Prevalence of peer victimisation among secondary school students in Nigeria

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The study investigated the prevalence of peer victimisation among secondary school students in a state in South Western Nigeria. Participants consisted of 385 secondary school students selected from ten secondary schools across 10 local government areas in Osun State, Nigeria. The participants, aged between 10 and 19 years, were stratified into junior and senior secondary classes. The Multidimensional Peer-Victimisation Scale was used to collect data on four types of peer-victimisation commonly found among students. Results from descriptive and inferential analysis of data indicate that the majority of participants reported overall high levels of peer victimisation with attack on property as the most frequent form of peer victimisation. There were significant differences between male and female participants on all forms of victimisation with females reporting higher level of social victimisation, verbal victimisation and attack on property than males. The study also found that while students' level of study did not significantly influence the extent to which they were victimised by peers, age was a significant factor in reported levels of peer victimisation. The study brings into focus the need to make guidance services functional in Nigerian secondary schools to overcome the problem of bullying and peer victimisation.

Peer victimisation, bullying, aggressive behaviour, peer oppression, peer harassment

INTRODUCTION

Peer victimisation, also known as bullying in the literature of educational research, is a social issue which has received considerable attention from researchers and educators (e.g. Björkvist, Lagerspaetz and Kaukiainen, 1992; Rivers and Smith, 1994; Slee and Rigby, 1994; Ambert, 1995; Dawkins, 1995; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Kaukiainen, 1996; Austin and Joseph, 1996; Rigby, 1996; Ross, 1996; Owens, Shute and Slee, 2000) in many parts of the world. According to some research findings, peer victimisation is a common experience among school children with 10 to 15 per cent of children experiencing it (Pepler and Craig, 2000; Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996).

In Nigeria, peer victimisation among students seems to have attracted little or no attention from researchers probably because it is not seen as a serious social or educational problem. Traditionally, there is the tendency to regard peer victimisation as a normal part of childhood experience which Nigerian children must learn to tolerate as part of the process of growing up (Obidi, 1990).

However, in recent times, there has been a growing concern for the increasing level of student unrest, sexual victimisation, violence and cultism in Nigerian schools. The dimensions which these problems have assumed and the inherent danger which they portend for the educational

development of the nation make it expedient for educational researchers to investigate the phenomenon of peer victimisation, which many believe sets a pattern for subsequent interactions involving victimisation and violence in the wider adult society.

Generally, peer victimisation is defined as the experience among children of being a target of aggressive behaviour of other children, who are not siblings and not necessarily age-mates (Hawker and Boulton, 2000). Smith (1991) described the act as an unprovoked attack that causes hurt of a psychological, social, or physical nature. According to Olweus (1994), peer victimisation occurs when a student is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. These negative actions are not necessarily provoked by the victim and for such actions to be regarded as peer victimisation; an imbalance in real or perceived power must exist between the victim and the person who victimises him or her (Coloroso, 2002).

Peer victimisation takes two major forms. Sometimes it may be physical, as in fighting, punching, pushing, kicking, hitting, strangling, beating, physical assault and direct vandalism (Hanish and Guerra, 2000; Hawker and Boulton, 2000). More often, peer victimisation takes a non-physical form. Non-physical victimisation includes a wide range of behaviour such as verbal abuse (Rigby, 1996), hurtful name-calling, emotional intimidation, persistent teasing, gossip and racist remarks as well as social exclusion (Mishna, 2003). Many European researchers have studied the effects of peer victimisation on the social and psychological well-being of its victims. In summary, the studies showed that students who are victims of peer victimisation are at the risk of developing severe psycho-social adjustment and emotional problems, which may persist into adulthood (Olweus, 1978, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Pellegrini, 1998; Kumpulainen, Raesaenen and Puura, 2001).

Apart from developing psycho-social adjustment problems, research findings also suggest that many aspects of victimised children's lives may be affected. In a meta-analytic review of cross sectional studies on peer victimisation and psychosocial maladjustment over a period of 20 years, Hawker and Boulton (2000) concluded that students who are victimised by peers suffer a variety of feelings of psychosocial distress. They feel more anxious, depressed, lonely and worse about themselves than do non-victims.

On the demographic correlates of peer victimisation, gender and age factors are given prominence by researchers. Most research findings on the relationship between age and peer victimisation tend to conclude that bullying behaviour is more prevalent among younger children than older ones (Nansel et al., 2001; Crick, Casas and Ku, 1999; Sourander et al., 2000). However, research findings appear to be inconclusive on the peer-victimising experiences peculiar to different age categories of school children.

Research findings have not been consistent on the relationship between gender and peer victimisation. While researchers such as Olweus (1994), Nansel et al. (2001) and Crick and Grotpeter (1996) found that boys report significantly more overt victimisation than do girls, evidence from others such as Crick and Grotpeter (1995) and Crick, Casas, and Ku (1999) suggested that girls report significantly more relational victimisation or socially hurtful behaviors than do boys. However, Bjorkqvist et al. (1994) presented a theory according to which the sex difference among adults in regard to victimisation appears to diminish or almost disappear with the males 'catching up' with the female advantage.

In Nigeria, there is currently no reliable data on the prevalence of peer victimisation among secondary school students. This study is therefore a pioneering attempt to investigate the prevalence of the problem with a view to sensitising Nigerian researchers to the need for more research in this area.

METHOD

Participants in this study consisted of 385 secondary school students (Male = 204, Female = 181) selected from ten secondary schools across 10 local government areas in Osun State, Nigeria. The participants, aged between 10 and 19 years, were stratified into junior secondary (N = 214) and senior secondary (N = 171) classes. Participants in the junior classes were those who had received less than three years of secondary school education while those in the senior classes had completed at least three years of secondary school education. The selection of participants was not necessarily random as they were students who the researcher met in class during visits to selected schools.

One research instrument, the Multidimensional Peer-Victimisation Scale (MPV) developed and validated by Mynard and Joseph (2000), was used to collect data for the study. The scale is a 16-item self-report instrument consisting of items intended to find out the extent to which students were victimised by their peers. The items cover four aspects of peer victimisation, namely physical victimisation (e.g. 'hurt me physically in some way'); social manipulation (e.g. 'tried to make my friends turn against me'); verbal victimisation (such as 'made fun of me because of my appearance); and attack on property (e.g. 'deliberately damaged some property of mine). Participants were required to indicate how often (0 = 'Not at all', 1 = 'Once', 2 = 'More than once') during the school year they had experienced 16 victimising experiences.

Scores on the total scale have a possible range of 0 to 32, and a possible range of 0 to 8 on each of the four subscales. Scores between 0 to 16 indicate a low level of victimisation, 17 to 21 indicate moderate level of victimisation while a high score of between 22 and 32 is indicative of a high level of victimisation.

The 16 items on the four subscales of the instrument emerged from a Principal Component Analysis of 45 victimising experience items gathered from 812 respondents by the original authors of the instrument. The items were reported to possess satisfactory internal reliability with Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.85, 0.75, 0.77 and 0.73 for physical victimisation, verbal victimisation, social manipulation and attack on property subscales respectively (Mynard and Joseph, 2000).

RESULTS

In order to ascertain the prevalence and nature of peer victimisation among participants, data collected from the administration of the Multidimensional Peer Victimisation Scale were subjected to descriptive analysis. The data in Table 1 reveal the overall level of peer victimisation experienced by participants.

Table 1.   Reported levels of peer victimisation

Level of Victimisation	Frequency		
	N	Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Low	8	2.1	2.1
Moderate	105	27.3	29.4
High	272	70.6	100.0
TOTAL	385	100.0	

As shown in Table 1, eight participants representing 2.1 per cent of the total sample reported a low level of victimisation while 105 participants representing 27.3 per cent were moderately victimised. Also, 272 participants representing 70.6 per cent experienced a high level of peer victimisation. To ascertain the type of peer victimisation experienced, participants' scores on each of the four sub-scales of the research instrument were subjected to descriptive statistics. The mean and standard deviation values of each type of peer victimisation are as presented in Table 2.

Table 2.   Mean and standard deviation of component variables of peer victimisation

Type of Victimisation	N	$\bar{x}$	Standard Deviation
Physical Victimisation	385	6.18	1.46
Social Manipulation	385	5.48	1.86
Verbal Victimisation	385	4.99	1.73
Attack on Property	385	6.50	1.50
TOTAL	385	23.16	3.15

The data in Table 2 reveal that attack on property was the most frequent form of peer victimisation experienced by participants. This was followed by physical victimisation and social manipulation. The least experienced form of victimisation was verbal victimisation.

A further attempt was made in this study to ascertain the influence of the demographic variables of sex, class of study and age on reported levels of victimisation. Table 3 presents a t-test comparison of the peer victimisation scores of male and female participants on each form of peer victimisation while Table 4 shows the difference in the scores of students in junior and senior classes.

Table 3.   Difference in peer victimisation scores of male and female participants

Forms of Victimisation	Participants	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	t	p
Physical Victimisation	Male	204	6.51	1.41			
	Female	181	5.82	1.42	383	4.79*	< 0.05
Social Manipulation	Male	204	4.99	1.97			
	Female	181	6.04	1.55	383	5.81*	< 0.05
Verbal Victimisation	Male	204	4.36	1.61			
	Female	181	5.70	1.59	383	8.19*	< 0.05
Attack on Property	Male	204	6.28	1.57			
	Female	181	6.75	1.38	383	3.09*	< 0.05
Overall Victimisation	Male	204	22.14	3.05			
	Female	181	24.31	2.85	383	7.18*	< 0.05

* Significant level p = < 0.05

Table 4.   Difference in peer victimisation scores of junior and senior students

Forms of Victimisation	Participants	N	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	t	p
Physical Victimisation	Junior School Grade	214	6.47	1.49			
	Senior School Grade	171	5.82	1.33	383	4.44	> 0.05
Social Manipulation	Junior School Grade	214	5.34	1.97			
	Senior School Grade	171	5.67	1.55	383	1.74	> 0.05
Verbal Victimisation	Junior School Grade	214	5.16	1.61			
	Senior School Grade	171	4.78	1.59	383	2.12	< 0.05
Attack on Property	Junior School Grade	214	6.35	1.57			
	Senior School Grade	171	6.70	1.38	383	2.26	> 0.05
Overall Victimisation	Junior School Grade	214	23.32	3.13			
	Senior School Grade	171	22.97	3.17	383	1.07	> 0.05

As shown in Table 3, a comparison of the overall peer-victimisation scores of male and female students using the t-test statistical analysis, yielded a t-value of 7.18, which is significant at the 0.05 level. This implies that there is a significant difference between the general level of peer victimisation by male and female participants with females reporting significantly higher level of victimisation than their male counterparts. Also, t-test statistical analysis of the different forms of peer victimisation reported by participants showed significant differences between male and female scores on all forms of victimisation with female participants reporting higher level of social victimisation, verbal victimisation and attack on property than male students. However, male students reported a significantly higher level of physical victimisation than female students.

From Table 4, the peer-victimisation scores of participants in junior and senior classes were compared. A t-test statistical analysis of peer-victimisation scores of junior and senior secondary school students on all forms of peer victimisation except verbal victimisation did not reveal any

significant difference at 0.05 probability level. This implies that the levels of physical and social victimisation as well as attack on property reported by students in junior and senior classes were not significantly different.

The study also investigated the influence of age on the reported levels of peer victimisation experienced by participants of different age categories using the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistical procedures. The results of the analysis are as shown in Table 5.

Table 5.   Influence of age on participants' level of peer victimisation

Form of Victimisation	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Physical Victimisation	Between Groups	51.09	2	25.54		
	Within Groups	762.82	382	2.00	12.79*	< 0.05
	Total	813.91	384			
Social Manipulation	Between Groups	78.49	2	39.25		
	Within Groups	1247.65	382	3.27	12.02*	< 0.05
	Total	1326.14	384			
Verbal Victimisation	Between Groups	42.48	2	21.24		
	Within Groups	1110.50	382	2.91	7.31*	< 0.05
	Total	1152.98	384			
Attack on Property	Between Groups	0.12	2	0.058		
	Within Groups	862.13	382	2.26	0.026	> 0.05
	Total	862.24	384			
Overall Victimisation	Between Groups	215.40	2	107.70		
	Within Groups	3597.29	382	9.42	11.44*	< 0.05
	Total	3812.69	384			

* Significant p = < 0.05

As shown in Table 5, the general level of peer victimisation reported by participants was significantly influenced by age (F = 11.44, p < 0.05). Table 6 shows the direction of the influence of age with younger participants reporting a higher level of peer victimisation than older participants.

On specific forms of peer victimisation experienced by participants, Table 5 shows that the age of students significantly influenced the extent to which they experienced physical, social and verbal forms of victimisation. However, the extent to which students experienced attack on property was not significantly influenced by age (F = .026, p = > 0.05).

A further attempt was made to ascertain which age category experienced the least and the highest overall level of peer-victimisation. To this end, participants were classified into three age groups namely: (i) Below 11 years (N=97) (ii) 11 to 15 years (N=174) and (iii) Above 15 years (N=114). Data on overall level of peer victimisation by participants in the three age categories were subjected to a post-hoc multiple comparison test using the Least Significant Difference (LSD) formula. The results are as shown in Table 6.

Table 6.   Multiple comparisons of overall peer victimisation scores according to age

Age Group (i)	Compared Group (ii)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference (i-ii)	Std. Error	p
Below 11 Years	11 – 15 Years	174	22.82	3.05	1.63*	0.389	<0.05
	Above 15 Years	114	22.61	3.34	1.84*	0.424	<0.05
11 - 15 Years	Below 11 Years	97	24.44	2.75	-1.63*	0.389	<0.05
	Above 15 Years	114	22.61	3.34	0.21	0.369	>0.05
Above 15 Years	Below 11 Years	97	24.44	2.75	-1.84*	0.423	<0.05
	11 – 15 Years	174	22.82	3.05	-0.21	0.369	>0.05

* Mean difference significant at 0.05 level

From Table 6, the mean value of participants who were younger than 11 years old ($\bar{x}$ = 24.44) was higher than the mean values of participants from any of the other groups. This implies that

students who were younger than 11 years old experienced the highest level of peer victimisation while students who were older than 15 years experienced the least level of peer victimisation.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have shown that most secondary school students in South Western Nigeria experienced high levels of peer victimisation. Data collected on the prevalence of this phenomenon among secondary school students revealed that 70.6 per cent of the study sample reported high level of peer victimisation while 27% and 2.1% reported moderate and low levels of peer victimisation respectively. The study has also revealed that attack on property was the most frequent form of peer victimisation, followed by physical victimisation and social manipulation. The high proportion of students who reported high level of peer victimisation with regard to attack on property and 'physical victimisation' appears worrisome as it suggests the existence of a serious problem that may have far-reaching effects on children's emotional and social development and by logical extension impact negatively on the social and psychological well-being of the entire Nigerian society.

The findings of this study point to the seriousness of peer victimisation as a social issue requiring the immediate attention of school authorities in Nigeria. It is reasonable to assume that the exposure of young people to bullying and victimisation while in school normally will generate high level of social aggression which according to Farrington (1993) may persist into adulthood in the form of criminality, marital violence, child abuse and sexual harassment. When these happen, the negative impacts extend beyond the victims of peer victimisation to their family members, the community and the entire nation. It also appears reasonable to conclude that the high level of peer victimisation reported by participants in this study is probably one of the early signs of anti-social behaviour that eventually culminates in youth violence and violent crimes in Nigerian society. This line of thinking is reinforced by suggestions from researchers such as Keise (1992), Stein (1995) and Mishna (2003) that the antecedents for many anti-social behaviours of young people such as violence and sexual harassment consisted of teasing and bullying, which are implicitly condoned by adults. In the same vein, Hazler and Carney (2000) had conceptualised youth violence as a continuum that has bullying behaviour such as fighting and teasing at its one end.

Another major finding of this study indicates that while students' level of study did not have significant influence on reported levels of peer victimisation by Nigerian students, their gender significantly influenced the extent to which they were victimised by peers. Specifically, female participants experienced an overall higher level of social and verbal victimisation than their male counterparts. The reason for this might not be unconnected with the lower status accorded women in Nigeria coupled with their general perception as the weaker sex in the Nigerian cultural setting. Though research findings generally tend to indicate that boys are victimised more often than girls (Olweus, 1994; Atlas and Pepler, 1998), the finding of the present study on gender differences on reported level of peer victimisation is consistent with that of Maekoya and Dussich (2003), which indicates that female students were significantly more likely than male students to be victimised by peers. However, there is need for caution in interpreting this result. This is because in the Nigeria socio-cultural setting, parents expect male children to prove their manliness by tolerating peer victimisation without complaints much more than their female counterparts. It is therefore expected that the lower level of peer victimisation reported by male students in this study is a reflection of the socio-cultural expectation which tends to make male children deny that they had been victimised by their peers.

The finding of this study also revealed that age was a significant factor in participants' reported levels of peer victimisation. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Crick, Casas and Ku, 1999; Nansel et al., 2001) this study revealed that younger students experienced higher level of peer victimisation than older students. This finding is not surprising as the concept of peer

victimisation, according to Farrington (1993), implies the oppression of a less powerful person by a more powerful individual or group of persons. Since younger students tend to possess less physical power, it is normal to expect them to report a higher frequency of peer victimisation when compared with older students.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has established the high prevalence of peer victimisation among secondary school students in South Western Nigeria. In view of the negative consequences of this social phenomenon not only on its victim but also on the entire society, an elaborate school-based intervention and prevention program in Nigeria is highly expedient. Such a program, which should have the victims of peer victimisation, the bullies themselves, as well as other students and school teachers as participants, should teach basic inter-personal and conflict-resolution skills to members of the school community. It is important that both teachers and school administrators should recognise the problem of bullying and sensitise the entire society towards ensuring that social support is provided to victims of peer victimisation. It is also necessary to make guidance services functional in all secondary schools to overcome the problem of peer victimisation. Counsellors should work in conjunction with school administrators to develop a code of behaviour to regulate student-student interaction in all schools with a view to minimising the occurrence of bullying behaviour among students. It is expedient, therefore, to increase the present number of counsellors in Nigerian secondary schools to ensure that practical and meaningful guidance intervention programs are provided for victims of peer victimisation.

Classroom teachers should encourage collaborative academic endeavours among students rather than endeavours that tend to promote unhealthy rivalries. When students are made to work co-operatively and in collaboration with one another, they develop healthy relationships that tend to discourage any form of peer victimisation. According to Adams, Carlson and Hamm (1990), team spirit, rather than individual rivalry, is stressed as students learn to work together in the classroom.

School authorities and parents should recognise the individual, peer and environmental factors that are related to peer victimisation in their schools and how these affect the children's social, psychological and academic development. They should regard peer victimisation as potentially detrimental to children's socio-psychological and academic development and give priority attention to programs aimed at assisting the victims. They also need to be concerned about strategies that can help not only the victim but also the bully and make him or her develop acceptable social behaviour.

One major limitation of the present study is, perhaps, its relatively small sample size. For a pioneering study of this nature, a larger sample would have ensured a wider generalisation of the findings. Though the study provides a useful insight into the nature and prevalence of peer victimisation, its results should, at best, be considered tentative until more elaborate research is conducted on the peer-victimisation phenomenon in Nigerian schools.

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