go to school, and education levels of the students' fathers: 6.9% primary-school, 11% secondary-school, 23.3% high-school, 56.6% university and 2.2% did not go to school. Distribution of students by mother's profession: 73.1% housewife, 2.8% private sector, 9.6% teacher and 12.4% other, and the distribution by father's profession: 14.5% civil servant, 11.6% tradesman, 8.4% are soldiers, 8.6% are teachers, 54% are other and 2.9% are not working.

Research Instrument and Data Analysis

The data were collected via a questionnaire prepared by researchers aiming to reveal students' demographic characteristics, their awareness of peer-bullying, and a scale measuring bullying behaviors of primary-school students (Colorado School Climate Survey, Garrity et al., 2000). The Colorado School Climate Survey consists of three-item Likert scale and 10 subscales (e.g. bullying experiences of victims and bystanders, what the victims and bystanders do against bullying, the identities of the bullies, the places where the bullying behavior occurs, the people with whom the bullying behavior is shared and the places where the students feel safe, their views about the school climate and their views on bullying). Frequency and percentage analyses were performed on the data using the SPSS program.

Results

Before the Colorado School Climate Scale was applied, students were asked whether they knew the definition of peer-bullying and whether they had been bullied. 45.8% of the students stated that they knew the definition of bullying, and 54.2% did not. The students who stated that they were exposed to peer-bullying are 24.5% of the group. The initial items of the Colorado School Climate Scale aim to reveal the type of bullying that the victim has experienced during the past month (Table 1). As summarized in the Table 1, 28.5% of the students stated that 'kids hit or kicked me', 16.5% said 'kids said bad words to me, made fun of me or called me names', 16.8% said 'kids told untrue stories about me', 27.1% 'kids told untrue stories about me', 21.1% 'kids took things that belonged to me', 11.7% kids threatened to hurt me or take my belongings at least once during the past month. Verbal and physical violence among students (e.g., hitting each other and not playing games) is the most common type of bullying.

The types of bullying witnessed by the audience are also examined (Table 1). When students were asked if they had ever witnessed a child being hit, pushed or kicked by other children in the past month, more than half of the group said at least once (50.4%). 40.6% of the students stated that they heard the children say bad words, make fun of or call someone at least once during the past month. 41.8% of the students stated that they had witnessed at least once in the past month that some children were not allowed to play or do their work. 35.5% of the students heard or saw that at least once during the past month, children took someone else's belongings without permission or knowledge. 20.6% of the students have heard or seen whether children have threatened to hurt someone else or take their belongings at least once during the past month. Bystanders witnessed the most physical and relational bullying.

Table 1

Bullying Experiences of Victims and Bystanders

	Victim		Bystander	
	f	%	f	%
Over the past month...				
...kids have hit or kicked me/other kids	Never	408 71,5	288	49,6
	Once	109 19,0	187	32,2
	More	54 9,5	106	18,2
...children have spoken badly, mocked or named me/other children	Never	420 73,0	345	59,4
	Once	92 16,0	140	24,1
	More	63 11,0	96	16,5
...kids have told untrue stories about me/about other kids	Never	480 83,2	441	76,0
	Once	63 10,9	92	15,9
	More	34 5,9	47	8,1
... kids haven't included me/other kids in what they've done	Never	420 72,9	334	58,2
	Once	107 18,6	135	23,5
	More	49 8,5	105	18,3
... kids took things that belonged to me/others	Never	455 78,9	372	64,5
	Once	78 13,5	138	23,9
	More	44 7,6	67	11,6
...kids have threatened to hurt me/others or take their belongings	Never	512 88,3	460	79,4
	Once	46 7,9	76	13,1
	More	22 3,8	43	7,4

Note. N's differ.

Table 2 shows what the victim and bystander do in case of bullying. The most common solutions used by victims in case of bullying are to get help from the family (33.4%), to get help from an adult at school (32.5%), to tell the child to stop (20.7%), to stay away from the child (19.2%), Talking to myself to feel better (15%), ignoring and walking away (14.9%), and teasing or calling the bully (3.6%) as the least common solutions, I said I accepted what he said about me (% 3.7). When the audience was asked what they would do if someone was bullied, 20.7% of the group said they did nothing, 15.1% played with the bullied child, 13.7% helped the child escape, 25.4% got rid of the bullying situation. they said that they helped the child in

generating ideas for the child, 32.4% asked for help from an adult at school, 14.6% said that they resisted the bully, 22.4% asked the victim how they felt.

Table 2

What the Victim and Bystander Do in Case of Bullying

	f	%
I got help from an adult at school	192	32,5
I got help from a child	65	11,0
I hit, kicked or pushed the bully	33	5,6
I told the bully to stop	122	20,7
I let the bully know that I accepted what they said about me.	22	3,7
I stayed away from the bully so they couldn't hurt or mock	113	19,2
What did you do when you were bullied?		
I got help from my mother-father (family).	197	33,4
I ignored the bully and walked away	88	14,9
I also said bad things, made fun of or called names	21	3,6
I tried to stop the bully by saying or doing funny things	47	8,0
I talked to myself to feel better	89	15,1
I did not do anything	65	11,0
I did not do anything	122	20,7
I told the child who was hurt, ridiculed or ostracized to play with me	89	15,1
I helped the child who was hurt, ridiculed or ostracized escape	81	13,7
What did you do when you saw someone being bullied?		
I helped the child come up with ideas to solve their problem	150	25,4
I asked an adult at school for help	100	32,4
I got ahead of the kid who hurt the other kid	86	14,6
I asked the injured child how they felt.	132	22,4

Note: Multiple options are marked.

Table 3 shows where the victim was bullied, who(s) the bully was, and who the victim told about the bullying. 63% of the group reported being bullied by a male student, 17.9% by a female student, and 16.9% by female and male students. When the students were asked about the places they were bullied, it was found that the classroom (32.9%), playground (26.5%) and corridor (18%) were the most common. If the victim is bullied, the person with whom he/she shares this problem the most is the mother (49%). While a group of 22.4% did not share this situation with anyone, 14.8% stated that they shared this situation with an adult at school.

Table 3

The Gender of the Bully, the Place Where the Bullying Took Place, and the People with Whom the Bullying Was Shared

		f	%
What is the gender of the bully?	Girl	54	17,9
	Boy	197	65,2
	Girls and boys	51	16,9
Where were you bullied?	Classroom	93	32,9
	Playground	75	26,5
	Hallway	51	18,0
	On the way to / coming from school	34	12,0
	Toilet	11	3,9
Who did you tell when you were bullied?	Canteen	19	6,7
	To anyone	68	22,4
	To a friend	34	11,2
	To an adult at school	48	15,8
	To my mom or dad	149	49,0
	To someone else	5	1,6

Note. N's differ.

As summarized in Table 4, most of the students (78.5%) felt safe in the classroom. In the playground, only 38.6% of the group felt safe. The places where students feel insecure are respectively; toilets (22.4%), going to school (22.4%), the playground (18.1%) and corridor (18.1%). The fact that students feel safe in the classroom, but feel more insecure in the playground, in the corridor, on the way to/from school and in the toilet may be due to the fact

that peer-bullying occurs by a child outside the classroom and in situations that are not under the supervision of the teacher.

Table 4

Places Where Students Feel Safe

How safe do you feel in the following places?		f	%
Classroom	Insecure	23	4,0
	A little Insecure	15	2,6
	A little safe	87	15,0
	Safe	456	78,4
Playground	Insecure	107	18,7
	A little Insecure	99	17,3
	A little safe	145	25,3
	Safe	221	38,6
Hallway	Insecure	103	18,1
	A little Insecure	87	15,3
	A little safe	140	24,6
	Safe	240	42,1
On the way to school	Insecure	127	22,3
	A little Insecure	78	13,7
	A little safe	100	17,5
	Safe	265	46,5
Toilets	Insecure	127	22,4
	A little Insecure	94	16,5
	A little safe	96	16,9
	Safe	251	44,2
School canteen	Insecure	74	12,9
	A little Insecure	170	29,7
	A little safe	66	11,5
	Safe	263	45,9

Note. N's differ.

As can be seen in Table 5 students think that if someone is bullied at their school, 45.9% of other children will help and 47.7% will seek help from an adult. In addition, 82.8% of the students think that there are definite rules in their school and 77.3% of the students think that when they see someone being bullied, they will immediately rush to help. Most of the students like to go to school (79.7%). Although the majority think that their teachers will intervene in the bullying they witness, they also think that there are malicious people at the school. This indicates that there may be bullying incidents that adults do not witness at school.

Table 5

Students' Opinions About the School Climate

	Definitely true	not true	Sometimes true	Often true	Completely true
Kids help out if they see someone being bullied	f 74 %12,6	170 29,7	66 11,5	263 45,9	
Children who see someone being bullied tell the adults	f 77 %13,4	112 19,5	111 19,3	274 47,7	
If someone is alone at recess, the children invite them to play together.	f 61 %10,7	150 26,3	94 16,5	266 46,6	
Children support their friends to work harder	f 77 %13,7	156 27,7	99 17,6	232 41,1	
Our school has strict rules.	f 28 %4,9	21 3,7	49 8,6	473 82,8	
Teachers who see that someone is being bullied immediately rush to help.	f 27 %4,8	33 5,9	67 12	433 77,3	
Misbehaving students take a lot of my teacher's time	f 92 %16,6	116 20,9	98 17,7	249 44,9	
The elders in this school make an effort to make children do their best at school.	f 46 %8,2	67 11,9	66 11,7	384 68,2	
My school tries to get everyone to attend class.	f 36 %6,4	67 11,9	87 15,5	373 66,3	
I usually play with someone at recess	f 51 %9	90 15,9	93 16,4	332 58,7	
Children make an effort to comfort me when I am uncomfortable.	f 97 %17,2	104 18,5	97 17,2	265 47,1	

I love going to school	f 33 %5,9	29 5,2	52 9,3	448 79,7
I'm afraid to go to school	f 483 %86,9	27 4,9	10 1,8	36 6,5
Most of the people in this school are good	f 50 %8,8	92 16,3	110 19,4	314 55,5

Note. N's differ.

As summarized in Table 6, most of the students stated that they do not obsess about people or animals that are smaller or weaker than themselves (88.3%), they do not like to make fun of people (97.3%), and they do not like to take or damage people's belongings without permission (97.6%). On the other hand, 45.3% of the participants said that they always wanted to win while playing a game or doing sports, and 34.8% of them said that they would worry about what people would think when they could not do something or failed.

Table 6

Students' Opinions About Bullying

	f	%
Do you get obsessed with people or animals smaller and weaker than you?	Yes 68	12
	No 511	88
Do you like making fun of people?	Yes 16	3
	No 566	97
Do you like to see people annoyed when you make fun of them?	Yes 24	4
	No 558	96
Do you think it's fun when people make mistakes?	Yes 42	7
	No 536	93
Do you enjoy taking or damaging people's belongings without permission?	Yes 14	2
	No 565	98
Do you want students to think you're the toughest kid in school?	Yes 35	6
	No 539	94
Do you get angry often and stay angry for a long time?	Yes 126	22
	No 453	78
Do you blame people for things that go wrong in your life?	Yes 42	7
	No 525	93

Do you want to take revenge on the people who hurt you?	Yes 129 22
	No 449 78
Do you always want to win while playing a game or playing sports?	Yes 261 45
	No 315 55
Do you worry about what people will think when you fail to do something?	Yes 201 35
	No 375 65
Do you get jealous or angry when someone succeeds?	Yes 72 12
	No 504 88

Note. N's differ.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Discussion

In the study, it was found that the majority of the students did not know the definition of peer-bullying. This indicates that awareness programs for bullying for both students and teachers at primary-school level are insufficient. Increasing the awareness of children about peer-bullying by developing preventive-programs instead of intervening in a possible peer-bullying and teaching them how to deal with this problem, will prevent the negative effects of peer-bullying on children, protect their mental health, contribute positively to the school climate, and contribute to the school climate in older ages. It will play a preventive role in peer-bullying behaviors that may occur. Otherwise, bullying behaviors will be learned by other students and will turn into a fundamental problem affecting students, teachers and parents throughout the school. Hence, it is important to urgently develop and implement peer-bullying awareness programs at primary-school level. It was observed that the Peer-bullying Prevention Module, developed by Özbek and Taneri (2022), created positive changes in students in respect of differences, expressing emotions and refugee awareness.

According to this research, primary-school children are exposed to verbal and physical bullying the most, while they witness physical and relational bullying. This finding is also compatible with the literature (NCES, 2019; Özkan & Çifci, 2010; Pişkin, 2010). Although physical bullying can be easily noticed, relational bullying is difficult to notice and has more negative effects on children. It can cause the child to feel lonely, excluded and humiliated, not wanting to go to school, and have negative consequences, up to suicide. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically examine the frequency and types of peer-bullying at primary-school level throughout the country and to discuss possible risk factors. In parallel with the literature

(Hamurcu, 2020; NCES, 2019), the majority of students in this study revealed that a male student was bullied.

Similar to the literature (NCES, 2019), in this study, the most bullied place was found to be the classroom. This study also revealed that approximately one-fifth of students found the classroom less safe or unsafe. This finding suggests that teachers are not aware of the bullying in the classroom. One of the reasons the classroom is found unsafe may be related to bullying or violence toward students by the teacher. It is recommended for future research to delve deeper into why students find the classroom environment unsafe. However, students also stated that they felt the safest in the classroom. It can be concluded that even if students are bullied in the classroom, they think that their teachers will interfere with the bullying and feel safer.

Conclusion

The research showed that peer-bullying occurs most frequently in environments that the teacher cannot see (playground, corridor, school bus, toilet, going to/from school, etc.) and that the places where students feel the most insecure in these unattended environments are also environments. This indicates that peer-bullying can be an important problem in places without adult supervision and shows the importance of the audience in peer-bullying. When a child is bullied, students who witness the incident notify the teacher or stand up to the bully as a unit, leave the bully alone or do not approve of him, which is a deterrent for bullying behavior.

The research showed that victims of bullying mostly get help from family or an adult at school, or the victim tells the bully to stop. This finding is also consistent with the literature (NCES, 2019). Another important finding of the study is that one-fifth of the victims and bystanders do nothing in case of bullying. It can be concluded that both victims and bystanders do not have enough information about how to deal with bullying. In order to empower victims and bystanders, it can be recommended to implement preventive programs in schools.

Studies show that students in schools with a positive climate have fewer problems with attendance, study habits and motivation, and have higher grades and test scores (Daily, Smith, Lilly, Davidov, Mann, & Kristjansson, 2020; Fan & Williams, 2018). It is necessary for the individual and academic development of students that schools are safe environments and that students have positive relationships with their teachers and friends. A positive school climate encourages learning and student achievement through a safe and supportive environment, while a negative school climate can hinder student achievement.

At the same time, school climate may be one of the major bullying risks or protective factors (Rodriguez Mandira & Stoltz, 2021). Teachers and school staff can play a key role in preventing bullying by working closely with students to build strong and healthy interpersonal relationships (OECD, 2020). Cunningham (2007) found that students who experienced low levels of bullying and victimization were more strongly committed to school and showed positive social behaviors. Instead, O'Brennan, Bradshaw, and Sawyer (2009) emphasized that victims and bully-victims feel less secure and involved in school than bullies. In the research, it was revealed that a significant part of the students were often angry and remained angry for a long time, they wanted to take revenge on the people who hurt them, and they became jealous and angry when others were successful. From these findings, it can be concluded that students have problems with anger control and peaceful competition. Activities on anger management can contribute to the reduction of peer-bullying and the school climate.

Recommendations

The most frequently reported reasons for bullying by students are physical appearance, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, and sexual orientation (NCES, 2019). Hosting approximately 3.8 million refugees, Turkey ranks first worldwide in 2021 (URL1). Intense refugee flow has increased the burden of foreign students in formal education in Turkey and the risk of bullying behavior toward them (Aykut, 2019; Yılmaz & Çıkılı-Uytun, 2020). Hence, it is important to encourage respect for individual differences at school and to establish a general tolerance norm (National School Climate Council, 2012). Conducting activities that increase respect and sensitivity to cultural differences is important in terms of preventing the exclusion of refugee students and reducing the possibility of all students being exposed to peer-bullying (Özbek & Taneri, 2022).

In this study, cyberbullying among students was not examined, but due to the fact that we are in the age of technology and with the effect of Covid-19, the use of mobile phones and internet among primary-school children and the risk of cyberbullying have increased accordingly. Therefore, working together with traditional bullying behaviors in future studies will increase the validity of research by providing a holistic perspective.

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