Listening to Students from Refugee Backgrounds: Lessons for Education Professionals

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ABSTRACT:

This article is based on a study that examined how students from refugee backgrounds cope with victimization and bullying in three urban high schools in the United States. Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were employed. Twelve high school students from refugee backgrounds participated in the study, which involved focus group interviews. Data were analyzed using the process of coding. Students reported a wide range of victimization and bullying experiences from verbal to physical assaults. Further, students reported multiple ways of coping with victimization and bullying. The study provides practical lessons for teachers and administrators to mitigate bullying among refugee students.

Keywords: victimization, bullying, resistance, refugee students, coping strategies, xenophobia

In the past five years (2007-2011), the United States has admitted an average of 62,500 refugees annually, about one third of whom are school-age children (Martin & Yankay, 2012). Refugees are people who are forced to migrate to other countries due to sociopolitical instability, often caused by wars, in their home countries. Many refugee families are resettled in poor urban areas, which means school-age children from refugee backgrounds often attend urban schools. Many students from refugee backgrounds have had negative, often traumatic, experiences in their home countries and countries of temporary asylum (McBrien, 2005; Melzak & Warner, 1992; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). They enter urban schools in a socio-emotionally fragile state that is further exacerbated by victimization and bullying encountered in these schools.

According to Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS, 2010), refugee children are highly vulnerable to bullying and victimization. BRYCS defines bullying as a "unique form of aggressive behavior that is intentional, harmful, repetitive in nature, and in which there is an imbalance of power (either psychological or physical) between the aggressor and victim" (BRYCS, 2010, p. 1). Bullying is "embedded in a social context where individuals are engaged in ongoing relationships" (Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011, p. 151). A social context such as a school is a prime setting for bullying as students interact with each other on a daily basis, and studies report the occurrence of bullying from elementary through high schools (Cornell, Sheras, & Cole, 2006). Students from refugee backgrounds are most vulnerable to bullying due to a myriad of reasons, including nationality, race, religion, and different cultural norms. Additionally, they are victimized for speaking English with a non-American accent (Harushimana, Ikpeze, & Mthethwa-Sommers, 2013).

This article has three main objectives. It seeks to: (a) outline victimization experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in urban schools, (b) show agency of students from refugee backgrounds by reporting on their resisting coping methods, and (c) provide methods and strategies to reduce victimization and bullying of students from refugee backgrounds and widen the circle of inclusion in urban schools. The article is organized as follows: First, literature associated with victimization of students from refugee backgrounds is reviewed. Second, the methodology employed in the study is discussed, and lastly, discussion of findings and their implications are proffered.

Literature Review

The bullying experiences of students from refugee backgrounds need to be understood within the larger context of widespread bullying that occurs in schools. For example, in a survey study of 11,000 students in elementary and middle schools, Stuart-Cassell, Bell, & Springer (2011) found that approximately 60% of both boys and girls from refugee backgrounds were bullied at least once a month. Bullying occurs in many forms, but O'Brien (2007) grouped stimuli for bullying into two broad categories: one based on group membership (such as race, nationality, sex, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic status) and another based on individual characteristics. Some students from refugee backgrounds are bullied because of their individual characteristics such as weight, but many students from refugee backgrounds experience bullying due to their group membership or perceived group membership. A study by Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett (2010) showed that refugee students were bullied physically and psychologically because of group membership based on nationality and immigration status. Correa-Velez et al. (2010) also revealed that bullying

was perpetrated by students, teachers, and administrators. They uncovered that school officials engaged in subtle forms of bullying through student isolation and over-classification of students from refugee backgrounds as being intellectually limited because of their linguistic and cultural differences.

Bullying on the basis of gender and race is also commonly experienced by students from refugee backgrounds. Mosselson's (2002) study on refugee girls revealed that girls experienced bullying in the form of alienation, shunning, and disrespectful interaction from both peers and school officials even though they worked hard to achieve good grades. A study by Fraine and McDade (2009) showed that refugee students of color who attend predominantly White schools were racially targeted by their peers. The study pointed out that race-based bullying was usually new and unfamiliar to students from refugee backgrounds who came from countries in which their racial identity was the norm. The students in Fraine and McDade's study quickly learned that being a person of color is highly undesirable in the U.S. Studies by Stepick et al. (2001) and Lee (2002) of Haitian and Hmong refugee students, respectively, reported that students who were targets of race-based psychological bullying were suicidal and developed less self-value based on their race.

Other studies report that bullying of students from refugee backgrounds is also based on religion (Asali, 2003; Birman, Trickett, & Bacchus, 2001). Asali (2003) found that most students from refugee backgrounds who are Muslim have experienced increased levels of bullying since the tragedy of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. Students reported being accused of being "terrorists" and told to "go back" to their countries. Birman, Trickett, & Bacchus (2001) reported that Somali middle and high school students were bullied on a daily basis by their peers because of their *hijabs*, headscarves, diet, and daily prayers. Students reported that teachers would often ask them to remove their *hijabs* and headscarves during gym classes or when taking school photos.

The studies examined above show that students from refugee backgrounds experience bullying for a myriad of reasons including racial, religious, and nationality. Examination and analysis of how these students resist and cope with bullying, as well as their experiences with school-based anti-bullying policies and practices, are lacking in the literature. This article fills this gap in the literature by examining refugee students' experiences with bullying, how they cope, and their thoughts on bullying policies. Further, we hope that our study contributes a unique perspective on coping strategies of students from refugee backgrounds and also contributes to the discourse on how to make schools welcoming institutions to all students, particularly those who come to the United States seeking physical and psychological shelter from persecution in their countries of origin.

Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted with 12 students from refugee backgrounds who attended three high schools in an urban area in upstate New York. The schools participants attended are classified as high-need schools with low pass rates on state tests, an average of 80% of students receiving free meals, and over 90% of students being African American and Latino/a Americans. Participants were in grades 10 to 12 and between the ages of 15 and 19. They came from four countries: Bhutan, Somalia, Thailand, and Myanmar. All participants were students of color and had been in the United States for two to five years. Seven of the participants were female, five of whom wore headscarves as part of their attire on a daily basis. Five were male, none of whom wore any clothing that revealed religious affiliation. All participants were Muslim.

The students were recruited for the study through the refugee outreach center their families frequented, as well as through the advisor of a school club to which many students from refugee backgrounds belonged. Parents signed letters of consent for all participants who were under 18 years of age. The researchers applied for and were granted clearance to conduct the research by the Institutional Review Board of their institution of affiliation. The focus group discussions were held at the refugee outreach center referenced above.

Data Collection Method

Qualitative research methodology was used to provide deeper levels of understanding the phenomena of bullying (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In-depth focus group discussions were employed as a data collection method to understand how bullying impacts students from refugee backgrounds in urban schools and coping strategies they employ. The focus group method is particularly useful when the research aims to elicit a diversity of perspectives on a particular theme (Gaizausicaite, 2012), as was the case in our study. Since focus groups require interaction and discussion among participants, this approach has the distinct advantage of eliciting deeper understanding of phenomena, and as Acocella (2012) notes, the method "can raise inter-subjective representations that reflect the images and beliefs of that social group configured into the FG [focus group]" (p. 1128).

Participants were divided into two groups based on gender, and discussions were held on different days for each group. Forming homogenous focus groups has been shown to provide participants a better environment to freely share their experiences and

perspectives, especially on sensitive topics (Gaizauskaite, 2012; Morgan, 1996; Sagoe, 2012). Each group had six students. This is an optimal group size, as researchers have shown that a group comprising four to twelve participants is likely to provide a rich diversity of perspectives while ensuring that all participants have a chance to contribute to the discussions (Gaizauskaite, 2012; Sagoe, 2012). A licensed clinical social worker was present at the focus group interview sessions for purposes of debriefing. Focus group interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. (See *Appendix A* for focus group interview questions.)

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a two-pronged approach. First, *Nvivo*, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) package, was used to generate initial codes. Next, the researchers employed the cross-analysis method of reviewing the *Nvivo*-generated codes to check for accuracy, recode as necessary, and generate themes. Models of how students from refugee backgrounds resist and cope with bullying, which we introduce below, emerged from analysis of the focus group responses.

Findings and Discussion

The study sought to investigate: (a) whether students from refugee backgrounds experienced bullying; (b) if so, what forms of bullying they experienced; (c) the coping mechanism that they employed; and (d) their perceptions on ways to reduce bullying in schools. Findings revealed that all participants had experienced bullying. They were bullied for a variety of reasons, including race, nationality, language, clothing, and religious affiliation. The study also showed that students employed a myriad of strategies to resist and cope with bullying, ranging from fighting back to reporting bullies to teachers. The study also revealed that participants found some coping strategies to be more effective than others. The participants also reported that school policies and practices against bullying are largely ineffective and proffered suggestions on methods to reduce bullying. Findings are presented under three major categories: (a) forms of bullying, (b) models of resisting and coping with bullying, and (c) implications for developing inclusive schools and classrooms.

Forms of Bullying

Students experienced different forms of bullying. Verbal harassment was the most commonly reported experience. Bullying also took physical forms, including hitting and throwing objects at students. None of the students reported cyberbullying experiences but were aware that such bullying occurs, including via social media such as Facebook.

Race-based bullying. Bullying on the basis of race and ethnicity was reported as a common occurrence by the students. One girl in the study observed that "If your eyes look different, you get bullied. If your skin looks different, they will call you dark. The problem is with race." The participants reported that they came from countries in which their race was not an issue, as they lived in largely mono-racial countries. However, one girl from Burma reported that she was familiar with being taunted for her dark skin color even in her home country, but in the United States the taunting she endured has been "mean spirited and really hurtful."

A student of Somali descent reported that a bully told him "to go back home to Africa" when he was alone, and in another instance a bully commented on the dark skin of three boys of Somali descent. One boy reported that a bully, a teenage girl, told them "You are dark; it is hard to see you in the dark." It is noteworthy that participants reported that the people who taunted them on the basis of their skin color were also students of color. Hollis (2012) contends that people who have been victims of racial marginalization are also highly likely to engage in marginalization of others on the basis of race. Or as Freire (1970) asserts, being a target of any form of oppression makes one most likely to engage in oppression of others.

In another instance, one participant reported that a bully confronted her in the stairway as she was going to class; the bully pinned her against the wall and said, "You fat Asian, you wanna [sic] fight?" Such targeting based on race and national origin is congruent with the BRCYS (2010) report, which notes that students of color are generally targets of bullying more often than their White counterparts and that since most refugees in the U.S. are of color, they tend to be disproportionately harassed.

Language and accent-based bullying. Most refugees resettling in the United States may have limited English language proficiency, which is another variable that makes them targets of bullying. Participants in this study mentioned being bullied because they did not speak English when they first arrived in the United States. For example, one student reported: "They were bullying me because of my accent. We were presenting in class, and they were laughing at me, because of my accent and the way I explain things; the teacher also laughed." In this case, it was not only the participant's peers, but also the teacher—a person in a position of protecting students—who engaged in collective bullying by laughing at the way she spoke. Lippi-Green (1994) and Mthethwa-Sommers (2013) point out that speaking English with a nonnative accent is perceived as desirable, some would even say appealing, when the speaker is White and mainly European; however, when people of color speak with an accent, their speech is mostly despised.

Perceived lack of English language speaking ability also placed students in a vulnerable position; one boy in the study reported that:

Just because you don't know how to speak English, they take advantage of you, take stuff away from you, and they don't give it back. If you try to get it back, two or three come and push you down like this…

In the case of this participant, limited English proficiency is equated with weakness, vulnerability, and general inability to advocate for oneself. Perpetrators of bullying seemed to be aware of their linguistic power and used this power to bully, victimize, and marginalize students from refugee backgrounds with limited English proficiency.

Clothing and religion-based bullying. Girls who participated in the study experienced clothing and religion-based bullying because of the headscarves they wore. One girl in the panel reported being told, "It is too hot. Take off your headscarf." She explained that her American-born peers did not seem to understand the significance of wearing a headscarf and thought that "I can just take it off because they tell me to do so." When asked to explain why she considered this bullying she responded by saying "Because it hurts me. They do not say it kindly or in a friendly way. They say it as if they are disgusted by my headscarf and me."

Another participant reported that her class was discussing attributes of a terrorist, and her classmates listed wearing a headscarf as one of the attributes. She stated, "One girl in my class was talking about, like, Muslims being terrorists and I was the only Muslim in the class. That hurts my feelings." She added that her peers would periodically look at her as they were talking about terrorists, and the teacher affirmed students who said that people who wear headscarves are terrorists.

While all male participants in the study were also Muslim, none of them reported being harassed because of their religion. Unlike the girls in the study who wear headscarves associated with Islam, the boys did not wear any outfits or attire that identified their religion. Bullying based on religion thus tended to be gender specific, affecting only girls in the study. In the sociopolitical climate following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, there has been evidence of increased general intolerance toward Muslims in the United States (Disha, Cavendish, & King, 2011) and students who are visibly Muslim are particularly negatively impacted by this intolerance.

Participants' bullying experiences reflect the characteristics commonly targeted by bullying, including race and ethnicity, gender, language, and religion (Wessler & Andrade 2006), which O'Brien (2007) categorizes as bullying on the basis of group membership. The other category of bullying, according to O'Brien, is individual-based bullying, which targets, for example, one's appearance, including physical size. Wessler and Andrade (2006) also report sexual orientation as an individual-based characteristic for bullying; the students in the research panel did not experience bullying on this basis. None of them identified their sexuality. There seemed to be uncommunicated acceptance of heterosexuality among the participants, though they discussed that gay students are likely to be targets of bullying and referenced media reports of a student who committed suicide as a result of being bullied for being gay.

Models of Resisting and Coping with Bullying

While there is no question that bullying and victimization in general are institutional, school-level problems that should be handled at the institutional level rather than by victims themselves, it is also important to understand how bullying victims handle bullying. Oliver and Candappa (2007) ask, for example, "Might a better understanding of how pupils attempt to cope with bullying inform the development of a more child-centered approach to addressing the problem of bullying?" (p. 72). Similar to Oliver and Candappa, we recognize and value the agency of students dealing with bullying and the importance of finding ways to incorporate their perspectives in institutional policies on bullying. In the U.S., 45 states have anti-bullying policies (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011), but these policies tend to put more emphasis on reporting bullying to teachers as a way of handling bullying (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006). Other anti-bullying programs include adding anti-bullying content to the curriculum and informing parents (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2012), but it is not evident in these programs that students' perspectives are sought and incorporated into their development.

The following are findings on how students from refugee backgrounds cope with bullying, as well as their views on how they think schools can handle or reduce bullying. We developed models of resisting and coping with bullying from the data. It is critical to point out that as Freire (1970) reminds us, with any form of oppression, as bullying might be perceived, there is resistance to disrupt, challenge, and stand against it. Resistance to bullying manifests in strategies employed to cope and at times push back or resist bullying. Findings in this study showed that students from refugee backgrounds have human agency, or an ability to consciously make decisions and undertake actions in order to resist and cope with bullying. We identified four models that participants used to do so.

Push-back bullying model. In the push-back bullying model, the bullying victims directly engaged the bullies when bullying occurred. This model involves a victim of bullying retaliating in the same way she/he is bullied. Participants reported that they often fought back. While fighting back was mostly verbal, some of the students, mostly boys, reported occasionally engaging in physical confrontation. When a bully approached one of the participants from Somalia saying "You are African, go back to your country," the participant fought back by saying "Yeah, I do want to go back to my country. If I don't get a job here I can always go back to my

country and get a job or education." The Somali student reported further on the conversation: "But then I ask him, 'Do you know where you are from?' and then he stopped bullying me. He didn't do it today." The student was insinuating to the bully that, as an African American, he had no other place to go. In other words, the student from a refugee background used the legacy of enslavement of Black people in the United States as a weapon against his bully. Similarly, one of the participants of Burmese nationality (who is repeatedly called "Indian" by her peers) indicated that when she was bullied on the basis of her nationality, she responded to her bullies by pointing out that she was proud of her nationality: "Last year, they bullied me; I talked to them straight to their faces. I told them that where I am from I am proud to be Indian."

Participants also pushed back or resisted verbal bullying, which included being insulted or cursed out, by cursing back. One participant reported that when she cursed back at the bullies, "I don't use 's' or 'f' words, but sometimes I curse back in Burmese language. The bullies do not understand what I am saying but they know that I am cursing at them."

Male participants mentioned physically fighting back as a coping strategy. One participant reported, "If they punch you, you punch back." Students reported that, in a physical confrontation, it was important to fight back and not show fear. For example, another participant stated that "When a bully pushes me, I push him back. He pushes me again and I push him back again until he stops." Another participant reported punching a bully:

Yeah, so these kids just started pushing me every time, and I would ignore them. I used to see them in the hallways. They used to do that every day. So one kid, he pissed me off, he was touching me, and that's when I punched him right there, and then he ran off and never did that again. You have to show them that you are a man too.

The participant demonstrates awareness that bullying among boys is part of performing masculinity by saying, "You have to show them that you are a man too." Resisting and coping with bullying by using the push-back bullying model proved to be effective for the students in this study. They found that when they mirrored the perpetrators' behaviors, victimization ceased. However, since push-back bullying is individually-based, school officials are usually not notified, and thus the issue of bullying is left unaddressed in schools. Although this model of resistance is effective in curbing bullying at a personal or individual level, it leaves the systemic nature of bullying of students from refugee backgrounds intact because schools cannot deal with the problem if the problem is unreported. It is also important to point out that this model of coping and resisting bullying is not desirable as the targets of bullying end up becoming bullies themselves. Achebe (2009) warned that there is a point when retaliation by using the same methods as a tyrant also makes one a tyrant. Push-back bullying is not a model that educators should condone.

Dignity preservation model. While it can be argued that all forms of resistance and coping are aimed at preserving the dignity of the bullying victim, the dignity preservation model entails hiding the victim's true emotions in front of the bully. One participant reported that when she was bullied, she went to the bathroom to cry, but remained stoic and nonresponsive while being bullied. Another participant reported, "I also cry," and the other girls in the focus group concurred that "She was crying today." The girls reported that crying occurred privately, away from the perpetrator; they pointed out that they would be humiliated if they cried in front of the perpetrator. Crying privately was a release of pain in a non-humiliating manner and a method to preserve one's dignity.

Another reaction to bullying that we identified as dignity preservation involved victims writing down what they felt and then burning the paper. One girl reported doing this, pointing out that writing down what hurt her made her feel better and made it easier for her to not dwell on the negative experiences of bullying. The girls who participated in our study found this form of coping to be effective because in the eyes of the bully, she was not negatively affected, and her dignity was preserved.

Ignoring bullies was also a common response from students in the study. When the bullying was only verbal, many students reported that they often did not overtly react. In one case, a student reported that he was in the playground with his friends when a 13-year old Latino-American girl started calling him names. He ignored the girl's verbal abuse, but when she started hitting them, he called her mother to intervene. Participants reported that ignoring bullies is sometimes an effective way to stop the bullying since the perpetrators do not get the intended reaction. One participant, however, reported that there are instances when ignoring bullies invited more victimization: "They just get mad at you… Yeah, they know you are not paying attention to them." Where possible, students reported ignoring the bullies by walking away from the scene: "If it is wild, I just walk away." By so doing, the targets of bullying were preserving their dignity by avoiding confrontations. While the dignity preservation model was effective in deterring one-on-one bullying, similar to push-back bullying, the model does not deal with the systemic nature of bullying because teachers and the school administrators are never informed and therefore never intervene at a school level.

Self-punishment model. In this model, the victims of bullying harm themselves with hopes that physical pain will dwarf emotional pain. In extreme cases of this model, victims may commit suicide because they see no possible way to stop the bullying. One girl reported engaging in self-starvation and cutting in order to relieve herself of the pain engendered by bullying. Reflecting on the experience, she stated, "It was really a bad time. I cried a lot and stopped eating. I drank pills, sleeping pills. I was also so mad so I cut myself. I still have the scars." This participant turned the pain of bullying toward herself and punished herself. Another participant also reported having stopped eating as a method of coping. The self-punishment model is intended to give the victim of bullying physical or tangible pain that represents intangible and emotional pain. This way of coping was not effective in deterring bullying, as self-punishment did not reduce victimization. The girls who reported harming themselves indicated that they were constant victims of

bullying. Similar to the push-back bullying and dignity preservation models, the self-punishing model does not deal with systemic bullying and leaves bullying undisturbed and intact at the school level.

External validation model. In the external validation model, targets of bullying resist and cope with bullying by reaching out to either school personnel or fellow students who are U.S.-born and have cultural capital as allies. Some participants reported using the strategy of "making friends with Americans." One student reported that she was bullied a lot the previous school year and that she did not talk much that year. In the current year, she reported talking a lot, having made many "American" friends, and tremendously decreased experiences with bullying. Some participants saw a clear connection between making friends with U.S.-born students and the reduction of bullying. One participant pointed out that a major benefit of having American friends is that American friends defend her:

They yell at the bullies, and the bullies seem to listen to them. If I say leave me alone, they don't leave me alone. But if an American student says leave her alone, they leave me alone. So it works.

External validation of humanity by American students reduced levels of bullying and even deterred some bullies. Some participants also reported that notifying school teachers and administrators helped reduce levels of bullying when the teachers and/or administrators directly confronted bullies. However, if the perpetrators were placed on detention, levels of bullying did not decrease. One participant stated, "Bullies enjoy not being in class [being in detention] and doing nothing." Even though application of the external validation model seemed effective in deterring bullying, some participants reported that there can be dangers in seeking external validation from teachers and/or administrators. One boy stated:

You come from a different country and you don't know how to speak English, you get bullied, and the teacher doesn't do anything. They believe the bully who tells them you bullied them. You get into trouble for no reason, because you don't know how to explain it.

These examples show that the external validation model may sometimes be effective in reducing levels of bullying at individual and school-wide levels. However, this model may only be accessible to and effective for students from refugee backgrounds who have learned and are willing to take a risk to communicate across national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries.

Developing Inclusive Schools and Classrooms: Implications for Practice

The various coping strategies employed by the students in our study have obvious limitations. One of the major limitations is that the coping strategies they employed, while some were effective at curbing bullying, did not impact bullying at an institutional level. Participants also offered specific suggestions on policies and practices that schools can implement to combat bullying.

Participants suggested that teachers and school administrators should not assume absence of victimization when students from refugee backgrounds do not report instances of bullying. Data from this study revealed that students rarely reported bullying incidents because they: (a) lacked command of the English language to be able to confidently tell their story, (b) did not want to appear to be a nuisance, (c) thought it was pointless as no action would be taken, (d) feared not being believed, or (e) did not want to confront the students who bullied them.

The students also reported that some anti-bullying policies and practices were not necessarily successful. For instance, one participant reported that in her school, if a bully is found guilty, his/her parents are called to the school, and the next step is in-school suspension (ISS). She didn't think this policy was effective, as most perpetrators liked ISS since they didn't have to do any school work there. To make ISS more effective, the student suggested increasing ISS time for repeat bullies, and getting "tough teachers in ISS." Since they thought that students in ISS didn't do any work there, one of the suggestions was to give more academic work to the bullies in ISS than they would get in the regular classes. Another suggestion was to take away computers in ISS, because perpetrators used them for entertainment "like listening to music and playing games. If ISS is to be a punishment, it should not be a fun place." Some participants also suggested that doing away altogether with ISS might be a better approach. One student suggested that bullies be suspended from school as a way to curb bullying. However, other students in the panel noted that, as one student put it, "Bullies don't like to come to school anyway, so suspending them is not punishment at all."

One participant stated that she did not report bullying anymore because when she reported it the first time, the teacher made her shake hands with the bully, and she did not think this was an effective approach since it did not get to the root of the problem. This student proposed that shaking hands with the perpetrator should not be used as a reconciliatory gesture when the perpetrator has not "even apologized." While it is important to not stigmatize students who perpetrate bullying, as Bazelon (2013) warned, it is equally important for teachers to be cognizant that bullying is hurtful to the victim. To treat both the victim and the perpetrator the same way—by asking them to shake hands—conveys the message that the pain of the victim is inconsequential. Rather, it is recommended that teachers and administrators use the restorative justice method in dealing with bullying. The restorative justice method allows the victim of bullying to express his/her pain and requires the perpetrator to listen and devise and enact strategies to end hurtful behaviors.

Participants also discussed what Gay (2010) called the *symbolic curriculum*, which refers to covert teaching that occurs through the display of posters, flyers, and other materials. They suggested that despite the symbolic curriculum in their schools that rejects bullying, victimization still occurs. They pointed out that the symbolic curriculum in schools is necessary and shows that schools stand against bullying; however, schools need to go beyond the symbolic curriculum and overtly discuss issues of bullying and their deleterious effects. Participants proposed having frequent assemblies on the issue and suggested that ongoing classroom-level discussions on bullying are essential.

What may appear to be straightforward but is nevertheless important to highlight is that bullying has to be addressed head-on by teachers and school administrators. Even though findings show that ignoring the bully was a somewhat effective coping method for the participants, school personnel cannot adopt this strategy. Bazelon (2013) pointed out that ignoring bullying does not end the problem as the perpetrators may perceive being ignored by people in positions of authority as approval of their behavior. School personnel have a responsibility to reduce levels of bullying of students from refugee backgrounds in schools.

Some of the strategies to reduce bullying of U.S.-born students cannot be generalized to students from refugee backgrounds. For instance, anti-bullying campaigns (e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) advise that all students, especially perpetrators, be explicitly taught how to empathize with other people as a strategy to lower levels of bullying. While this advice may be effective for the general student population, one of the participants in our study reported that her teacher implemented this strategy by asking students from refugee backgrounds to do a presentation on their experiences so that their peers could get to know them and develop empathy toward them. However, when the students presented, they were laughed at and ridiculed by their classmates, and victimization was exacerbated. This teacher had explicitly attempted to teach empathy, but it backfired for the students from refugee backgrounds; their classmates' knowledge of their stories was used against them for further bullying.

Teachers and school administrators with students from refugee backgrounds should be aware of the high likelihood that these students will experience bullying. Such awareness can place teachers and administrators in a position to be proactive, not reactive, in addressing the problem. For example, when teachers and/or administrators admit a student from a refugee background, they can use a peer mentor system by pairing the student with a U.S.-born student who can serve as a 'buddy." This might reduce levels of bullying experienced by individual students from refugee backgrounds. Using a buddy system taps into the external validation model that was effective for students who participated in our study. However, caution should be taken in pairing or assigning peer mentors, as not all students will be interested in being paired up with a student from a refugee background. Moreover, teachers and administrators should be intentional in creating inclusive schools and classrooms for students from refugee backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study delineated the widespread nature of group- and individual-based bullying and victimization of students from refugee backgrounds attending urban schools. It showed various models of resisting and coping with bullying that students from refugee backgrounds employed, including push-back bullying, dignity preservation, self-punishment, and external validation models. The participants in the study proffered suggestions on how school teachers and administrators can mitigate bullying of refugee students, which range from assuming that bullying is not occurring if it is not reported, to holding perpetrators of bullying accountable by using the restorative justice approach that puts an onus on the perpetrator to change his or her behavior, and to using the symbolic curriculum in tandem with assemblies and continued discussions on bullying. Mitigation of bullying among students from refugee backgrounds is essential in ensuring that students find school a refuge from victimization, which many of them have already endured in their home countries. Most importantly, schools need to be a place where students, especially students from refugee backgrounds, feel accepted and valued. As schools continue to find better ways to address bullying and as governments at various levels pursue legislation and policies on bullying (e.g., New York State's Dignity for All Students Act), it is important to pay attention to how students from refugee backgrounds are impacted by and deal with bullying.

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

1. How do you define bullying?

2. Are you aware of any policies in your school that deal with bullying?

3. Are there times when you have been bullied? Can you share with us times when you have been bullied?

4. Can you share with us how you dealt with instances of bullying? What are the strategies that you used to cope with bullying?

5. Do you think these strategies were effective/worked? Why? Why not?

6. In hindsight, would you have used the same strategies? If not, why not? What would you do differently?

7. Were school personnel informed about bullying? If so, what actions were taken by the school? Did you feel protected? If not, why were school personnel not informed?

8. If you were to give advice to teachers and administrators about bullying and actions that need to be taken by schools, what advice would you give?

9. If you were give advice to students like you who are undergoing bullying, what advice would you give?

10. If you were to give advice to bullies about the negative impact bullying has on individuals, what kind of advice would you give?

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