Research Article

RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES FOR BULLYING PREVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Research underscores the critical role of a positive school climate in combating bullying. The results can be generalized and assumed, that: bullying behavior occurs when there is a victim, and the environment allows the realization of aggression; school culture is a strong predictor of bullying behavior; the probability of becoming a victim (victimhood) is high among those teenagers who experience high levels of stress in the environment; when a teenager experiences a sense of threat, he/she develops such physical, psychological, or social symptoms that make him/her vulnerable to bullying; the school culture that is oriented to adherence to the rules of communication and mutual respect in the group reduces the likelihood of a teenager to become a victim; consequently, when a teenager has a sense of wellness even in combination with aggression, this sense reduces the likelihood of a teenager to become a victim. As a result of the research, an effective anti-bullying program can be established that actively involves students, teachers, and parents.

Keywords: bullying, victim, school climate, aggression.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying has emerged as a pervasive global issue, manifesting in various settings such as schools, public spaces, and social environments frequented by young people. Given its prevalence, it is crucial to examine the psychological underpinnings of bullying as one of the key challenges of the 21st century and to analyze the factors that drive adolescents to engage in such behavior.

Bullying is often classified as a subset of aggressive behavior; however, it primarily entails psychological rather than physical harm. Unlike typical aggressive actions, bullying is characterized by its repetitive nature, which exacerbates its detrimental effects over time. Therefore, bullying is inherently intentional and recurring. Numerous studies indicate that cultural norms, community dynamics, traditions, and values significantly influence adolescent development and the frequency of aggressive behaviors within specific cultures and communities. Recognizing the significant role of the environment in both the perpetration and prevention of bullying, the current study investigates the issue within the context of school culture. It is hypothesized that a safe and supportive school culture is less conducive to bullying than an unsafe one. To explore this hypothesis, international case studies of various school administrations were analyzed. The analysis revealed that in schools where values and principles are not imposed but rather cultivated, students feel more protected, resulting in a lower incidence of bullying.

To test this hypothesis, levels of aggression, school climate, and victimization were measured. The research findings clearly demonstrate that school climate is a strong predictor of bullying behavior. If school administrations acknowledge their role in fostering a positive school environment, incidents of bullying can be significantly reduced. To address this issue, the implementation of the Dan Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is recommended, as it has proven effective in mitigating bullying behavior.

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ENVIRONMENT AS A STRONG DETERMINANT OF BULLYING

Numerous scholars assert that environmental factors play a pivotal role in either preventing or provoking bullying behavior. In her article, "Understanding the Psychology of Bullying," Susan Swearer, a Professor at the University of Nebraska, proposes a comprehensive model that facilitates an in-depth understanding of bullying. This model emphasizes the influence of family, peers, school, and culture/community on bullying behavior (Swearer, 2015). Specifically, **family** characteristics are frequently identified as predictors of violent behavior in adolescents. Factors such as domestic violence, a lack of parental involvement in adolescents' lives, and insufficient emotional support from parents are often associated with the provocation of violent behavior or self-victimization (Swearer, 2015).

Bullying typically occurs within **peer** groups, as adolescents spend considerable time interacting with peers, both in face-to-face settings and through social media. Peer behavior has been the subject of extensive psychological research. For instance, some studies examine bystander behavior from a gender perspective, revealing that girls are more likely than boys to support victims during violent incidents (Salmivalli, 2001). Additionally, research conducted over time suggests that as adolescents age, bystanders become less involved in conflicts and are less likely to defend victims. Notably, those bystanders who do intervene and defend victims are often individuals with high social status (Salmivalli, 2001). Furthermore, researchers suggest that adolescents who engage in defending weaker peers in conflicts tend to develop greater self-confidence.

The **school** environment has been the primary focus of bullying research. It is reasonable to infer that the school climate—whether positive or negative—is directly correlated with the incidence of bullying. Studies by Bryan Gendron (2011) indicate that factors such as inadequate teacher responses to violence, unhealthy teacher-student relationships, and insufficient student engagement in school activities frequently contribute to bullying and violent behavior. Moreover, in a negative school climate, students are less likely to report violent incidents to teachers or school administration

(Unnever, 2004). The research conducted by above mentioned scholars demonstrates that an unfriendly school environment not only increases the prevalence of bullying but also exacerbates the overall unhealthiness of the school atmosphere (Gendron, 2011; Unnever, 2004). These findings suggest that bullying is not an isolated phenomenon but is intrinsically linked to external and environmental factors. The importance of environmental influences on human behavior is central to Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which Grace Craig characterizes as one of the most influential theories on human development (Craig, 2001). According to this theory, children both shape and are shaped by their environment. Therefore, when investigating the levels of aggression or the psychological mechanisms underlying bullying in adolescents and children, it is essential to consider the role and significance of the systems that influence adolescent development. In summary, a substantial body of research and theoretical frameworks underscores the crucial role of the environment in shaping behavior (Asatiani, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Used questionaries

The objective of this research was to examine the role of the environment in mitigating bullying behavior. A hypothesis was formulated suggesting that, **irrespective of the level of aggression, a favorable school environment would contribute to a reduction in the incidence of bullying**, while an **unfavorable environment would lead to an increase in such incidents.**

To test this hypothesis, three questionnaires were employed to survey the level and the forms of aggression and frequency of victimization among teenagers, as well as the school environment. The Buss-Durkee[1] Inventory was utilized to identify various forms of aggression among adolescents. This questionnaire, originally developed in English, comprises 75 test items distributed across eight scales.

To assess the school climate, a questionnaire[2] developed by Bochaver et al. (2014) was administered. This instrument is designed to evaluate the emotional atmosphere within classrooms and the broader school environment. The questionnaire contains 46 questions, grouped into four thematic blocks: Threat (16 questions), Wellness (11 questions), Isolation (10 questions), and Equality (9 questions)[3]. The students' perception of **threat** was measured by their responses to questions concerning behaviors such as interference, abusive actions, ridicule that incites laughter among peers, and the use of offensive names. The questionnaire also required students to evaluate their class by answering whether their class is perceived as disruptive or "hooligan-like." The **Wellness** scale assessed students' sense of security and comfort, gauging whether they felt confident in leaving their belongings unattended in the classroom or corridors, whether excursions with teachers were common, and whether their class teacher enjoyed their role. The **Isolation** scale measured the frequency and acceptability of fights among students, assessing whether such incidents were considered commonplace or exceptional, leading to extended discussions. The **Equality** scale gathered information using statements such as "If there is a fight, is it discussed for a long time?" and "Our class has a reputation as a good class." The dimensions of an unsafe school

environment were represented by the Threat and Isolation scales, which, according to the hypothesis, were considered predictors of bullying. Conversely, the Wellness and Equality scales measured aspects of the school environment that were hypothesized to reduce the risk of bullying, thereby serving as negative predictors.

To identify bullying cases, the Mynard and Joseph Multidimensional **Peer-Victimization Scale** (Form A)[4] was applied. This scale is designed to assess both direct and indirect victimization and includes 45 items that address four types of victimization: physical victimization, verbal victimization, social manipulation, and property infringement.

Sample Description and Hypothesis

The literature review indicated that deviant behavior is most prevalent in high school classes. Therefore, the survey participants were selected from 9th to 12th grades. These students were asked to complete the questionnaires. In alignment with the literature and the formulated hypothesis, variables that could potentially influence the attitudes under investigation were also identified as additional factors in the survey.

The sample was limited to students from 9th to 12th grades in Georgian secondary schools. An accessible sampling method was employed to form the sampling framework. School principals and representatives of resource centers were contacted through social networks and provided with information about the survey, including a Survey Monkey link and an official letter of support from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports of Georgia. The survey was conducted over a period of six weeks, during which 1,422 teenagers participated. The goal of the research was to examine the role of the environment in reducing bullying behavior. For this purpose, we formulated a hypothesis according to which, regardless of the level of aggression, a favorable school environment would ensure a decrease in the incidence of bullying, and accordingly, an unfavorable environment would contribute to an increase in the incidence of bullying.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics 21. To evaluate the hypothesis, a hierarchical regression model was developed in which the victimization scale served as the dependent variable. The analysis focused on the impact of two contrasting school culture indicators—namely, "wellness" and "equality" on one side, and "threat" and "isolation" on the other—on victimization levels. Additionally, the analysis accounted for the aggression indicator, as the hypothesis posits that a safe school environment reduces victimization even in the presence of aggression, while an unsafe environment exacerbates bullying incidents. It was hypothesized that, even when aggression is present, victimization is less likely to occur if the school culture does not provide the necessary conditions for such behavior to manifest. To test this, a regression model was constructed following an initial correlation analysis.

Chart 1

Correlations		sk_g isolation	sk_k wellness	sk_s threat	sk_t equality
bd agression	Pearson Correlation	.184**	-.269**	.342**	-.204**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	1428	1428	1430	1428

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table demonstrates that aggression has a small yet statistically significant positive correlation with the school culture indicators of "isolation" and "threat," and a small but statistically significant negative correlation with "wellness" and "equality." These findings are consistent with the hypothesis.

To further test the hypotheses, a composite variable representing school culture and aggression was calculated based on the correlation data. This involved adjusting the signs of "wellness" and "equality" (due to their negative relationship with aggression) and then creating a cross-product variable for statistical analysis.

View the Table of relevant products below:

Chart 2

> **sk_g_bd isolation and agression** = sk_g isolation * bd agression
>
> **sk_k_bd wellness - inverted and agression** = sk_k wellness - inverted * bd agression
>
> **sk_s_bd threat and agression** = sk_s threat* bd agression
>
> **sk_t_bd equality - inverted and agression** = sk_s threat- inverted * bd agression

The newly derived variables were then used to construct an updated regression model. The analysis revealed that these composite variables—combining school culture and aggression—yielded a more robust model for explaining victimization, with a coefficient of determination (R = .591) indicating that 33.8% of the variance in victimization can be accounted for by this model.

Chart 3

Model Summary				
Model	R	RSquare	AdjustedR Square	Std.Error of the Estimate
1	.591a	.349	.338	6.13139

Chart 4

ANOVAa					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	26553.257	8	3319.157	87.546	.000b
Residual	53760.972	1418	37.913		
Total	80314.229	1426			

a. Dependent Variable: vs victimization scale

Chart 5

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	48.81	1.161		42.041	0
Isolation	-.217	.465	-.048	-.466	.641
Wellness	.651	.358	.149	1.818	.099
Threat	-.046	.211	-.021	-.219	.827
Equality	-1.013	.436	-.202	-2.326	.02
Isolation and aggression	.021	.011	.214	1.922	.05
Wellness and aggression	-.026	.009	-.28	-3.041	.002
Threat and aggression	.02	.005	.443	4.018	.000
Equality and aggression	.014	.011	.135	1.333	.183

To further understand the influence of different predictors, the weight of their impact was analyzed by converting the Beta coefficient values into percentages.

Chart 6

	Beta	Abs. value of Beta coefficient	Share in percentage		
equality	-0.231	0.231	14.87%	14.87%	73.02%
isolation and aggression	0.198	0.198	12.75%	58.15%	
wellness and aggression	-0.302	0.302	19.45%		
threat and aggression	0.403	0.403	25.95%		
Other:				26.98%	
				100%	

As indicated by the hierarchical regression model, the combination of school culture variables and class aggression levels accounts for 73.02% of the variance in victimization, as revealed through regression analysis. To better visualize the regression model derived from the survey data, a diagram was constructed:

- X - Represents the assessed value of victimization based on the variables included in the regression model.
- Y - Represents the victimization value for students.

Fig 1:
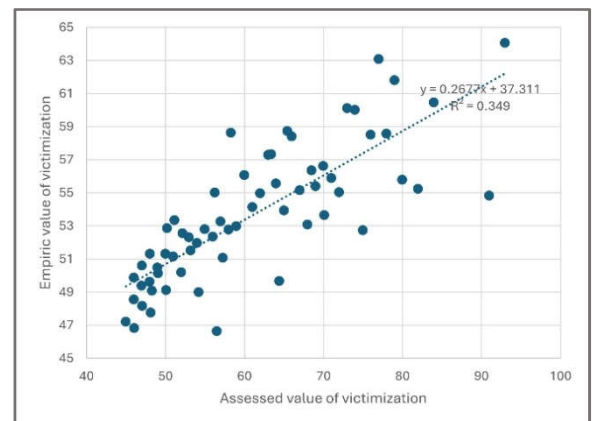
Among the predictors of bullying behavior, the combination of school culture and aggression variables proves to be the most significant, accounting for nearly 4/5 (73.02%) of the explanatory power. Specifically, the combination of aggression and the "threat" dimension of school culture exerts the strongest influence on victimization, contributing 25.95% to the overall impact. The "wellness" dimension, in combination with aggression, accounts for 19.45% of the impact; however, unlike "threat," "wellness" exerts a negative influence on victimization. In other words, while "threat" exacerbates victimization, "wellness" mitigates it. The "equality" dimension ranks third in predictive power, accounting for 14.87% of the total impact. However, when combined with high aggression, the mitigating effect of "equality" on victimization diminishes, indicating that a school culture emphasizing equality is less effective in reducing victimization in aggressive environments. The "isolation" dimension, when combined with aggression, contributes 12.75% to the total impact.

The influence of other additional factors accounts for slightly more than a quarter (26.98%) of the total impact, which will not be discussed further in this article. A key finding from this research is that 73% of adolescent victimization can be explained by the emotional climate fostered by classroom and school culture. This emotional climate encompasses feelings of anxiety, threat, and tension. The research indicates that adolescents who perceive interference, disdain, name-calling, ridicule, fighting, swearing, and cursing as acceptable behaviors in their classroom are more likely to experience victimization. When an adolescent feels threatened, they may develop physical, psychological, or social symptoms that increase their vulnerability to bullying. The research also highlights the significance of the sense of isolation as a factor contributing to victimization. When a student feels isolated—lacking peer support, witnessing frequent fights, and finding classes uninteresting and unpleasant—this sense of isolation, combined with aggression, intensifies their victimization.

Conversely, the research indicates that a school culture emphasizing adherence to communication rules and mutual respect within the group reduces the likelihood of victimization. When students feel confident that they will not be disturbed, that their belongings are safe, that teachers enjoy engaging with the class, and that fights are rare, they develop a sense of well-being. According to the survey, this sense of well-being, even in the presence of aggression, lowers the likelihood of becoming a victim.

Therefore, since the research demonstrates that a sense of well-being reduces the probability of victimization regardless of aggression levels, it is advisable to promote the development of a school culture that enhances adolescents' well-being.

In conclusion, the hypothesis that bullying behavior manifests when the environment is conducive to such behavior has been confirmed. It can be concluded that favorable conditions for bullying arise in schools that create a sense of danger or separation among adolescents, whereas schools that foster feelings of well-being and equality among students have a lower likelihood of experiencing bullying.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE RESEARCH

The research reaffirms the critical importance of nurturing a positive school climate and environment. From this perspective, the five-step anti-bullying program developed by Dan Olweus, which emphasizes school climate, is invaluable. The Olweus program encompasses the following components:

- School-wide initiatives
- Classroom climate enhancement
- Student engagement
- Parental involvement
- Community participation

According to studies, this program reduces the risk of adolescents becoming victims of bullying by 62% (Smith, 2019). At each step, specific actions are recommended. For instance, an anti-bullying policy should be established within the school, outlining the steps the administration should take in response to bullying incidents. The existence of such a policy provides potential victims with a sense of security and deters potential aggressors by ensuring their behavior will not go unpunished. Teachers, guided by this policy, will know how to support both victims and bullies.

The classroom component of the program addresses strategies for reducing bullying within each classroom. Role-playing exercises, where students practice navigating challenging situations, have proven highly effective. These exercises prepare students to respond confidently to bullying, whether by defending themselves against name-calling or addressing rumors.

The third step involves continuous education of students, emphasizing that becoming a victim of bullying is never their fault.

The fourth step underscores the importance of parental involvement. Schools should help parents understand their vital role in supporting their children and fostering problem-solving skills. Parents should feel integrated into the educational process.

Finally, the fifth step involves community participation. A key strength of the Olweus program is its inclusion of the broader community in anti-bullying efforts. Establishing an anti-bullying council that includes community members helps raise awareness about the importance of combating bullying and demonstrates the community's commitment to the cause. This program serves as an effective strategy for improving the school climate and environment, which research has shown to be essential in the fight against bullying.

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