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Bullying: A Matter of Life or Death

Wanda Bragg

Faculty Sponsor: Martha Daugherty

In the recent past, much importance has been placed on the issue of bullying in schools, both in the United States and in foreign countries. Research has been conducted on this issue not only here, but in Norway, Sweden, England, Japan, and Australia. The perception of educators and parents has changed from one of “it’s just a passing thing with young people” to one of concern and, in some cases, alarm. Given the seriousness of this topic, the purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which bullying occurs at the middle school level.

A series of incidents here and abroad has probably contributed to the change in attitude of adults toward the issue of bullying. In Norway in the early 1980’s, three boys, aged ten to thirteen, committed suicide after extensive bullying by their classmates (Greenbaum, 1987). In Japan in the mid-1980’s, a thirteen-year-old boy hanged himself after having been bullied for some time by classmates, two of whom were named in his suicide note (Barone, 1997). In March of 1987, a seventh grader in DeKalb, Missouri, brought a gun to school and killed another student before killing himself; the probable cause—bullying (Greenbaum, 1987).

Tragedies of this nature have prompted numerous studies on bullying, as well as the implementation of prevention programs. As parents, teachers, and community members become increasingly concerned, it is important to understand the impact that bullying has on students in the local setting.

Bullying is not a new phenomenon; it has been around for hundreds of years. It was documented in ancient Greece, has been in existence in England for centuries, and has been present in education in the United States in situations ranging from common school-yard...
bullying to the hazing and initiation rites of college fraternities (Horne and Socherman, 1996).

Definitions

Many definitions have been given for bullying, all of which have similar phrasing and, basically, the same meaning. Dan Olweus, an internationally-known expert on bullying, says, “a student is being bullied when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students.” He defines a negative action as one that “intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort on another” (Horne and Socherman, 1996, p. 78) and logically calls the recipient of this action the victim.

According to Olweus, there are two types of bullying. In the direct form, the victim receives bodily harm from kicking, butting, pushing, or shoving. In the indirect form, the victim receives emotional or mental harm through name-calling, rejection, gossip, threats, or insults (Horne and Socherman, 1996). For the sake of clarity, this study will refer to direct bullying as physical bullying and to indirect bullying as mental bullying.

Review of Literature

Bullying has become such an important topic of concern that it may be asked why more has not been done by school personnel to stop it. F. J. Barone, in a study conducted on bullying in 1993, agreed with other researchers that many people seem to feel that it’s just a “normal part of growing up.” Barone also gave other possible reasons, such as that schools may not know how to handle the problem and, therefore, may leave bullying unidentified. Also, many adults may not identify certain actions as bullying, or schools may have so many other pressing issues to handle that they feel they have no time to address the problem of bullying.

During his 1993 study, Barone surveyed two groups in upstate New York. One group consisted of 847 8th graders; the other comprised 110 counselors, teachers, and administrators at the schools
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of these 8th graders. When the feelings of the two groups were examined, the adults surveyed were found to believe that 16% of the students had been victimized by bullies while in middle school. The students’ estimation, however, was much higher: 58.8%. When students were questioned by gender about bullying, 47% of the victims were boys, while 53% were girls. When questioned concerning mental and physical bullying, 89.3% of physical bullying victims were boys, while 67.1% of mental bullying victims were girls.

When asked if they had been physically injured by bullies, 10% said they had been. Barone found that these injuries ranged from minor ones (lumps and bruises) to major ones requiring hospitalization. Among this 10%, 75.5% were boys.

When asked where bullying most often occurred, staff members felt that it happened most frequently on playgrounds, in locker rooms, and in hallways, respectively. While only 10.6% of the staff members thought bullying most often occurred in hallways, 62.9% of the students thought bullying most often occurred there.

When asked how to deal with bullying at the middle school level, 41.4% of adults surveyed said that discipline should be tougher, and 33.7% said better supervision was needed. Only 17.4% thought more counseling was necessary. Forty-three percent of the students thought more counseling was needed; however, 25.8% mentioned a need for tougher discipline and 22% recommended better supervision.

As might be expected, Barone concluded that teachers should look more carefully for signs of bullying in the hallways. He also wondered if some of the pushing and shoving in the hallways that teachers believed to be unintentional might not be so.

Ahmad and Smith conducted a study on bullying in 1990 using 100 students ages 11, 13, and 15. Their instrument for gathering data was an interview. They concluded that this instrument is not the best means of collecting data on bullying, because many students did not want to be interviewed (Whitney and Smith, 1993). An anonymous questionnaire—such as one used by Olweus in Norway in 1991—seems to be a more valid instrument because it it measures what it is supposed to measure: in this case the degree to which students were being bullied. Pilot work related to its use showed a general
consistency of answers given by students using approximately 25 questions (Whitney and Smith, 1993).

Another study conducted by Whitney and Smith in 1993 paid special attention to procedures for using a questionnaire. The study included 6,758 students from 24 schools in Sheffield, England, who ranged in age from 8 to 16 years old. The questionnaire was given by teachers who were not the students’ regular teachers. It was emphasized that honest answers were needed, and it was explained that honest answers could help adults work on the problem of bullying at school. These students were not asked to put their names on the forms, so that no one would know who filled them out.

The students were also spaced apart in the room and not allowed to talk. Completed questionnaires were placed in a plain envelope. The results of the study were as follows: At the middle school level, 27.7% of the students said they had been bullied at least sometime. Ten percent said they were bullied weekly or more often. On the secondary level, 10% were sometimes bullied, but only 4% reported being bullied on a weekly basis or more often.

Benefits of Intervention

Saunders (1997) found that intervention by adults has many benefits. First, children who have been victimized will feel safer at school, as will their classmates. Second, the bullies will also benefit because, if left alone, it has been shown that they will experience academic and social failure. Third, unchecked bullying can help create an unsafe school (Wanat, 1996) and may lead to more serious violence if not stopped (Nolin, Davies, and Chandler, 1996). This intervention takes the form of strategies in which adults work directly with students to help them deal with bullying. There were no strategies which seemed to work better than others; the most important factor seemed to be that the adults played an active role in working with the students. Students were not told to solve the problems by themselves (Saunders, 1997).

Given that bullying in schools is a serious problem, school officials should take steps to solve it. These steps can include
assigning very serious consequences for those who bully. When suddenly faced with serious problems, one Canadian middle school took drastic measures to stop bullying. During the 1994-95 school year, bullying victims were often hit or punched. The staff quickly made the decision to suspend or expel the bullies. Bystanders who promoted bullying were also to be held responsible in the same manner. As a result, the number of incidents of bullying declined drastically, and the school was able to implement a program to help students deal with less severe forms of bullying as well (Litke, 1996).

Since bullying actually begins in elementary school, programs there could deal with the problem before it spreads to middle schools. One such program was developed by Briggs (1996). Working with a group of students in the second and third grades, he taught them how to deal constructively with simple disagreements in the classroom. He encouraged them to talk their problems out rather than bully each other. Faced with more serious bullying outside the classroom, these students solicited their teacher’s help in dealing with the situation and in helping these students as well. Working with young children, teaching them the art of negotiation, conflict resolution, and simple courtesy can help to curb bullying at the elementary level and later (Greenbaum, 1987).

As students get older, bullying may not be as easy to identify by adults. Bullies may become much more cautious about bullying other students around adults for fear of punishment. They are more likely to do their bullying in unsupervised areas of playgrounds, locker rooms, and bathrooms (Sanders, 1997).

Preventing Bullying at School

When problems of bullying occur in middle school, school personnel should take immediate steps to deal with them. In a study on bullying conducted by Hazler, Hoover, and Oliver (1993), suggestions were made for dealing with such bullying. One suggestion was to make everyone understand that the problem exists. Having done so, administrators should train staff members in the steps necessary to deal with bullying. There should be a
comprehensive plan, familiar to all staff members, with emphasis put on following it consistently. In assessing the scope of the problem, the staff should use some sort of anonymous survey of the students. School intervention programs should also be developed to train observers and to help not only victims, but bullies as well.

In a generation-long study conducted by several collaborating researchers, 870 bullies, aged 8 to 30, were studied. The findings revealed that those who began bullying at an early age were much more likely to have criminal records as adults than children who were not bullies (Greenbaum, 1987).

Gender is obviously an important factor in the forms that bullying takes. A study undertaken in England in 1990 found that boys were more likely to be physically bullied, while girls were more likely to be bullied mentally (Siann, Callaghan, Glissov, Lockhart, and Rawson, 1994). Consequently, schools should probably develop their programs with these differences in mind.

When studies were conducted using teachers to find out what concerned them most about school in terms of violence or potential violence, most of them mentioned physical conflicts between students (Shen, 1997). Some of these conflicts can begin as simple misunderstandings, rise to the level of bullying, and escalate into acts of serious violence. Teachers do not feel safe under these circumstances because they are often the ones who have to intervene in such situations (Shen, 1997). Having a plan in school to deal with problems before they get out of hand could make everyone feel more secure.

The review of related literature has revealed similar findings in studies conducted by researchers. Whether the research was conducted in the United States or in a foreign country, bullying seemed to be a serious problem for school-aged children. Researchers said that at the middle-school level, bullying manifested itself in greater frequency than at other levels, although it seemed to have its roots in elementary school. Bullying continued into high school, although fewer students were bullied on the whole than they had been in middle school. Of the twenty researchers whose materials were directly consulted, all concluded that bullying is a very serious problem that should be understood and confronted constructively.
As reflected in the literature, bullying is an important issue that must be dealt with in some manner. Adults must work together with students before the problem of bullying becomes more serious. Researchers believe that once these efforts are made, bullying can be confronted in a positive manner and that schools and the community will reap the benefits.

Design of the Study

As described above, bullying in middle school can be a problem that is sometimes overlooked or minimized by adults. However, it can become a serious threat not only to individual students but to school safety in general. This research study was a quantitative descriptive study that used a student survey to analyze problems related to bullying. Quantitative descriptive research attempts to describe an area of interest accurately by converting the data into percentages or some other numerical form. The question to be answered by this study was to what extent students were bullied in middle school.

Sampling Method

The target population for this study was middle school students. The population included one middle school located in the southeastern United States. The system from which the middle school was chosen was located in a rural area with no large towns nearby. The system population included 4,082 students, and the school population numbered 1,027. The racial make-up of the school was 76% Caucasian, 22% African American, and 2% Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian.

A non-random convenience sampling was used for this particular study. The sample consisted of students from four heterogeneously grouped classes that totaled 113 students. All students were given the opportunity of participating, but only 55 students brought back their parental permission forms, and therefore only these 55 students were included in the study. The subjects were
a mixture of regular education students and special education students; no distinction was made between the two groups.

Measurement Instruments

The instrument used in this study was a student survey adapted from a published one (Randall, 1996). The survey was designed to gather student feedback on the extent and nature of bullying experiences in school. The researcher shortened the number of questions on the survey to make it more likely that seventh-grade students would give their full attention to the number of questions asked. Also, some choices of answers were changed to fit the particular school setting. Certain words in one question were put in bold print to make it easier for students to interpret the question correctly. Most possible answers consisted of either “yes” or “no.”

The published part of the survey had been used by other researchers in gathering similar information. Guidelines given for administering the published survey included giving the survey on Friday since some questions referred to events that may have occurred during that week. It was also suggested in the guidelines that it was legitimate to substitute terms such as “being picked on” for “bullying” if the researcher believed that students would understand the meaning more clearly. The demographic information of gender and age was requested at the top of the survey. The parts of the survey that were generated by the researcher were not tested for reliability or validity.

Data Collection Method

A parental permission form was sent home on the Monday of the week that the survey was to be completed. The researcher explained to each class the purpose of the research. Discussion was permitted on the subject of bullying, and student questions were answered by the researcher. On Friday of that same week, the participating students completed a copy of the survey in class.

Participating students were not gathered into a separate room. Rather, they were surveyed during their regular class period. Students
were allowed to ask questions about anything on the survey that they did not understand. For most items on the survey, students were instructed to circle their answer choice. One question asked that students choose from a list of places where they believed bullying occurred most often. For this question, they were to put the letter of the answer they chose in a blank provided by the question. Students were then asked to fold their surveys and place them in a large envelope with all other surveys, thus helping to guarantee that no one would be identified with a specific survey.

Analysis

After gathering the surveys, the researcher separated the surveys into stacks of boys and girls. According to related literature, the perception of bullying may differ according to gender; the researcher wanted to explore this possibility with the surveys gathered. The results were tallied for questions 1-12 according to how they were answered by boys and girls. Then, the tallies were converted into percentages.

Findings

All 55 participants in this study were students in the researcher's seventh-grade social studies classes. Thirty-three of them were girls and twenty-two were boys.

Both boys and girls agreed that bullies were generally bigger than the people they pick on. More girls than boys said that they had been picked on at their present school. Of those who said they had been picked on that month, more of the girls cited a greater number of times than the boys did and with greater frequency. (Refer to Table 1 for the percentages for survey questions 1-6.)

More of the boys who said they had been picked on told no one, whereas more of the girls told teachers or friends. Often the girls reported that the bullying did not stop when they told someone. More often than not, the bullying stopped when the boys told someone.

Many of the girls and boys said they had seen other students
being picked on at this school. Both groups reported that bullying occurred most often on the playground. The next most frequently cited locations were the halls when classes were changing (for the girls) and the bathrooms (for the boys).

More boys admitted to having bullied someone else in the last week or month than girls did. However, the percentage of both groups who admitted to bullying at all was fairly low, with 27% of the boys saying they had bullied before and 21% of the girls admitting the same. (Refer to Table 2 for percentages for survey questions 7-12.)

Discussion

The results of this study show that there is a need for bullying to be taken seriously by adults at the middle school level. Students who were surveyed were very familiar with bullying, and many of them had been involved in some way.

The findings of the study seemed to support findings in the related literature that showed that more girls were bullied than boys at the middle school level (Barone, 1997). School personnel should also always be aware of locations where bullying is most likely to occur. According to Barone (1997), two of the most popular places for bullying were on the playground and in the halls during change of classes. This study also found the same to be true. Also, most students in this study reported that they had witnessed others being bullied, a finding which is supported by the related literature (Greenbaum, 1987).

Future research should focus on ways that bullying can be stopped successfully. Some research has been done in this area, but more could be done to determine the success levels of intervention programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Also, more research could be done to see if community involvement could help to solve problems concerning bullying.
Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, the sample was a convenience sample from one section of the seventh grade. The study may have been more conclusive if students had been randomly selected from grades 6-8. Second, some students may not have answered all questions accurately. If all students being surveyed had been gathered in a central location, they may have felt more comfortable asking questions about anything they didn’t understand. Third, some of the questions were developed by the researcher and had not been piloted. If they had been piloted, validity and reliability for all survey items could have been established.

Conclusions

This study found that many students at the middle school level observe bullying on a regular basis. Many are bullied themselves, although some actually take on the role of bully at one time or another. The findings of the study do not necessarily indicate that bullying is a problem in all middle schools. The findings indicate, however, that school personnel should be aware that bullying could be more of a problem than they realize.

References


## Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Girls’ Response</th>
<th>Boys’ Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bullies are larger than those bullied</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Have been bullied at this school</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Have been bullied more often than twice</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Have been picked on this month</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Have been picked on this week</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Told teachers most often</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told parents most often</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told friends most often</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told no one</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Girls’ Response</th>
<th>Boys’ Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. If told someone, the bullying stopped</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If told someone, the bullying didn’t stop</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Students witnessing others being bullied</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Have seen bullying occur most often:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—on playground</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—in halls during class change</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—in bathrooms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Have been a bully</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have never been a bully</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Bullied someone this week</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Bullied someone this month</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STUDENT SURVEY ON BULLYING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Put an (x) here _if you are a boy._

Put an (x) here _if you are a girl._

How old are you? _
Please read each question carefully and circle the answer you think is right. If a question does not apply to you, don’t mark any of its answers.

1. Are bullies usually bigger than, smaller than, or the same size as the students they pick on? BIGGER SMALLER SAME SIZE

2. Have you ever been bullied/picked on at this school? YES NO

3. If so, how often has this happened? ONCE TWICE MORE

4. Have you been picked on this month? YES NO

5. Have you been picked on this week? YES NO

6. Who do you tell when you are bullied? TEACHERS PARENTS FRIENDS NO ONE

7. If you told somebody, did the bullying stop? YES NO

8. Have you seen other students being bullied at this school? YES NO

9. Where have you seen bullying occur most often at this school? Choose one answer and put its letter in the blank.
   (a) in the classroom (b) in the halls when classes are changing (c) on the playground (d) in the gym (e) in bathrooms (f) on buses (g) going to buses in the afternoon

10. Have you ever been a bully? YES NO

11. If so, did you pick on anyone this week? YES NO

12. Have you picked on anyone this month? YES NO