

EXPLORING BULLYING DYNAMICS FROM GENDER AND ACADEMIC YEAR PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The present research aimed to analyze the differences between the different bullying categories by gender and academic year in primary and secondary education children, as well as their relationship with academic performance. Our sample consisted of 46 children from 4th grade (n=18) and 5th grade (n=28). They were males (56.52 %) and females (43, 48%) ranging in ages from 9 to 11 years old (mean = 10.67, standard deviation = 0,47). Our findings suggested significant differences in gender and academic year, indicating a greater number of boys in the role of the bully and girls in that of non-bully. The most aggressive pupils were in the 5nd grade (11 years old). Regarding academic performance, statistically significant differences were obtained that confirm the hypothesis that performance or average grade varies according to the category of bullying in which pupils find themselves. We discuss the implications of our findings, taking into account their relevance for remediation and mitigation interventions aimed at promoting psychological well-being when faced with bullying.

Keywords: *academic performance; academic year; bullying; gender; primary education; pupils; secondary education;*

Introduction

In recent years, bullying has surpassed acceptable limits and is increasingly present in Romanian society, including in the school environment, where children are supervised and operate in a microsystem. School plays an important role in children's daily lives and, like the school curriculum, it is expected to teach children how to manage negative feelings and experiences and to cope with bullying. Schools are currently considered both a space for educational and personal development, transfer, and preservation of knowledge, and an educational institution, a protected environment, a living space, a realm of experience, a socializing authority, a selection tool, and a society-reproducing institution (Sharp & Smith, 2002).

Bullying has been defined as deliberate aggression or intentional harm-doing carried out by one or more people repeatedly and over time in an interpersonal setting, characterized by an imbalance of power, either real or perceived, that makes it difficult for the victims to defend themselves from the aggressors (Sidera et al., 2020). Studies have found that people who differ from the majority in some way, such as sexual orientation, gender, race, presence of pathologies, are particularly vulnerable to victimization (Olweus, 2003).

Recognizing the importance of understanding the underlying factors that contribute to bullying behavior, this study aims to explore the impact of gender and grade level on bullying, and examine the relationship between bullying and academic performance. Previous research (Huang et al., 2021) has shown that these factors are interrelated, but few studies have explored their interaction in a comprehensive manner. The transition from primary to secondary education is marked by the destabilization of group cohesion, the reorganization of friendship relationships, and early adolescence. By gaining a deeper understanding of these factors, we can work towards developing effective strategies for reducing bullying and promoting positive outcomes for pupils (Shore, 2005).

1. The theoretical substantiation

Aggressor profile

Most specialists have mentioned that aggressors have an unstable emotiveness. Frequently, the initiators come from well-insured families from a material point of view, have a leading status in the classroom or in a group of adolescents, have a certain self-ratior and are the teenagers liked by the teachers (Stephenson, Smith, 1987). They hold a certain power in the classroom. Some are subjected to domestic violence, and at school they externalize their negative energy. In fact, they are also victims. In the reference group I find the way to assert themselves as stronger, more valuable. On the one hand, in school they are aggressors, on the other hand, in the family, they are victims of abuse.

Profile of the victim

Anyone, anywhere, who is vulnerable and does not have the support of a group, p oate become a victim of bulling behavior (Cleary, & Sullivan, 2003). These roles are not fixed: a safe person in one environment can be very vulnerable in another. For these reasons, I chose to investigate the prevalence of the phenomenon in the transition from primary to secondary education because this change could favor the appearance of this behavior.

Coloroso (2010) states that anyone can be a target, but schoolchildren who are different are more vulnerable. In other words, any child or adolescent who is perceived as different due

to their attitude, precarious financial situation, race, ethnicity, religion, way of dressing or academic capacity can be a target of bullying (Ragoo, 2014). Specialists emphasize the especially important role of the family in the development of the correct self-image (self-confidence, relationship skills). This must help the child, from an early age, to cope with various relationship problems, to find the constructive method of resolving a conflict.

Consequences of the manifestation of the phenomenon of bullying

Emotional suffering caused by bullying, regardless of their form, can produce slowing down school progress, lead to delay or absenteeism, and end with the suicide of repeated offense and humiliation leave marks on personality development and emotional and relationship skills (Sharp & Smith, 2002). If we think about their future, there is a probability that those involved will have a disorder of the mechanisms of social adaptation and will not be able to create connections, relationships with other people.

Everyone involved is affected and everyone suffers. The victim of bullying is affected in the long term by childhood experiences. Unlike those who have suffered a single trauma, such as natural disasters, the victims of this behavior experience daily, repeatedly, actions on the psyche or emotional integrity. Children who go through these traumas are more likely that once they reach adulthood to manifest aggressive and compulsive behaviors, to have obsessions, depression or anxiety.

As well as being repeatedly associated with poor academic achievement (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Park et al. 2017), bullying victimization has been associated with low self-esteem (O'Moore & Kirkham 2001), low educational motivation (Young-Jones et al. 2015), reduced academic self-concept (reading and mathematics) and lower commitment to study, and higher extrinsic motivation and test anxiety rates (Caputo, 2014). Some studies also found a negative association between peer victimization and academic self-efficacy and self-concept (Flook et al., 2005). In addition, children who are victimized by their peers tend to have negative attitudes toward school (Rueger, et al., 2010), negative perceptions of school climate (Wang et al., 2014), and difficulties concentrating on school work.

On a scale of measuring stress, witnesses rank on a par with the victims. The experience of being day by day in a school that fails to meet their needs for comfort and physical and emotional safety, increases their likelihood of being frequently absent from school, of experiencing acute feelings of anxiety, restlessness and worry, of seeking acceptance in strong groups, as well as of copying behaviors to ensure their survival in school and thus ensure that they will not become the next victims (Withson, 2017).

As for children who are the authors of bullying behaviors, an aggravation of violent behaviors is often encountered as they enter their teenage years. Thus, children who have systematically assaulted colleagues in primary education, have chances that in adolescence and in adulthood they will consume alcohol and other substances with high risk for their physical and emotional health; engage in violent and delinquent behaviors, of vandalism, extreme physical violence, theft, school dropout; become adults at high risk of illegal behavior, domestic violence and minimal job-keeping skills (Sharp, Smith, 2002).

At the community level, bullying interferes with the child's professional progress. At school it interferes with learning. In an environment full of bullying, students become focused on the problems it involves and are distracted from learning. The inability to learn produces long-term theoretical gaps and the weakening of the power to evolve, which will affect their health and well-being over time (Rago, 2014).

2. Research methodology

The objectives of this study were to establish the differences between gender and academic year with the presence of bullying and its different categories, as well as to determine if there is a relationship between suffering or exercising bullying with the level of academic performance in a sample of primary and secondary school pupils.

The primary hypothesis of this study is that gender and grade level play a role in bullying behavior and its impact on academic performance. This hypothesis is linked to the theory of social identity, which posits that individuals define themselves and others based on group membership, such as gender and grade level. The secondary hypothesis is that the relationship between bullying and academic performance is complex and dynamic, and that multiple roles and dimensions of bullying must be taken into account. This hypothesis is linked to the theory of social support, which suggests that individuals who experience bullying may experience decreased psychological well-being, leading to lower academic performance.

Participants

The sample consisted of 46 pupils of Udrea Băleanu Technological High School, aged between 9 to 11 years old (mean = 10.67, standard deviation = 0.47), distributed in 56.52% subjects that were boys and 43.48% girls. This school is located in a community that brings together several ethnic groups: Romanians, Gypsies, Serbs. There is an action protocol against school bullying and a specific anti-bullying program, called SSR (Stop the bullying, Support the victim and Reeducate the aggressor), which includes actions to improve relations in the educational community. The selection strategy for this study will be a convenience sample.

Instruments

The European Bullying Intervention Project Questionnaire (EBIPQ) is a validated instrument translated into Romanian that allows us to identify the prevalence of involvement in bullying of the aggressor, the victim and the victimized aggressor; as well as the typology (direct or indirect) and the manifestations (physical, verbal and relational) (Albéniz Iturriaga et al., 2022). This instrument has very good psychometric properties in several European countries, including Romania.

It consists of 14 items, 7 describing aspects related to victimization and 7 in correspondence with aggression. For both dimensions, the items refer to actions such as hitting, insulting, threatening, stealing, saying foul words, and excluding or spreading rumors. The scale was designed to assess the frequency of aggression or victimization, so the items are related to the different types of bullying. The frequency is taken into account, taking as a reference the previous two months and is evaluated by a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where the possible answers are: No; Yes, once or twice; Yes, once or twice a month; Yes, about once a week and Yes, more than once a week.

Procedure

Following the ethical guidelines of consent, confidentiality, and anonymity in the responses, school principals were first contacted, and the aims of the research were explained to them. With the support of principal, the parents of all children were informed the purpose of the study and that the data collected and the children's names would remain confidential. Once the collaboration was accepted, the participants were contacted in the classroom, and after receiving informed parental consent, they were given the opportunity to fill in the scales freely. It was carried out anonymously, ensuring the confidentiality of the data obtained and its exclusive use for research purposes. Children were told that there were no right or wrong answers, that honesty was the most important feature of their participation, and that they could leave the study at any time.

The questionnaires were filled out individually in a suitable environment and without distractions. The process of filling the questionnaires took about 15 min. No data was lost. No questionnaire was rejected.

Analysis and interpretation of the research data

To compare the scores obtained in the EBIPQ according to gender and academic year, the Chi-square test was used, while the analysis according to school performance was carried

out using the one-factor ANOVA test. To study the correlation between the different categories of bullying obtained with the EBIPQ scale and school performance, Pearson's test was used. A statistical significance value of $p < 0.05$ was established using SPSS version 25 software.

Associations between Bullying Categories, Gender and Academic Year

The bullying situations encountered by the pupils are illustrated in Table 1. We presented their responses in correlation with the gender of the participants and their age. Positive responses to all bullying situations encountered by students in school were taken into account. From the interpretation of the data, it is found that physical aggressiveness among boys is more common compared to that of girls, and verbal aggression is found in a higher percentage among girls of 53.9%.

Following the association between bullying situations and the gender of the students, we identify the intensity of the connection as low. The Chi-Square test for the association of variables indicates that the results for the situation of repeated irony and verbal aggression differ significantly by gender, $p > 0.05$, which shows an association between repeated irony and gender; verbal aggression and gender. There were more girls (62.6%) classified as non-victim/non-bully than boys (52.1%), and there were more boys in the bully/victim role (18.7%) than girls (10.1%)

Bullying situations	Chi-Square	Contingency coefficient	Phi coefficient	p
Repeated irony	0.112	0.013	0.013	0.738
Verbal Aggression	1.080	0.040	0.040	0.299
Physical aggression	5.877	0.093	0.093	0.015
Exclude from the group	8.851	0.113	0.114	0.003
Teasers	2.746	0.114	0.144	0.253
Emotional abuse	5.955	0.093	0.094	0.015

Tabel 1 - The bullying situations

From the analysis of the bullying situations encountered by pupils it can be found that the most common bullying situations encountered by 10-year-olds are, teasing 43.8% and verbal aggression with 43.8%. For 11-year-olds, the most common bullying situation is physical aggression with 49.7%, and for 9-year-olds, 13.8% emotional abuse is the most common. Regarding the age of the students, it can be noted that students younger than 9-10 years of age face certain bullying situations more often.

Comparison between Bullying Categories and Academic Performance

Statistical significance ($p > 0.001$) was observed between bullying categories and academic performance. Academic performance was achieved by calculating the average of the marks obtained by each child in all the disciplines corresponding to the last assessment carried out. It has been confirmed the hypothesis that the performance or average varies according to the students' classification in terms of bullying: there are significant differences in the performance of the pupils according to this classification ($p < 0.001$). The ANOVA single-factor test showed that the lowest performance is achieved by the aggressors, followed by the victims, and in the end the best performances are recorded by non-victims and non-aggressors 7.56 (SD = 1.27).

A post hoc analysis was performed to compare the averages in pairs of each of the categories of bullying. It was observed that the comparison between pupils in the non-victim/non-bully category and the pupils in the bully/victim category ($p < 0.001$) and a comparison between students in the victim category and students in the bully/victim category ($p = 0.007$) was significant. It can be concluded that students in the non-victim/non-bullying category and students in the victim category have a higher academic performance than students in the bully/victim category.

Conclusions

Our study showed that forty-three percent of children surveyed were somehow involved in bullying either as a victim, bully, or both. Considering a global perspective, the main contribution of the study is to provide information on how bullying is distributed across different ages and genders and how it affects academic performance. This information will be used to develop more specific anti-bullying interventions in the future.

The first aim of the study was to establish the relationship between the presence of bullying and pupils' gender and academic year. The results of our study show the existence of a significant relationship between the categorization of students according to the types of bullying and their gender. Specifically, this relationship was observed for the categories of bully/victim and no-victim/no-bully in boys, finding a greater number than expected for this gender in the role of bully/victim and a smaller number for the role of the non-victim/non-bully. At the same time, the opposite results were obtained for the female gender, where we also found significant differences in the roles of bully/victim and non-victim/non-bully. There are no significant differences for both genders in the roles of victim or bully.

Types of behaviors related to bullying are also differentiated according to gender, with physical violence, insults or threats being the most experienced among boys; while girls are

related to relational behaviors such as exclusion, spreading rumors or being ignored by other peers (Smith et al., 2019). The differences in the figures and behaviors found for both genders can be explained by taking into account gender socialization and normative expectation of both, understanding bullying as a behavior in which different genders act according to what is expected of them. Bullying allows the aggressor to demonstrate his or her physical strength, dominance over others, and rank in the social hierarchy. In this way, and according to the existing evidence, bullying has a dual direction, in which a person who has been a victim may later become a bully, making both roles risk factors for future aggressions (Walters, 2021).

These findings suggest that boys and girls take on social stereotypes. Thus, the masculine stereotype associated with virility and violence as opposed to femineity is therefore assimilated from childhood. Consequently, it seems reasonable that anti-bullying interventions should be aimed at breaking down sexist social stereotypes. Regarding the academic year and bullying, our study also found a significant relationship, 5th pupils assuming the role of bully in a higher proportion than the rest of the years. Our results are partially confirmed in the Benítez-Sillero et al. (2021) study, where higher results were found for the bully role between 11 and 15 years of age; that is, as well as the study by Save the Children where it is highlighted that the pupils with the greatest involvement are found in the middle years of secondary school, and then decrease in the upper years.

In the second objective of our study, the existence of a relationship between the academic performance of students with respect to suffering or practicing bullying was considered. Understanding academic performance as the average mark obtained in the last exams in all subjects, the results showed significant differences between the mean grades of the different categories, thus confirming the hypothesis that bullying is related to the variation in the grades of the academic record (Riffle et al., 2021). It is worth noting that the lowest level ratings are associated with bully/victim behaviors, followed by the bully role, which can be explained or justified by the characteristics of the group to which they tend to belong. In other words, finding yourself in these roles within bullying means higher levels of Machiavellianism and being perceived as popular among peers, although Mariko Hosozawa et al. (2021) finds that pupils with lower academic performance were more likely to be victimized.

This is current information that may be relevant for the implementation of interventions aimed at preventing bullying from continuing to be perpetuated to a point where it may have an impact both at the school level, worsening the levels of academic performance or school dropout, and at the level of the mental health and quality of life of children and adolescents. Future research on bullying should be complemented by new forms of harassment such as cyberbullying, which is becoming increasingly prevalent.

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