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Bullying in Nigerian Schools: Prevalence Study and Implications for Counselling

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ABSTRACT School bullying is becoming a threat that no school can afford to dismiss. Although many demographic variables associated with bullying have been examined, there has been no study in Nigeria, which has looked into comparison between Government and Private/Mission schools. This study examined this neglected demographic variable in addition to establishing the incidence of bullying in schools in Benin City, Edo state. It was found that 78% of the children have been victims of bullying on at least one occasion and 71% have lashed out at others at least once. However, more boys than girls were found to be both bullies and victims (χ^2= 18.570, $p<0.01$). Boys reported being kicked or hit more often than girls (χ^2 = 13.302, $p<0.01$). The result shows that it was more common for bullying to take place in the classroom in government schools than in private schools (χ^2 = 43.773, $p<0.05$). The result demonstrated significant differences between the schools investigated. However, significantly more private schools reported kicking and hitting taking place in the playground than in the government schools, whereas bullying is more likely to take place in the classroom in government schools. It is recommended that counsellors play a significant role in combating the patterns of unhappiness and violence out of which much bullying arises.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can have negative consequences on the general school climate and on the right of students to learn in a safe environment without fear. Bullying can also have negative lifelong consequences-both for students who bully and for their victims. Although much of the formal research on bullying has taken place in the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, and Japan, the problems associated with bullying have been noted and discussed wherever formal schooling environments exist (Egbochuku, 2001).

About a decade ago, media headlines in Nigeria appeared to heighten public interest in this sensitive area of bullying. Schools, parents and children alike started demanding investigations and intervention to conquer this seemingly large and serious problem. Often prevalence of bullying is underestimated because the victims find it hard to tell others. Direct bullying seems to increase through the elementary years, peak in the middle school/junior high school years, and decline during the high school years (Olweus, 1993a). However, while direct physical assault seems to decrease with age, verbal abuse appears to remain constant. School size, racial composition, and school setting (rural, suburban, or urban) do not seem to be distinguishing factors in predicting the occurrence of bullying. Boys engage in bullying behaviour and are victims of bullies more frequently than girls (Sudermann et al., 1996; Olweus, 1991; Whitney and Smith, 1993).

The Problem of the Study

In the light of the increased awareness of bullying, studies have sought to find the root cause of the problem and to discover the best ways of preventing its occurrence in schools. Various reports and studies have established that approximately 15% of students are either bullied regularly or are initiators of bullying behaviour (Olweus, 1993a). Patterns of bullying and victimization are very different for boys and girls. Boys are much more likely to report being bullies, and perpetrating violent acts on others than are girls, at each age. Girls are somewhat less likely than boys to be the victims of bullying, although the rates are not as discrepant as the bullying (perpetrator) rates (Olweus, 1993b). This suggests that it is important to study whether boys victimize other boys, or both boys and girls, and vice versa.

In Nigeria, there seems to be absence of research on the extent and nature of bullying in

schools. This study therefore aimed to establish figures for the incidence of bullying, in addition to age and gender differences that are associated with it. Making use of similar methodology, comparisons will be made between Private/ Mission schools and Government schools. To guide this study, the following research questions were raised: What is the extent *o*f Bullying?; What are the types of Bullying in your school?; Who is bullying reported to?; Where does the bullying take place?; Would youth join in bullying?; Who are bullies and where do they come from?; Do teachers try to stop bullying?; and What do you think should be done about bullying?

METHOD OF THE STUDY

Participants: The population of the study consisted of all students in Private/Mission and government schools in Benin City. Students spend six years in the Secondary School in Nigeria. At the end of three years, they take the Junior Secondary School three (JSS3) exam, which is a qualifying exam for Senior Secondary School. For this study, only Junior Secondary School 3 (JSS3) students were used. The subjects were randomly selected from six schools. Three of which were Private/Mission schools and three were government schools. 1002 questionnaires were distributed to the six schools, making a total of 167 questionnaires per school. However only 300 were selected from the pool, and used for analyses because the others were not adequately completed. Of the 300 questionnaires used, 150 were from Private/Mission schools while 150 were from Government schools (i.e. 75 boys from Private/Mission and 75 boys from government; 75 girls from Private/Mission and 75 girls from government,). With ages ranging from 12 to 15 years.

Measures: This questionnaire used for this study was tailored after Olweus' questionnaire on bullying. The questionnaire used consists of seven multiple-choice questions about bullying behaviour and actions taken by pupils. For example, questions on racial bullying were not included in the questionnaire because this is not a problem in that environment. It also contained one open-ended free response question which asked the students what they thought could be done in their schools to stop bullying. Participants answered the questions by putting a tick in the box beside the response that best described what they had experienced or what they know about bullying in their schools {(i) No [ ] (ii) Only once or twice [ ] (iii) Sometimes [ ] (iv) Once a week [ ] (v) Several times a week[ ]} The investigator had earlier established the psychometric properties of this questionnaire during a preliminary study and obtained 0.65.

Procedures: All the questionnaires were administered to each of the six schools during a one-week period. Standard instructions were issued to all the schools so that administration of the questionnaires followed the same format. Where possible, the questionnaires were handed out and collected by members of staff. The definition of bullying was read to the students before the questionnaires were handed out. Once the questionnaires had been given out, the administrator read out the instructions on the top of the questionnaire and told the children to fill in the details requested. Confidentiality and the importance of telling the truth were stressed. The administrator also drew attention to the fact that for all but three questions, they should tick only one box and that for the final open-ended question, they should write what they thought was appropriate. Completed questionnaires were placed in envelopes and were collected for analysis. It was also stressed to the children that if they had any concerns regarding the questionnaire they did not have to complete it and that no explanation was necessary.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What is the extent of bullying in your school?

Almost four in every five participants (78%) reported being bullied to some degree and 85% of the children admitted to bullying others at least once. Further analysis examined 'moderate bullying' and 'severe bullying' (Moderate bullying incorporated all the responses by participants who ticked the boxes 'No', 'only once or twice', 'sometimes'; whereas severe bullying incorporated the final two categories only i.e. 'once a week', and 'several times a week'.) Using moderate bullying criteria, more than half of the children (62%) were being bullied and 30% bullied others. For severe bullying, 5% and 3% said they were bullied or bullied others respectively. More girls accepted being bullied (81%) than boys (68%), however, more boys accepted bullying (77%) than girls (62%).

Research Question 2: What are the types of bullying in your school?

The most common type of bullying behaviour reported was kicking and hitting (50%). This was followed by threats 'to beat you' (25%), 'Extortion of money from you' (13%), 'locked inside a room' (3%),' sent nasty notes' (4%), 'no one talks to you' (3%) and 'teased you' (2%). The participants that reported 'kicking and hitting others' were 67%, followed by those who reported 'refused to talk to others' (18%). Those who threatened to beat others were 15%. Further perusals showed that 54% of bullying was carried out by boys kicking and hitting were slightly more common in private schools (61%) than in government schools (40%). However, threats to 'beat you' were slightly higher in government schools (33%) than in private schools (11%). Significantly more boys reported being kicked or hit than girls ($\chi^2 = 13.302$, $p<0.01$).

Research Question 3: Who is bullying reported to?

Findings showed that reports of bullying were most likely to be reported to the teacher (54%) or to someone at home (21%), or the school principal (14%). Friends and senior students were least likely to be informed (6% and 5% respectively). The pattern was similar for boys and for girls. When collected, data was further broken down into school types. A similar pattern is recorded, for example, participants in private schools would first report cases of bullying to their teacher (65%), someone at home (11%), the principal (14%), friend (5%), and to a senior (5%). In government schools 43% would report to the teacher, 30% to someone at home, 13% to the principal, 4% to a friend, while 10% would rather report to their seniors.

Research Question 4: Where does the bullying take place?

It was reported that bullying was most prevalent in the playground (40%). Although 23% reported that it occurred in the classroom, 22% reported it happened somewhere in the school, and 15% on the way home from school. More boys reported that bullying took place in the playground (31%), 28% somewhere else in the school, 25% in the classroom, and 16% on the way home from school. For the girls 33% reported that bullying took place in the playground, 30% on the way home from school, 22% in the classroom, and 15% some where in the school. When the data was broken down by school type, it was realised that in the private schools, there was equal likelihood of bullying taking place in both the playground and somewhere else in the school (24.6% and 31.4% respectively). Bullying taking place on the way home from school and in the classroom was equally common (23% and 21% respectively). For government schools the pattern of response was in the following order: bullying in the classroom (40%), playground (27%), somewhere in the school (20%) and on the way home from school (13%). The result shows that it was more common for bullying to take place in the classroom in the government schools than in the private school ($\chi^2 = 43.773$, $p<0.05$).

Research Question 5: Would youth join in bullying?

More than half of the participants said they could join in bullying (51%) with a reasonable number not sure (32%) and 17% said no. When data was broken down by sex, 63%of boys said they could join in bullying, 26% not sure and 11% responded they would not. For girls, 52% could join in the bullying sometimes but 18% were not sure. However, 30% said that they definitely would not join in.

Research Question 6: Who are bullies and where do they come from?

The bullies were mostly from the higher classes (74%), followed by those from the same class (26%). They were mostly older children (49%) and mostly boys (29%). Of all the participants, 14% claimed that younger children were the bullies. The participants also responded that someone helped them bully others sometimes (25%) and 10% said this happened all the time. Sixty-nine per cent of boys agreed that bullying comes from those in higher classes with only 31% saying that it occurred in the same class. In the same manner, 70% of girls said the bullying comes from the higher classes with 30% from the same class. The same pattern was shown in both private and government school with bullies from higher classes being more common than those from the same class.

Research Question 7: Do teachers try to stop bullying?

It was claimed by 51% of the participants that teachers always stop bullying with 35% saying that they sometimes stopped bullying, and 14% claiming teachers did nothing to stop bullying. Thus the majority of the respondents reported that teachers always or sometimes stop bullying. Similar results arise when the data is broken down

Table 1: Open ended response by respondents 'as to what can be done about bullying in schools'

Categories of Responses	*Number of responses*	
Bullying students should be dealt with, disciplined and severely punished	96	32%
Report bullies to school authorities to correct them	80	26.6%
Principals and school authorities should stop bullying	76	25.4%
Teachers should stop and advise bullies to make friends among junior students	46	15.4%
Expel bullies from school	42	14.1%
Warn senior students to recognise junior ones as their brothers	8	2.5%
Rules and regulations should be properly enforced to stop bullying	8	2.5%
The introduction of discipline and severe punishment	96	32%
Reporting bullies to the school authorities for correction	80	26.6%

by sex. Both boys and girls agreed that teachers always stop bullying (53% and 49% respectively) and teachers sometimes stop bullying is attested by 38% of boys and 32% of girls, while 9% and 19% respectively represented teachers as doing nothing to stop bullying. There is a slight difference between teachers' responses to bullying in government schools with 'always stop bullying' (47%) and 'sometimes stop bullying' (42%), while 11%'do nothing about bulling'. For private schools, 64% responded to 'always stop bullying' while 'sometimes stop bullying' had (26%). However, 10% claimed that teachers 'do nothing about bullying'.

Research Question 8: What do you think should be done about bullying?

The last question on the questionnaire was an open-ended one to allow the participants to express their views on what could be done about bullying in their schools. The responses from the individual schools were put in a pool, which were then grouped into nine categories. The responses are presented in Table 1.

HO_1: There will be no significant difference in the nature of bullying of participants from the various types of schools

Furthermore, data collected were broken down into Private/Mission and Government schools. The result revealed that (79%) and (76%), of the students in Private/Mission and Government schools respectively were bullied. Moreover, (73%) of the students in government schools bullied others while (68%) owned up to have bullied others in Private/Mission schools. Severe bullying was reported by 3% of children in both Private/Mission and Government schools. This is summarised in Table 2.

HO_2: There will be no significant difference in bullies and those victims among males and females participants.

Findings from table 3 revealed that in private schools more boys bullied others (80%) than were bullied (73%), whereas more girls accepted being bullied (85%) than being bullies (55%). The picture is similar in government schools where for boys the victim/bully ratio is 68% to 75% respectively and for girls is 85% to 71% respectively. The figures of being bullies were higher in private schools than in government schools for boys but the same in both cases for girls. Results further demonstrated that a large number of participants were both bullies and victims of bullying (45%) although there was no significant difference between the schools. However, significantly more boys than girls were simultaneously found to be both bullies and victims (χ^2= 18.570, p<0.01).

Table 2: Nature of bullying in private/mission and government schools by gender

n-300		*Victims*	*Bullied Others*
Degree of Bullying	Moderate	62%	30%
	Severe	5%	3%
Gender	Girls	81%	62%
	Boys	68%	77%
School type	Private/ Mission schools	79%	68%
	Government schools	76%	73%

Table 3: Prevalence of bullying in private/mission and government schools (n-300)

	Private/Mission		*Government*	
	Boys	*Girls*	*Boys*	*Girls*
Victims	73%	85%	68%	85%
Bullied Others	80%	55%	75%	71%

(χ^2= 18.570, p<0.01).

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study are an additional

confirmation that school violence exists in most schools irrespective of the philosophies in operation in the school. It was reported that bullies were mostly from the higher classes and mostly older boys. A number of reasons for these findings might exist. Most obviously younger students at school are more inhibited physically than older students and therefore represent ideal 'targets' for bullies. Junior secondary school students were used, in this study, with age ranging from 12 to 15 years. As children grow up, they become physically and mentally stronger and less likely to be perceived as ideal 'targets. These findings support those of Hoover, Oliver and Hazler (1992), and Boulton and Underwood (1992) who also reported a number of bullied victims and found an increase of bullying others with age. Further evidence supporting this finding is the study of Rigby and Slee (1991) who asked respondents to identify what percentage of their class was being "picked on a lot" by other students. The median percent per class was 10% for girls and 11% for boys. In another study, Slee (1995) noted that 26% of the sample was bullied once a week or more often. In Zimbabwe, Zindi (1994) reported that 16% of students were bullied now and then, and 18% were bullied weekly or more often.

Some of the most convincing findings from this study are those regarding gender differences. A significant finding of the study was that bullies were most likely to be boys. In addition boys were represented as both victims of bullying and being bullies themselves. However, bullying by girls should not be discounted as evident from the results of this study, 55% of girls accepted being bullies., confirming studies of O'Moore and Hillery (1989); Hazler et al. (1991); and Hoover, Oliver and Thomson (1993) who found that, in general, bullies tend to be boys.

In addition, result from this study shows that bullying was most prevalent in the playground (40%), classroom (23%), followed by 22% and 15% respectively for somewhere in the school and on the way home from school corroborating the studies by various authors who noted that there is much more bullying in school than there is on the way to and from school (Olweus, 1978; Ziegler and Rosenstein-Manner, 1991; Rivers and Smith, 1994). In addition, the study revealed that boys also suffered from physical forms of bullying and were more likely to be bullies in the playground than girls do. This provides further evidence for the works of Yates and Smith (1989); Siann et al. (1993); and Whitney and Smith (1993) who found in their studies that within the school grounds, the playground is the most common setting for bullying, followed by the hallways, classrooms, lunchrooms, and washrooms. However, in a residential school, Zindi (1994) found that the dormitory was the most common location of bullying, followed closely by the playground, with the washrooms rating third and the classroom last.

By far, the most common type of bullying behaviour reported was kicking and hitting (50%). This was followed by threats 'to beat you' (25%), 'Extortion of money from you' (13%), 'locked inside a room' (3%),' sent nasty notes' (4%) 'no one talks to you' (3%) and 'teased' (2%). Moreover, 67% participants accepted 'kicking and hitting others' while 18% 'refused to talk to others'. Those who threatened to beat others were 15%. Kicking and hitting were slightly more common in private schools (61%) than in government schools (40%). However, threats to 'beat you' are slightly higher in government schools (33%) than in private schools (11%). These findings confirm the previous findings of Boulton and Underwood (1992) and Stephenson and Smith (1989), who found by far that the most common type of bullying was kicking and hitting. It is the opinion of the investigator that these similarities in the findings must lie in the fact that adolescents have similar characteristic all over the world.

The open-ended question on combating bullying provided useful information. The importance of giving the participants the opportunity to suggest ways that could be used to combat bullying cannot be overemphasised. My contention that these students are disconnected from responsible caring adults is supported by one of their responses (i.e. rules and regulations should be properly enforced to stop bullying). The responses were well thought out and potentially useful ideas. This question was included with the belief that if ideas of stopping bullying came from the students themselves, they would be willing to support ideas introduced by the school authorities. It is hoped that such findings could help stakeholders plan adequate and effective prevention programmes. It is interesting to note that the students wanted more strict punishment for bullies, more strict rules and regulations and more

involvement of school authorities and the principals. Another important point made by the students was that victims should report to someone about the bullying or that someone witnessing the bullying incident should inform a responsible adult. All too often the fear and the code of silence stops victims denouncing what is happening and, as a consequence, bullying continues. Until children have confidence in a successful intervention scheme, bullying will go undetected.

The majority of the respondents in this study reported that teachers, always or sometimes stop bullying. Similarly, both boys and girls agreed that teachers always stop bullying. However, there is a slight difference between the responses from students in government and those in Private/ Mission schools to actions taken by their schoolteachers with regards to bullying. More students from Private/Mission schools claimed that their teachers always stopped bullying than students from Government schools. This response is not surprising considering the ethos and climates from the two types of schools. There are more teachers in private/mission schools, they are also better paid, and the students are fewer making supervision possible. How teachers interact with students has important consequences for the level of bullying in any school. Teachers may have a significant impact in a number of ways. The school proprietors of Private/Mission schools are aware of this, so they make all the efforts to keep their students by providing adequate supervision. This could account for the differences on the roles played by teachers from both types of schools.

The results generally failed to support the hypothesis that there would be differences in bullying incidents among students from Private/ Mission and government schools. One would have expected significant differences as the ethos and climates in these schools are different as stated in the aspect of this study, on the problem of the study. A likely reason however, could be as a result of the philosophy of the nation on education, which is based on the 'development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and the provision of equal educational opportunities for all citizens at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system' (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1998). However, some differences did emerge regarding types of bullying behaviour, and the sites where bullying took place. Important however, was that more Private/Mission school participants reported that they were being kicked and hit than their counterparts in Government schools. Significantly also, more participants from government school reported being bullied in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Bullying often takes place in schools and is seen as a serious problem frequently right in the classroom. The facts show, too, that bullying is an equal-opportunity torment - the school type, (private/mission, or government) seems to have no bearing on its occurrence. On conclusion, the enormity of bullying in schools can no longer be shrugged off with a 'kids-will-be-kids attitude'. The fact that almost four in every five participants reported being bullied in this study shows the prevalence of bulling in Nigerian schools, making it a serious problem that should not be ignored. On gender differences boys are more likely to be both the perpetrators and the victims of bullying.

Another important finding from this study is that most students who are bullied reported or claimed that they will report the bullying to their teachers. More students from Private/Mission schools report to their teachers than students in government schools. The reason for this might be as a result of media publications on the effects of bullying on both the victims and the bullies. Another feasible reason is that most schools in Nigeria now have the services of the school counsellor.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

Even though statistics from this study show that school bullying is diminishing, it is still a threat no school can afford to dismiss. School counsellors can intervene effectively to reduce bullying by:

1. Developing a safe and supportive school climate. An important starting point for counsellors is to realise that much bullying occurs without the knowledge of teachers and parents, and that many victims are very reluctant to tell adults of their problems with bullying. In some cases, when it is acknowledged, school principals and teachers underestimate the extent and severity of

bullying in their own schools. Adults often mistakenly believe that bullying will stop if it is ignored. Some even believe that bullying can be good for a child as it "makes a man out of him" and it teaches them to look after themselves. Others mistakenly believe that bullying is part of growing up and is only a passing phase, or that bullying does not harm anyone (Dawkins and Hill, 1995). Victims, too, may be ashamed and afraid that adults cannot or will not help to resolve the situation. It is therefore the counsellor's business to get to know the students in the school. The counsellor needs to know who is unhappy and what the unhappiness is about. This can be done from their school record, or from the way the students dress, or even wear their hair!.

2. Bullying should be suspected especially when students continuously present, among others, any of the following symptoms headache, abdominal pain, disturbed sleep, bed wetting, feeling sad, to the counsellor:
3. It is also important that counsellors realise that in the bullying situation, there is always a power imbalance of some kind. This ensures that the victim always gets the worst of the interaction, making it necessary for both the bully and the victim to receive intervention in order to stop the bullying pattern. It is the responsibility of the school counsellor to assist the school in setting up an anti-bullying policy using the 'collaborative approach' involving techniques of peer and teacher counselling to resolve conflict. This approach is also used in conjunction with problem solving, peer counselling, safe school teams, school resource offices, and disciplinary committees. The anti-bullying policy will, among other things: Provide good supervision for children; Provide effective consequences to bullies; Establish good communication between counsellor, teachers and parents; Provide all children the opportunities to develop good interpersonal skills; and Create a social context, which is supportive and inclusive, in which aggressive bully behaviour is not tolerated by the majority

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