Bullying in Schools: A Form of Child Abuse in Schools

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Child abuse is largely recognized as a significant issue within the school system and the larger society. In the schools, incidents of child abuse can take any of physical, sexual and psychological forms. This paper would restrict itself to bullying, by more specifically providing a clearer understanding of the concept of bullying, its prevalence, and effects on the victims' well- being. In addition, intervention for the reduction of incidence of child abuse in the system is provided.

Educational scientists and their social science counterparts in Nigeria have tended to restrict the whole idea of child abuse to child labor, street hawking, child trafficking, early girl- child marriage, etc, which take place outside the school; thus, placing little or no attention to the growing incidents of child abuse within the school. Within the school, incidents of child abuse have persisted, even though most of the time they are either denied or under- reported (Aluede, 2004; Astor & Meyer, 2001; Benhenishty, Zeira & Astor, 2002). Within the school system, incidents of child abuse may take any of sexual, psychological or physical forms.

In this paper, we would be interested in one of those aspects of child abuse that take place in the school system, which is bullying. Bullying has always been a problem in schools. It is more recently becoming a bigger crisis with vicious consequences. Bullying is not just a child's play, but a terrifying experience many school children face everyday (Craig, 1998; Garrett, 2003). Bullying is now recognized as a significant problem in many schools around the world (Nicolaides, Toda, &

Smith, 2002). Although, school officials, teachers, parents, and students are exerting great efforts to make schools friendlier and safer places, a reduction in bullying is not always evident (Beran, 2005). To that end, the thrust of this paper is to provide information relative to the definition of bullying, the prevalence of bullying, and the effects of bullying on school children; and suggest counseling advocacies for reducing incidents of bullying.

Definition of Bullying

Defining bullying has been very nebulous, as no single definition covers all aspects of bullying. Even though no single definition may cover all the aspects of bullying, it has been called willful, conscious desire to hurt another or put him/ her under stress. This stress is created not only by what actually happens but also by fear of what might happen. However, bullying is not the same as harassment or assault. It tends to involve many incidents that accumulate over time, rather than a single incident or a few of them (Anonymous, 2003). Bullying can also be as direct as teasing, hitting or threatening, or as indirect as exclusions, rumors or manipulations (Garrett, 2003).

According to Beran (2005), much of what we understand today about bullying is a result of Dan Olweus' work beginning in the 1970s in Scandinavia. Although his definition of bullying has been debated, the vast majority of the published studies use the Bully/Victim Survey, developed by Olweus as a measure of bullying (Bedell & Horne, 2005; Beran, 2005). Dan Olweus, a pioneer in the systematic study of bullying, identifies common elements of this behaviour, such as deliberate aggressiveness and marked inequality in terms of power. Tactics employed in this act include harsh teasing, constant criticisms, insults, gossips and unreasonable demands (Anonymous, 2003)

Bullying occurs when one or more children repeatedly hurt another child through words or actions. Bullying may involve direct physical actions such as hitting or shoving, verbal

assaults, such as teasing, name-calling, or it may involve more indirect action such as socially isolating a child or manipulating friendship (Limber, 1996, as cited in Fried, 1997).

Orpinas and Horne (cited in Bedell & Horne, 2005) differentiate between violence, aggression, and bullying though the concepts are frequently used interchangeably. Orpinas and Horne (cited in Bedell & Horne, 2005) subscribed to the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition and classification of violence. In general, WHO defines violence as intentional use of physical force or power against oneself (intrapersonal), another person (interpersonal), or a group or community (collective), that can or does result in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002, as cited in Bedell & Horne, 2005).

According to this definition, victims experience injury or distress in the face of repeated attacks against which they are unable to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993).   Bullying behaviours may be directed at a victim in the form of verbal or physical attacks, or they may indirectly target a victim through gossiping and exclusion from the peer group. Victims have been described as shy, depressed, and anxious, whereas bullies have been characterized as aggressive, dominant, and antisocial (Olweus, 2001).

Today, bullying is becoming much more sophisticated. In the area of bullying is the new and insidious development of digital bullying – the sending of menacing text messages via cell phones and computers. In addition, youths also create hate-filled web pages about a victim, including personal information. This form of bullying is extra-ordinarily damaging to the child who is being victimized by it (Anonymous, 2003)

Prevalence of Bullying in Schools

Bullying behavior among school-age children occurs in many schools across the globe (Anonymous, 2003; Kenny et al, 2005; McEachern et. al, 2005). Studies conducted in various countries indicated that a growing percentage of student population is being bullied everyday across the globe, and that rates of bullying vary from country to country (Duncan, 1999).

For example, research conducted in Scandinavian countries and Australia found that approximately 10% of children are frequently victims of bullying; while in England and Canada, approximately 20% of children report victimization by bullying (Duncan, 1999). *Pediatrics in Review* (cited in Anonymous, 2003) revealed that in Norway, 14 percent of the children are either bullies or victims. Similarly, Olweus (1994) studied 140,000 Norwegian children between the ages of 8 and 16 and found approximately 15% of these children are being bullied.

In the United States, American schools harbor approximately 2.1 million bullies and 2.7 million are their victims (Olweus, 1984, as cited in Fried, 1997). Thus, one in seven children is a bully or a target of bullying (National Association of School Psychologists, as cited in Garrett, 2003). In addition, the National Association of School Psychologists (cited in Anonymous, 2003) reported that every day more than 160,000 American school children miss school because they fear being bullied. In other situations, targets of bullying may stop talking about school, get to school late each day, miss classes, or make up excuses to miss school entirely as a result of fear of attack or intimidation by other children.

In Britain, it is speculated that about 1.3 million children are involved in bullying. Whitney and Smith (1993) sampled 6,758 students in 24 schools in all areas of the city of Sheffield, UK. Their results revealed that 27% of the elementary and middle school sample reported being bullied sometime during the term the study was conducted. Ten percent of elementary / middle school children reported weekly incidents, and 4% of secondary students indicated it happened at least once a week. Rivers and Smith (1994, cited in Kenny et al, 2005) surveyed 7,000 elementary and secondary school students also in the UK. They found that in the elementary grades, 29% of boys and 24% of girls experienced some of physical bullying; approximately 41% of boys and 39% of girls experienced verbal bullying; and almost 19% of boys and 25% of girls experienced indirect bullying. On the secondary level, approximately 12% of boys

and 5% of girls reported physical bullying; 23% of boys and 24% of girls reported verbal bullying, and 8% of boys and 10% of girls reported indirect bullying (Kenny et al, 2005; McEachern, et al, 2005).

Bullying is also a prevalent problem in Canada; as 8% of Canadian students indicated being bullied on a regular basis, often once per week, or more often. Furthermore, a survey during the 2001 school year of more than 225,000 Ontario students revealed that between one fourth and one third of them were involved in some form of bullying either as a target or as a perpetrator. In Japan, 15% of primary school pupils say that they have been bullied. In Australia and Spain, the problem prevails among 17% of their students (McEachern, et al, 2005).

Effects of Bullying

The most extreme consequence of bullying for victims and the society is violence including suicide and murder. The sense of powerlessness experienced by children who are victimized can be so profound that some victims of bullying react with self-destructive acts or lethal retaliation. In addition, victims of bullying could often become identifiable because they become moody, irritable, frustrated, or act tired and withdrawn. In other cases, victims may even become aggressive with those at home or with peers and friends (Anonymous, 2003).

Victims of bullying feel sad, unhappy, hurt, or rejected as a reaction to peer victimization. They often feel bad about themselves based on comments that were made by bullies and some even report losing relationships as a result of the victimization. Persistent bullying may erode a victim's self-confidence, induce serious health problems and even ruin his/her careers. Victims may also experience headaches, sleeplessness, anxiety and depression. Some may even develop post-traumatic stress disorder (Anonymous, 2003).

The effect of being bullied on depression was higher in those who had suffered indirect bullying compared to those who were victims of direct bullying. This questions the belief that direct bullying is more harmful than indirect.

Bullying also has had effects on the bullies themselves. If not stopped in childhood, bullies would likely grow up to bully others in the workplace. In fact, it is common knowledge that those who had been bullies at childhood developed behaviour patterns that endured into adult life and are more likely to have criminal records than those who were not bullies (Anonymous, 2003). In addition, although, the bullies themselves may not suffer any initial consequences; they are most likely to suffer from long-term consequences. In that if they do not change behaviors, the pattern of bullying behavior often becomes a habit as the bully gets older. These bullies may at adulthood become aggressive adults and have a higher chance of attaining criminal convictions, courts conviction, alcoholism and personality disorders (Garrett, 2003).

Academic performance, besides emotional and social behavior of victims and bullies, also suffers in any bullying situation. Robert and Coursol (1996) found that repeated bullying is associated with absenteeism and poor academic performance. Roland's (2002) research supports this, which found that both victims and bullies had significantly higher scores on measures of depression and suicidal thoughts than their peers not involved in bullying. He concludes that for bullies, home dysfunction may contribute to their depressive feelings; whereas for victims, being bullied is the reason they are depressed (Kenny et al, 2005).

Bullied children tend to be fearful, anxious, and have slightly lower self-esteem than non-bullied children (Olweus, 1994; Rigby & Slee, 1991). They tend to be loners, quiet, cautious, sensitive, and easily prone to crying (Olweus, 1994). These victims have few friends in school and tend to withdraw and isolate themselves from others. These characteristics appear to apply to both boys and girls, although less research on girl victims has been conducted.

Generally, bullied victims are at high-risk for later maladjustment (Olweus, in press, as cited in Schwartz, Dodge & Coie, 1993). In addition, the effects of bullying on victims when

compared with other children tend to manifest the following conditions: low self-esteem; low self-confidence; poor self-worth; higher rates of depression; anxiety; feeling more insecure; incompetence; hypersensitivity; feeling being unsafe; panicky and nervous at school; having recurrent memories of bullying to the point that their concentration is impaired; rejection by their peers; socially avoidant; more introverted; having few friends usually isolated; and feel lonelier (Duncan, 1999).

The effects of bullying on victims of physical bullying obviously include the injuries sustained in the process. However, the risk of psychological damage in these cases is also substantial. Thus, individuals who are constantly bullied lose their self-confidence, their self-esteem and are at increased risk of suffering stress-related conditions, which can trigger physical trauma (Rigby, 2002).

Counseling Interventions

Interventions, including public exposure to the consequences of bullying to school children, therapeutic interventions, penalties, punishments and extensive education efforts, have been attempted. Nevertheless, incidents of child abuse, especially bullying are increasing at an alarming rate up to 98% in the past seven years (Fried, 1997). It therefore becomes imperative for school counselors to strengthen intervention strategies that would help address this concern.

One of the most important roles school counselors can assume in preventing and combating the problems of bullying is by consulting with teachers and school administrators. Teachers, administrators, and school staff can be educated in professional development workshops or in staff meetings on what constitutes potentially abusive comments, and on the short-and-long term negative effects of bullying. A peer mentorship model facilitated by the school counselor, where veteran teachers and novices acquire strategies with which to observe classroom behaviors, to assess the impact of behaviors, and to provide feedback that would help reduce the incidents of bullying in schools, would be of great benefit (Kenny, et al., 2005; Nesbit & Philpott, 2002). In addition, counselors could encourage teachers to schedule

individual conferences with students for the purpose of making students feel engaged in the learning environment. The outcome of creating a safe, welcoming environment by applying effective strategies sets the tone of a classroom's particular rituals, habits that would serve as a way to unify its group of students (Peterson 2005).

It is well documented that bullied children need to learn to relate to others without abusing power, and the victims of bullying need some practical tools to cope with the perennial problem of bullying. Thus, training school children early in life to be empathetic can help in preventing them from turning into bullies. School counselors can be very helpful in this regard by imbuing in both the victims and bullies the new style of education called "empathy training" that teaches students as young as five years old to understand the feeling of others and to treat people with kindness. Expectedly, those who go through this empathy training, when compared with those who have not, are most likely to be less aggressive. Furthermore, lack of supervision of bullies has been reported to be a veritable reason why bullying thrives in our school system; as many victims feel that they have no place to turn to. A good intervention is crucial since most school children are incapable of solving the problem of bullying in schools, because it's about power, and whenever a bully picks on someone, the bully's power is reinforced. It is therefore advocated that school counselors should properly supervise school teachers to ensure that incidents of bullying are promptly reported and handled (Anonymous, 2003).

Teachers and school administrators must foster positive multicultural environments where respect and tolerance for everyone are encouraged and modeled (Moran, Smith, Thompson, & Whitney, 1993). One program developed and field tested by Olweus (1994) in Norwegian schools had significant reductions in direct and indirect bullying behaviors. This program approached the problem by developing school policies that consisted of monitoring students' activities in and out of school. Rules were developed against bullying, and school

psychologists and counselors counseled bullies and their parents. Parents and teachers were also educated and consulted within groups. Better supervision by adults of school facilities was instituted.

A good intervention that counselors can adopt in managing bullying and school violence issues is "a whole-school campaign approach". This would involve collaboration with the entire school district, school personnel, as well as parents of students. These people would be trained to assist in ending violent issues in schools by talking with and teaching students the important facts about bullying and why this act needs to be stopped. Major program activities would include: developing awareness about bullying; involving adults in activities; surveying bully-victims problem; holding school conference days/class meetings about bullying; and providing better supervision especially during recess and lunch (Garrett, 2003).

There is also great need for counselors and other service providers in the schools to advocate for violence prevention strategies that include parental involvement and on-going parenting skills training. This training must be aimed at educating parents on the importance of keeping handguns and other dangerous weapons out of the hands of children, curtailing children's exposure to media violence, addressing the effect of racism and sexism on violent behavior, and emphasizing the value of teaching and using conflict resolution skills in daily life (Fried, 1997; Kenny et al., 2005; McEachern, et al., 2005).

Increasing public awareness and knowledge about the problem can help to reduce incidents of bullying. Olweus (1991) has asserted that a combination of strategies can lead to dramatic reduction of approximately 50% in the number of bullied victims in schools. These strategies should include: (a) active involvement by teachers and parents in prevention programs, (b) vigilance by school personnel for incidents of bullying, (c) the development of firm sanctions and consequences for students who engage in bullying, and (d) teaching assertiveness skills to the bullied victims (Kenny et al, 2005; McFadden, 1986; Olweus, 1991). In addition, bullying can be combated in the

school by having social pressure brought to bear by the peer group rather than the condemnation of individual bullies by people in authority (Herbert, 1989).

Another important component for reducing bullying in schools is to increase students' social competence. Children's social competence leads to more friendships, positive relationships and academic success. Social competence is defined by Bedell and Horne (2005), as "a person's age-appropriate knowledge and skills for functioning peacefully and creatively in his or her own community or social environment" (p.2). The student component of the School Social Competence Development and Bullying Prevention Model is designed to build a student's social competence in six areas: awareness, emotions, cognitions, character, social skills, mental health and learning disabilities (Bedell & Horne, 2005).

Generally, even though counselors may be successful in designing and implementing intervention programs that would address bullying in schools, it is essential to recognize that students can be discreet in devising ways to disguise acts of bullying, in order to escape identification. An assistance counselors can render in this regard is imbuing in the teachers the need to engage in some form of surveillance, which may be necessary to detect acts of bullying occurring outside the general area of the classroom (Peterson, 2005).

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