

SCHOOL BULLYING: VICTIMIZATION IN A PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the problem of school bullying in a primary school in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Particularly the paper looks at bullying victimization with the focus on how bullying affects the thinking, feelings and behavior of the bullying victims. The paper also explores how the school regards school bullying, what type of intervention measures that the school has and how these measures are implemented in the school. Data was collected through in depth interviews with the participants of this study who were two victims of school bullying, a school counselor, and a Discipline Head. The results showed that bullying affects negatively the thinking, feelings and behavior of the victims in which they reported among other feelings of fear, anguish, anger, foolish, and hating school as the outcomes of being bullied. It was also found that the school under study does not have a particular or constant intervention programs for both bullies and victims of school bullying in the school. The implications of these findings for future studies on school bullying-victimization particularly in Malaysia are discussed.

Keywords: School bullying, victimization, bullying intervention, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

There has been frequent reporting in the media on bullying cases that took place in the Malaysian schools of late. In January this year six primary school students were caught on video assaulting another fellow student in a class room in which the victim was kicked and punched mercilessly. Not only that, the attackers went on to humiliate the victim by placing a rubbish bin over his head (The New Straits Time, 6th January, 2015). In another incident, a Form Two student was warded in the Intensive Care Unit when he suffered broken ribs and shoulders after he was allegedly beaten by his seniors in his school (The Star, 24th October, 2014). The nation has also experienced school bullying cases that involved deaths; one incident happened in 2004 when a Form Four student in a boarding school in Melaka died in his school's hostel after he was beaten by a group of his seniors.

There were not many studies on school bullying that have been conducted in Malaysia even though the incidence of school bullying seems to be prevalent in Malaysian schools, judging by the constant media reports on the matter particularly in the last two decades. In the few studies that have been conducted on school bullying in Malaysia, the results have indicated that bullying in Malaysian schools are rampant although not at the alarming state. In a study on "Bullying Among Elementary School Children in Malaysia", it was found that bullying among primary school students are massive and there is a serious need for the relevant parties to investigate further and plan on a long term basis to address this issue. The study revealed that 79.4% of the 2528 students participated in the study had involved in psychological-physical victim category, 53.2% had involved in both types of bullying, and 49.4% bully-

victims of both types. More children involved in psychological bullying (82.7%) compared to physical bullying (56%) (Yaakub et al, 2004).

In a cross-sectional study on school bullying among primary school students which involved 410 year six students from seven public primary schools Kuala Lumpur, the findings suggested that school bullying is common even in the primary schools. Results of the study demonstrated that 41.2% of the primary school students reported having been victims of bullies whilst another 17.6% who had been bullied turned later on to be bullies (Wan Salwina et al, 2009). In another study on the reasons for the involvement of students in bullying showed that one of the main reasons of bullying was the desire to obtain money from the victims so that they (the bullies) could buy cigarettes or food with the money (Norshidah & Khalim, 2014). Participants of the study were 20 secondary school students from a public school in Kuala Lumpur who have been identified to be involved in bullying other fellow school mates.

This research paper investigates the problem of school bullying in a primary school in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Particularly the paper looks at bullying victimization with the focus on how bullying affects the thinking, feelings and behavior of the bullying victims. The paper also explores how the school regards school bullying, what type of intervention measures that the school has for both bullies and victims and how these measures are implemented in the school. On top of that, the paper also sought to find out the involvement of the bullying victims in the intervention programs, and how they perceived and reacted to the programs.

SCHOOL BULLYING: VICTIMIZATION

Literatures on school bullying started to grow significantly following the work by Dan Olweus, who can be considered as the pioneer in the studies of school bullying. Since he started his research on school bullying in Norway in the 1980s, for more than three decades now, bullying in schools has been widely recognized as a societal problem, which can negatively affect the lives of many schoolchildren. Bullying is a particular vicious kind of aggressive behavior since it is directed often repeatedly towards a victim who is unable to defend himself or herself effectively (Smith et al, 1999). This is the crucial element that distinguishes bullying from other types of aggressive behaviors, such as conflict. It is an “unfair match” since the bully is physically, verbally or socially stronger than the victim. With this scenario, it is hard to deny that bullying gives serious negative impact to the victims. Olweus found that adults who have suffered from bullying as children were more likely to develop anxiety, depression and low self esteem. (Smith et al, 1999).

School bullying victims commonly feel that they will always become victims of their peers’ aggressive and abusive behaviors. Bullying “victimization is often characterized as a rather stable experience (e.g., “Once a victim, always a victim”), but stability estimates vary as a function of time, age, and methodology” (Hymel, Swearer, 2015). In the aspect of academic development, in the short term, the victims of bullying ability to learn and their academic achievements are very likely to be affected (Elliot, 2002, Smith et al, 1999). It can also lead to a more disastrous consequences to the children’s well being, for instance attempted suicide, suicide and depressive behavior (Rigby, 1996). Being a victim can result in poor school attendance, because many victims become afraid of going to school. Elliot (2002) found in her study that 8% of 8th graders in the U.S. miss at least one day of school per month for fear of bullies. Victims often receive lower grades due to attendance problems, and also due to their stress and worry.

In another study by Suckling & Temple (2002), it was revealed that majority of the bullying victims lack self-confidence and courage and do not retaliate when attacked or threatened. Victims of school bullying are more anxious and insecure, often cautious, sensitive and quiet than other students in general. They are usually a group of low self-esteem children who often have negative view of themselves and their situation, regard themselves as failures, stupid and unattractive. These undesirable conditions are worsened when they were bullied as it affirms their weak self-perception (Lee, 2004). The behavior and attitude of the victims seem to signal to others that they are insecure and worthless individuals, who will not retaliate if they are attacked or insulted.

Frequent harassment may lead children to develop a sense of mistrust toward their peer group at large and thus become so preoccupied with feelings of social alienation and concerns for their safety that they have difficulty attending to the demands of school and eventually develop negative school attitudes (Slee, 1994). A study by Rigby, 1996 on school bullying has indicated that to be regularly bullied in school is no doubt a very unpleasant experience which may seriously affect the mental health and well being of the victim. Being bullied by other children hurts in many ways; emotionally, each day of school bring the anticipation of being hurt, humiliated or terrorized with all it's accompanying tension, anxiety and fear (Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

School bullying is associated with serious adjustment problems that affect negatively the psychological development of the victims, from somewhat less than optimum psychological functioning such as being unhappy, having a low level of confidence and being lonely, and a more distressing psychological states such as high levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal thinking. Since it is known that a considerable proportion of young people who actually commit or attempt to commit suicide, are depressed, it is by extension likely that victimization may also be an important causal factor in suicidal behavior (Olweus, 1996 as in Smith et al, 2004).

With regards to school-based interventions for bullying, particularly for the victims, many well known researchers in school bullying such as Olweus (2005) in Norwegian schools, Suckling & Temple (2002) in Australian schools and Elliott (2002) in United Kingdom schools have found out that a whole-school approach is needed for an effective bullying treatment and preventive measures. Suckling and Temple (2001) have noted in their studies on anti-bullying policy in schools in Australia the importance of adopting a whole-school approach in tackling bullying. A whole school approach tackles bullying at the levels of prevention and intervention and takes into account the style and quality of leadership and management practices, the quality and delivery of curriculum, the quality of supervision in the school area, the formalized and agreed procedures to deal with a bullying incident and building relationships with others and with self.

If the school is serious about tackling bullying, it should begin with conducting a survey using a short questionnaire designed to obtain information about the extent and nature of bullying in the school. This according to Olweus (2005), serves as a starting point for active interventions as seen in his anti-bullying program. The Olweus anti-bullying program has general prerequisites which are awareness and involvement on the part of adults. It has three measures i.e. measures at the school level (questionnaire survey, school conference day, effectiveness supervision during break times, establishments of staff discussion groups), measures at the class level (class rules against bullying, class meetings with students, meetings with parents of the class) and measures at the individual level (serious talks with

bullies and victims, serious talks with parents of involved students and development of individual intervention plans).

The success of Olweus anti bullying program was reflected in the three major projects that Olweus carried out in the Norwegian schools, first running from 1983 to 1985, second from 1997 to 1998 and third from 1999 to 2000. The overall results showed that there were marked reductions by 50% or more in self reported bully/victims problems for the periods studied. There were also clear reductions in general antisocial behavior, improved order and discipline and a more positive attitude to schoolwork and the school (Olweus as in Smith et al, 2004).

In the experience of Kidscape (an organization which deals with the prevention of bullying and child abuse in United Kingdom), teaching the victims of school bullying on self assertiveness has proven effective in developing feelings of self worth and positive self concept among the victims (Elliot, 2002). Many students have reported on the effectiveness of this program in which they feel more confident to lead a school-life with less anxiety and worry. Lone parents or teachers have little chance of successfully helping victims unless a school has a clear, well-developed, anti-bullying policy. To help victims effectively, it is necessary to create a school ethos in which bullying is unacceptable (Elliot, 2002).

It is vital for schools to work in partnership with parents in tackling school bullying, as parental support is crucial if a child's behavior is to be changed. Schools may take the lead to provide opportunities that will encourage parental involvement in the children's school activities in general and in the bullying matter in particular. This can be done through briefing parents on the school's policy on bullying, inviting parents to formal and informal school functions, conducting parent-information sessions to help parents identify the possible signs of bullied child and reinforce anti bullying at home and make them aware of who they need to contact if their child is experiencing problems (Rigby, 1996). Thus, schools' anti-bullying program should be carried out comprehensively in schools starting from the primary school level since this is the stage where bullying is more common and behavior modification is more likely to happen.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempts to answer three research questions:

1. How does school bullying affect the thinking, feelings and behavior of the victims of school bullying in a primary school in Selangor?
2. What are the school-based interventions for school bullying, in particular the interventions for the victims in a primary school in Selangor?
3. What are the perceptions of the victims of bullying on the school-based interventions for school bullying?

METHODOLOGY

The study conducted an exploratory case study using the qualitative research approach. Method of data collection was in-depth interview. Two types of qualitative interviewing formats i.e. the interview guide approach and the phenomenological interviewing were used.

Research site

The research site for this study is a public primary school in the state of Selangor. The school is located in the urban area and has a number of 2,100 students. In terms of race composition, there were 1,719 (825%) Malays, 192 (9%) Chinese, 144 (7%) Indians, and 45 (2%) other races.

Participants

The participants of this study were two victims of school bullying in the school. Both of them were nine years old male students, and were in Standard Three. Two other participants were the school's guidance and counseling teacher and the school's Head of Discipline.

SUMMARY OF THE BULLYING CASES

The bullying episode experienced by the two victims (Victim A and Victim B) came to light to the school's authority when the parents of the victims reported the bullying case to the school. In Victim's A case, his mother had realized that Victim A had been taking her money without her permission for quite a number of times. When his mother confronted him, he revealed that a Standard Six student (Bully A) had been demanding money from him regularly. In Victim B's case, he confided with his mother the same experience with Victim A and that Bully A had inflicted physical aggression upon him which included kicking and hitting. Both parents reported to the school about the bullying incidents and Bully A admitted to the wrongdoings. Bully A had also involved in two theft cases and several other bullying cases in the school.

RESULTS

For research question one, on how school bullying affect the thinking, feelings and behavior of the victims, the results of this study support the findings of the previous studies aforementioned (Lee, 2004, Suckling & Temple, 2002, Juvonen & Graham, 2001, Smith et al, 1999), that to be bullied is a very unpleasant experience which affects negatively the feelings, thinking, and behavior of the victims. It was clear from the victims' responses that the experience of bullying tormented them very much:

Feeling Of Fear:

In responding to the interview question, "what do you feel every time Bully A asked money from you? Victim A says : *"I don't want to give, but I'm scared that he would beat or kick me...Once before at the field, he stepped on my toes with his shoes...I didn't wear shoes at that time because I played football without wearing shoes...it was very painful..."*

Victim B: *"I must give him, one ringgit or sometimes two ringgit because I'm scared at him... and there was this one day I had to give him more, five ringgit, because he saw me bringing my game boy ...if I don't give him he wanted to call the prefect to check me..and he was still asking for money after that...and I am also scared in the toilet, two times he hit me there.. "*

Helpless And Humiliated:

Victim A: *"He always kicks and pushes me...when I told him don't, he said he just wants to play...I told him I don't want to play with him...he said that I'm stupid and behave like a girl..."*

Victim B: *"... like that day at the canteen...he asked me to give my seat to him, he said that he always sit on that stool...I was eating...He kicked the stool until I fell off the stool...everyone looked...I just went off... I could not do anything.."*

Feeling Of Anger:

Victim A: *"...I felt like crying, angry at Bully A, felt like saying "devil" to him...I hate him..."*

Victim B: *“Yes, angry at Bully A...but I cannot do anything to him because he will do more and more bad things to me..”*

Reluctant To Go To School:

With regard to attending school during the period of bullying, the two victims reported the following:

Victim A: *“...sometimes ok...but if Bully A asked me to bring money the next day, I don't feel like going to school.. I didn't feel good... sometimes I have to take my mother's money to give to him.... I feel sad”*

Victim B: *“I don't feel happy going to school... always think if Bully A asks money...sometimes I don't have money to buy food.. I feel trouble...I feel scared to be in the canteen during break time because that was where Bully A would normally look for me. I could not tell anyone else, I am scared that it will give me more trouble..*

For research question two which is “what are the school-based interventions for school bullying, in particular the interventions for the victims”, according to the school's counseling teacher and the Discipline Head, the school does not have specific intervention programs for bullying. Whenever there is a complaint of a bullying case, the guidance & counseling and the discipline units would cooperate to tackle the problem. Normally, both bully and victim will be interviewed (sometimes both will be interviewed together) to gather the necessary information. Course of action for the bully will be decided depending on the severity of the bullying incident, which usually will be handled by the discipline unit. Types of punishment include canning, strong reminder and advice, and parents of the bullies will be informed of the wrongdoings. The bully will then normally undergo counseling session with the counseling teacher. There is no specific intervention program for the victims except they are advised to inform the teachers if they are bullied again.

The teachers also informed that the students are regularly reminded about bullying during the school assembly. The students were told that the school does not tolerate any kind of bullying and students were encouraged to report on bullying if they happen to be the victims or if they know that it happens to any of their friends. The teachers informed that bullying cases in the school are under control, and none of the cases was so serious that it needed to be reported to the District Education Office or the police. Some of the bullying cases were revealed by the parents after their children informed them about it, whereas in some cases the students who were bullied or the witnesses of the bullying incidents reported to the teachers on the incidents.

Another program that both teachers viewed as being able to help the school to curb bullying is peer guidance which is an ongoing program conducted by the guidance and counseling unit. Currently they have twenty members in the peer guidance group who would help fellow students who have problems related to schooling. Occasionally the school would conduct programs to inculcate good behavior such as “*Kempen Nilai-Nilai Murni*” (Noble Values Campaign), “*Kempen Salah Laku Sifar*” (Zero Misconduct Campaign) and “*Respect Others and Others Will Respect You*”. The teachers viewed these campaigns in a way would instill good values among the students which can help in reducing students' misbehaviors including bullying.

For research question 3, on how the two victims perceive the current school-based interventions, the findings indicate that both victims did not have much knowledge on the campaigns aforementioned. Victim A revealed that he was only aware of the Noble Values Campaign. Both students informed that there were only two meetings with the teachers (the

counseling teacher and the discipline teacher) since the teachers were aware of their bullying incident. The first meeting was with Bully A and the discipline teacher, and the second meeting was with the counseling teacher. Basically, they said both teachers advised them to tell the school if Bully A bullies them again. They were also told not to have any contact with Bully A whenever they are in the school compound.

With regard to the peer guidance in their school, only Victim A reported that he knew about its existence but did not know how it functions or who the members are. The findings also indicated that both victims did not have much confidence in the effectiveness of the current school's bullying interventions. When asked if they still fear Bully A, both students admitted that they still feel scared of him:

Victim A: "Even though he no longer asking money from me, but he still roughed me like pushing, shouting and cursing and show his anger to me..."

Victim B: "...still feel scared (of Bully A).. yes, they (the teachers) already scolded him but he's not scared of anything..

Victim 2 also revealed that he did not tell the truth to his mother when he told her that Bully A did not bully him anymore because his mother scolded him when she first got to know that he had been giving money to Bully A. His mother blamed him partly on the bullying and he feels very sad when he recalled his mother saying he was stupid to let someone bullied him.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the current study are in tandem with the findings of previous studies on school bullying-victimization on several matters. Similar to the findings of the current study in which the two victims reported feelings of fear as the result of being bullied, previous studies have revealed that many victims of school bullying often feel insecure and fear when they are at their schools (Lee, 2004, Suckling & Temple, 2002, Smith et al, 1999). The victims commonly feel scared because they always anticipate that the bullies are always after them to hurt them verbally and physically even though they do not do any wrong. With regard to the perception of being helpless as revealed by the participants of this study, earlier studies have also found that school bullying victims often feel angry not only towards the bullies but also at their own selves because of their incapability to fight back or defend themselves (Lee, 2004, Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

Another outcome of the current study is that bullying affects negatively the behavior of the victims towards attending school. Both victims disclosed they did not favor school during the period of bullying. Past studies have shown that many victims of school bullying skip school as they anticipate that they would be further hurt, humiliated and roughed. This may lead to poor academic development as well as school dropping (Dunne et al, 2010, Elliot, 2002, Smith et al, 1999). Victims of school bullying have the tendency of not favoring school, perceive school more negatively, and as a result they do less well academically (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). It is common for school bullying victims not discussing about the bullying occurrence with their parents or teachers due to embarrassment and fear that they will be hurt more. It is likely that the victims suffer in silence and develop disliking towards school (Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

It can also be concluded from this study that there is no specific intervention for bullying especially for the victims in the school under study. Victims of bullying were not assisted in dealing with their feelings of anxious, humiliation, anger, and self-worthless caused by the bullying. They were also not helped in developing healthy intra and interpersonal skills which

include self-confidence and self-assertiveness which both victims in this study seem to be lacking of. Both victims confessed that they still feel scared whenever they see Bully A. This gives the impression that the experiences of being bullied tormented both victims greatly, and that the interventions used by the school did not help the students in dealing with their problems effectively. They have not only suffered at the time of the bullying period, but the feelings of fear and anxious are still with them until now.

Both victims lack self assertiveness, and there is no specific program as revealed by the two teachers in the school to teach students on this skill. Assertiveness is the ability to stand up for ourselves and to say how we feel when we feel we need to. People who are not assertive frequently believe they have no right to their feelings, beliefs, and opinions. Also, they do things in such a way that their negative views of themselves are confirmed as correct (Lee, 2004). Thus, schools should include lessons on self assertiveness in their school-based bullying interventions, especially for the victims. The lessons on self assertiveness can take place in the form of courses conducted in the schools as part of the co curricular activities or at camps outside the schools (Elliot, 2002). It is also can be conducted in a manner of group work approach where the victims interact to one another with the guidance of a group leader/leaders.

Both victims in this study also indicated that they have little confidence in their school's bullying interventions, when they related that Bully A in a way still abuse them physically and verbally and they did not want to further report because to the victims "Bully A will not stop his bullying acts as he is not scared of anything, including punishment from the school". The school should adopt a whole-school approach at all time in tackling bullying, not just reacting to bullying problem on case-per-case-basis. A model of a whole-school approach consists of activities at the school level, class level and individual level. At the school level, teachers and non-teaching staff work together in a common approach towards bullying. Together they will develop an anti-bullying policy that gives the school community clear expectations, direction, commitment and consistency in tackling bullying behavior (Olweus, 2005). One of the important factors at the school level measures is to work hand in hand with parents and gain their support in the school bullying policy.

Another area that the school should emphasize is the effective use of the counseling unit in developing preventive and corrective bullying measures. Counseling-based approaches which focus on solving the problem rather than apportioning blame have some success in dealing with both bullying and victimization (Sanders et al, 2004). The counseling-based techniques suggested by many researches in school bullying especially use the humanistic approaches (Sanders et al, 2004, Rigby, 1996, Byrne, 1994). Humanistic approaches to bullying are characterized by a sincere desire to understand and appreciate the needs of those primarily involved in the bully/victim problem, namely the bully and the victim (Rigby, 1996). Central to this approach is the belief that success in working on the problem depends largely on the quality of the relationship that can be developed through the giving of respect and engaging in genuine two-way communication with those involved.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

School bullying brings various negative consequences to school children especially to the victims; the frightening experiences of Victim A and Victim B in this study speak by itself. Thus, concerted efforts by all concerned, especially the teachers and parents, is very much needed to deal with bullying effectively. One important finding of this study is that the school under study does not have a systematic and a well planned bullying intervention program, especially for the victims. This is indeed an undesirable situation, since the primary school

level is the stage where bullying is more common and behavior modification is more likely to happen. In the case of this study where both victims were categorized as submissive passive type, the central focus of intervention of the school should be in helping the victims develop self-assertiveness, positive self perception, and good interpersonal skills. These are vital in order to eliminate the “victim mentality” in the victims that prohibits them to stand up for themselves in the events they need to do that. It is not like teaching them to respond untactfully to bullying acts, but teaching them the skills to do or to say the right thing at the right time.

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