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Bullying and Victimization in Cyprus: The Role of Social Pedagogy

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Bullying and Victimization in Cyprus: The Role of Social Pedagogy

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THEORY

PRACTICE

RESEARCH

Bullying is a worldwide concern that affects negatively a significant minority of children. Over the past thirty years, a growing amount of empirical and theoretical work has been accumulated in the relevant literature. Researchers in Cyprus have focused on the causes and the prevalence of bullying, and have investigated numerous related factors (i.e. temperamental, relational, and contextual factors). In this paper, we will bring together recent empirical studies and theoretical work in order to draw a comprehensive picture of bullying in Cypriot schools. Our main objectives are to discuss local and international data on bullying; to analyze cross-cultural similarities and differences; to reflect on major issues related to bullying such as the psychosocial profiles of bullies, victims, and bully/victims, the causal factors and the consequences of bullying and victimization. Finally, we will discuss the role of the school, and particularly what is known as social pedagogy in preventing phenomena such as these from happening in our schools and our communities.

Key words: *bullying, victimization, cultural values, social pedagogy*

Definitions and types of bullying

Bullying at school is defined as a systematic and repeated aggression involving peers (Olweus, 1993). Typically, this type of aggression requires an imbalance of power between the victim and the bully (Rigby, 2002). Furthermore, bullying is intended to cause harm, induce fear and create distress to the victim (Greene, 2000). It can be perpetrated either by an individual or a group, even though the majority of victims are bullied by a single individual (Olweus, 1994).

This type of maladaptive behaviour manifests itself in several forms. That is, bullying can involve physical aggression (e.g. hitting, pushing, kicking, shoving); verbal violence (e.g. threatening, teasing, name calling); or social exclusion (e.g. gossiping or spreading rumors, forcing peers to isolate someone) (Craig et al., 2000; Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Newman et al., 2001).

Depending on their role in bullying incidents, three distinct groups of children have been identified: the bullies, the passive victims and the aggressive victims, often called bully/victims (Bowers et al.,

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1994; Austin & Joseph, 1996; Wolke et al., 2000). Bullies have been found to display higher levels of aggressive-impulsive behaviour than other youth (Olweus, 1993; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). On the other hand, victims have been found to display elevated levels of depression and anxiety (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999; Juvonen et al., 2003), as well as feelings of insecurity and loneliness (Bond et al., 2001). Furthermore, bully/victims share characteristics of both bullies and victims (Schwartz et al., 2001). A study conducted by Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle and Mickelson (2001) showed that bully/victims suffer from severe psychosocial problems. Therefore, it is important to note that the bully/victim profile seems to be more pathogenic than that of either bullies or victims.

Previous studies have shown that children involved in bullying suffer from both short-term and long-term consequences later in life (Roland, 2002; Seals & Young, 2003; Headley, 2004). A number of researchers have suggested that negative effects related to bullying include loneliness, poor academic achievement, poor social adjustment, greater risk of substance use, and psychological difficulties later in life (Olweus, 1997; Roberts, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001).

Bullies are more likely to exhibit externalizing problems such as aggressive and antisocial behaviour later in life (Sourander et al., 2000). Additionally, researchers argue that during adulthood bullies tend to behave aggressively towards partners and use harsh physical punishment with their own children, and their children are more likely to become bullies themselves (Roberts, 2000; Carney & Merrell, 2001; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). In contrast, victims are at greater risk of exhibiting internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety later in their lives (Olweus, 1993; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Bond et al., 2001). Finally, bully/victims tend to combine all these risks and exhibit both externalizing and internalizing problems as adults.

Prevalence of bullying

Since its introduction in the early 1990's (Olweus, 1993) the bullying phenomenon has been extensively examined and it has become a universal concern (Andreou, 2000). The prevalence of bullying among 8–12 year old children in Western Europe was found to vary between 3% and 23%, and the prevalence of victimization between 8% and 46% (Wolke et al., 2001). In an earlier study, Olweus (1993) found that approximately 15% of students were involved in bullying experiences; 6% as bullies, 9% as victims, and 1.6% as aggressive victims. In Central and Eastern Europe, a United Nations supported survey found that 35% of school-children (ages 11-15) reported they had been bullied within the past two months, with the percentage ranging from 15% in Sweden to 64% in Lithuania. Using a similar methodology, Rigby and Slee (1990) found that 15-17% of elementary and high school students in Australia were often victimized by their peers. More recently, in a cross-national study of 113,000 students from 25 countries between the ages of 11 and 15 it was found that involvement in bullying (bullies and victims) varied from 5% to 54% across countries (Ronald, 2002; Nansel et al., 2004). In Greece the percentage of children reporting that they had been bullied was 8.2%. Additionally, about 6% admitted that they bullied other children, while about 1% of the respondents were bully/victims (Sapouna, 2008). Finally, Stavrinides, Paradeisiotou, Tziogouros and Lazarou (2010) surveyed 1645 elementary and high-school students, and they found that the prevalence of bullying among students in Cyprus was 17%. More specifically, the results of this study showed that 5.4% of the children were involved as bullies, 7.4% of the children as victims, and 4.2% as aggressive victims.

Parameters of bullying

A number of empirical studies have identified an array of factors that put children at risk of becoming either bullies or victims (e.g., Menesini et al., 2010). These risk factors can be classified in

three categories: temperamental, relational and contextual. Regarding the temperamental factors, research shows that children's involvement in bullying experiences may be associated with high levels of callous-unemotional (CU) traits and with low levels of affective empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; 2007; Viding et al., 2009). Using a sample of 11–13 year old children, Viding and her colleagues (2009) indicated that CU traits predicted direct forms of bullying and explained 3% of the variance beyond the presence of conduct problems. Additionally, Wolke et al. (2000) found that a high level of empathy inhibits aggressive behaviour such as bullying.

As far as the relational factors are concerned, several authors have found that children's involvement in bullying experiences is associated with poor relationships with their peers (Dill et al., 2004; Hodges et al., 1999). Nansel et al. (2004) suggested that victims experience poorer relationships with classmates than do uninvolved children or children classified as bullies. Generally, children who bully or who are victims of bullying tend to lack appropriate social skills (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005), which may further contribute to problems in their social relationships.

Finally, regarding the contextual factors, studies have shown that children's involvement in bullying is related to familial and school factors. Researchers argue that specific aspects of parenting such as parental style (Chen et al., 1997), inadequate parental monitoring and involvement (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987), and maternal depression (Hay et al., 2003) are related to children's involvement in bullying. According to Baumrind (1991), parental style describes a series of parental behaviours and rearing practices that shape familial climate and affect the dynamic processes that take place in the home. Parental style is measured as it is perceived by the child. Parents may be classified in any of the three distinct parental styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Numerous studies have demonstrated a strong link between parental style and children's social adjustment (Radziszewska et al., 1996; Strage & Swanson, 1999; Kaufmann et al., 2000; Spera, 2005). Chen, Dong and Zhou (1997) have shown that the authoritative style is linked positively to indices of social and school adjustment and negatively to adjustment problems. In contrast, Pereira, Canavarro, Cardoso, and Mendonca (2009) have shown that authoritarian parents have children with numerous behavioural problems such as externalizing difficulties. In terms of bullying, some studies have indicated that authoritarian parenting is related to aggression and bullying behaviour at school (Chen et al., 1997; Baldry & Farrington 2000; Kaufmann et al., 2000). Furthermore, permissive parental style tends to be associated with children's victimization experiences (Georgiou, 2008a).

There is ample evidence suggesting that inadequate parental monitoring and lack of involvement predicts bullying experiences at school (e.g., Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987). These authors claimed that delinquent behaviour is associated with parental rejection, weak parental supervision and parental disengagement. Following the reciprocal model of interpretation, Laird, Pettit, Bates and Dodge (2003) found that lower levels of parental monitoring predicted future delinquent behaviour and that lower levels of delinquent behaviour predicted higher levels of monitoring.

Additionally, empirical studies have documented the association between maternal depression and a range of adverse behavioural and emotional outcomes in children (Downey & Coyne, 1990; Connell and Goodman, 2002; Goodman, 2007). In relation to child aggression and involvement in bullying, numerous studies have demonstrated that maternal depression is linked to externalizing problems such as proactive aggression and other types of problem behaviour and more worryingly to an array of severe forms of antisocial behaviours during childhood and adolescence (Munson et al., 2001; Hay et al., 2003).

Researchers have argued that bullying is linked to school factors such as negative school climate, distrust towards teachers, and poor quality of teacher-student relationship (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003; Bibou-Nakou et al., 2012). Positive school climate refers to the quality and character of school life, and it may act as a protective factor against bullying. For instance, positive school climate promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect, and mutual trust (Ghazi, 2003)

factors that inhibit bullying. In contrast, Thornberg, Halldin, Bolmsjö and Petersson (2011) found that distrust towards teachers is associated with children's involvement in bullying. Further, according to Bibou-Nakou and her colleagues (2012), bullying is frequently understood by students as an issue that is related to adverse school climate. Specific components of school climate such as student-teacher relationship, academic competition, and the pressure of academic achievement were significantly associated with bullying.

Furthermore, research showed that community factors such as socioeconomic indicators, rates of violence or crime, and drug trafficking are linked to children's involvement in bullying (e.g. Cook et al., 2010). These researchers conducted a meta-analysis investigation using 153 studies and the results indicated that bullies and victims are significantly influenced by adverse community factors such as a high rate of neighbourhood delinquency and violence.

Bullying and cultural values

Culturally embedded beliefs and expectations give shape to the child-rearing attitudes in a given society, and thus parents' values determine the parenting practices that will be adopted. Individualistic cultures promote individual-oriented child-rearing, encouraging children to be independent and self-reliant, whereas collectivistic cultures emphasise group orientation, inducing children to be more cooperative and inter-dependent. Further, according to previous research, collectivistic societies endorse and promote authoritarian parenting strategies, while individualistic societies idealise authoritative parenting (Keshavarz & Baharudin, 2009). For example, adolescents living in a collectivistic context believe that parental control is associated with positive outcomes and view it as parental warmth and acceptance. In contrast, adolescents living in an individualistic culture resent parental control and view it as a negative index of parenting (Kim, 2005).

The association between cultural orientation and bullying is vague. There are some studies reporting that bullying and victimization of out-group members is more common among collectivistic cultures. For example, Nesdale and Naito (2005) showed that participants from collectivistic cultures such as Japan exhibited a greater bullying propensity than participants from individualistic cultures such as Australia. These results are in line with some more recent findings, according to which Egyptian and Saudi Arabian participants (taken as representing collectivistic cultures) revealed a higher level of bullying behaviour than Americans (Hussein, 2009). These findings are explained by means of the stronger need of collectivists to belong to a group, to be accepted by the in-group and to have a social identity that coheres to that of the larger affiliation group. Therefore, members of the in-group behave in a way that fosters conformity to group norms and bias in favour of the in-group versus the out-group. However, other findings on peer delinquency contradict these results. For instance, Le and Stockdale (2005) indicated that individualism was positively related to self-reported delinquency, with partial mediation through peer delinquency, whereas collectivism was negatively related to delinquency.

Bullying in Cyprus

As we have seen above, bullying in Cypriot schools affects a significant minority of children, as is true in other western European countries (Stavrinides et al., 2010). During the past several years a series of studies conducted locally have tried to examine the parameters and correlates of the phenomenon. Georgiou, Stavrinides and Kyriakou (2007) investigated the perceptions of primary school students regarding bullying. Their data showed that while bullying was associated with low academic achievement, the same was not true for victimization. More recently, a longitudinal study

provided further evidence that earlier involvement in bullying predicted later drop in school grades, while prior victimization was not linked with school grades (Stavriniades et al., 2011).

In a study investigating the psychosocial profiles of children involved in bullying incidents, Georgiou and Stavriniades (2008) reported that bully/victims manifested the most maladaptive outcome compared to bullies, victims and uninvolved children. More specifically, the authors showed that bully/victims deviated the most from their peers, had the most difficult temperament, they used hostile attributions more frequently and had the lowest rate of peer acceptance. In the same vein, Georgiou and Stavriniades (2012) found that bully/victims were the most impulsive, had the lowest affective empathy and worst pro-social skills, and they had high levels of hyperactivity.

In relation to the bullying-empathy link, several researchers hypothesized over the years that bullies suffer from low levels of empathy (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Olweus, 1993; Smith & Thompson, 1991). Most of these studies, however, are cross-sectional and therefore do not clearly show the direction of effects between bullying and empathy and they do not distinguish between the emotional and the cognitive components of empathy. To address this gap, Stavriniades, Georgiou and Theofanous (2010) conducted a longitudinal study in which they found a reciprocal relationship between bullying and the affective component of empathy: that is, bullying at Time 1 predicted lower levels of affective empathy at Time 2, while affective empathy at Time 1 predicted less involvement in bullying at Time 2.

In addition to the studies investigating the mechanisms, profiles and consequences of bullying, another line of research has examined contextual associations of bullying and victimization and particularly the role of family processes. Georgiou (2008b) has shown that maternal overprotection is significantly associated with child victimization at school. While mothers try to protect their vulnerable youths, they often cause more harm by creating barriers for their children to develop their social skills and their sense of independence. Recently, Georgiou and Stavriniades (2013) added that parent-child conflict is also a factor capable of predicting bullying. These findings suggest that a dysfunctional family environment may foster children's aggression, which, in turn, can be channelled through attacks against vulnerable children at school. Interestingly, in the same study the authors found that the only variable predicting less bullying was child disclosure, which is the free willing information sharing offered by the children to their parents. In a different line of investigation, Georgiou, Fousiani, Michaelides and Stavriniades (2013) provided evidence about the link between harsh parenting and bullying. More specifically, they found that an authoritarian parenting style was significantly associated with bullying and victimization. Finally, Nikiforou, Georgiou and Stavriniades (2013) found that attachment with parents and peers is also a predictor of bullying and victimization. Specifically, the authors showed that alienation, lack of trust and lack of communication with parents and peers predicts both bullying and victimization. Interestingly, this association appears to be stronger for girls.

In the relevant literature, quantitative studies are still dominant while qualitative studies published in the area of bullying are quite limited. In one of the latter studies, Nikiforou (2013) worked with a sample of families that included children and adolescents who were identified as bullies, victims or bully/victims. Qualitative analysis demonstrated that parental practices such as authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting, physical abuse and parent alienation were linked to children's involvement in bullying. Further, these qualitative data provided evidence about the school processes that were related to bullying. School factors, such as distrust towards teachers, tolerant policies and discrimination on behalf of the teachers, were the main themes that emerged from this analysis. Additionally, the results revealed children's attributions about being a bully, a victim or a bully/victim. Specifically, it was found that bullies tend to explain their own behaviour using individualistic terms (i.e. it is the victim's fault) and non-individualistic terms as well (peer pressure). On the other hand, victims tend to explain their experience by blaming themselves (i.e. their own different, deviant and odd behaviour).

Bullying in periods of crisis and social pedagogy

As outlined above, prior research has identified several factors that act as parameters of bullying and victimization at school. Some studies suggest that this problematic behaviour is mostly due to idiosyncratic characteristics of the aggressor that may be related to psychopathology (Fanti et al., 2009), while others link bullying with personality and neuro-psychological disorders (Coolidge et al., 2004). Most researchers agree, however, that social factors and specifically the family background of both bullies and victims are related to this phenomenon.

Furthermore, bullying cannot be fully understood without considering both the social and moral aspects involved in the phenomenon, as Arsenio and Lemerise (2004) rightfully argue. The holistic model suggested by these two authors describes the application of moral structures during peer interactions and is useful in exploring questions about the connections between children's understanding and their behaviour involving aggression and other morally relevant acts.

What follows from this analysis is that bullying activities at school and related phenomena such as peer aggression and anti-social behaviour of students of all ages should be addressed by the combined effort of all partners involved in the educational process. The three main partners are teachers, parents and students themselves. Obviously, sporadic and fragmented interventions organized by school personnel in the school premises are doomed to fail. The same fate awaits teacher initiatives that are formally positioned in the daily routine of school functioning (i.e. lectures during class periods, punishments, dealing with aggression as if it was material for homework). On the other hand, individual parents acting on their own in order to prevent or exterminate these behaviours from their child's repertoire do not have much luck either.

In the past five years, like many southern European countries, Cyprus has been going through a financial crisis with banks collapsing, businesses closing down and public debt reaching dangerous levels. A direct result of this crisis is increasing unemployment, especially among young people, poverty and social unrest. In the conclusions of a conference organized by the Council of the European Union in Brussels, on October 5, 2012, the following statement is very clear as well as very alarming: 'children growing up in poverty and social exclusion are less likely than their better-off peers to do well at school, enjoy good health and realize their full potential later in life, as the risk of becoming unemployed and poor and socially excluded is higher for them' (Council of the European Union, 2012, p. 2).

In addition to these general observations, it seems that the international financial crisis affects the quality of human relationships, including those between parents and children and between peers. Researchers have found that economic stress in family life is linked to children's symptoms of internalizing and externalizing problems (Conger et al., 1994). The economic pressure experienced by parents tends to increase parental dysphoria and marital conflict as well as to maximize existing conflicts in the family. As a result, these hostile exchanges between parents and children affect their emotional and behavioural stability and may indirectly contribute to social problems such as peer aggression and bullying at school.

In order to tackle effectively this difficult and painful situation, systematic and cooperative efforts are needed. These efforts can take the form of social pedagogy as described in several, relevant publications (Mylonakou-Keke, 2003; Cameron, 2011). Contemporary schools should abandon the old methods of excluding parents and students from the decision-making process and realize that only with the partnership between teachers, students and parents the goals of education can be fulfilled. Schools tend to be introverted institutions. As a result, they remain practically unaffected by the changes that happen so rapidly in the world around them. This should change. 'A school door must open from both sides, not only from the inside' (Georgiou, 1998, p. 73). Teachers have for centuries controlled the 'lock' of the school door stopping outsiders, especially parents, from truly

participating in the educational process. This defensive attitude leads nowhere and stops the school from actualizing its stated purpose, which is to educate all students and help them become whole persons and socially adjusted individuals.

The support of family units and the enhancement of home-school cooperation are among the cornerstones of social pedagogy (Hämäläinen, 2012; Mylonakou-Keke, 2013). Additionally, the role of the school should not be limited only to that of a knowledge-providing or a certificate-issuing institution. This role should be predominantly social pedagogical in nature (Kyriacou et al., 2009; Kornbeck et al., 2011; Stephens, 2012; Mylonakou-Keke, 2013), that is, schools should undertake a more active and decisive part in the effort to eliminate social phenomena such as bullying and victimization. To this end, communities can rightfully expect that schools take the lead in organizing prevention and intervention programmes aimed at reducing of these distractive problems.

A more social pedagogical curriculum could be developed, based on the findings of empirical research that has identified the parameters of bullying, the characteristics of the various groups of children and adolescents involved in bullying activities, existing cultural values and parenting practices as well as all the other related factors. This will include learning goals and means for attaining these goals: material, such as case studies for group discussions, interactive exercises, mentoring opportunities and a comprehensive system of rewards for those children who manage to acquire new, sustainable behaviour towards their peers. If we fail to introduce these innovative interventions that will bring together all the interested parties, bullies will continue to bully and victims will continue to be victimized.

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