Bullying of Students in Academic Institutions: A Qualitative Study

Faieza Chowdhury

Faieza Chowdhury, Southeast University, Bangladesh. (email: faiezac30@gmail.com)
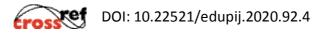
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Abstract

Every student has the right to feel safe within their academic institution. However, many experience frequent bullying and undergo mental traumas, alienation and self-destructive behaviors. Bullying is largely an unreported and unaddressed issue in many academic institutions, which can result in long-lasting effects on students' lives. A study conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), reported that 23% of school students in Bangladesh had been victims of bullying. This statistic clearly indicates that bullying is an alarming issue in Bangladesh which needs to be addressed urgently and properly. This qualitative study was conducted with 60 undergraduate students in order to explore their perceptions and experiences on bullying practices within the academic institutions of Bangladesh. Drawing on the findings of the study, a number of recommendations for the prevention and monitoring of bullying practices within the educational setting are suggested.

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Introduction

The term bullying is something which we often hear about and even experience personally whilst growing up. Bullying has been a continuous theme in various western literature including William G. Golding's 1959 classic, "The Lord of the Files," Nick Hornby's 2002 novel, "About a Boy," as well having been highlighted in numerous movies such as "The Mighty," "Mean Girls," and "Billy Madison." Research topics related to bullying have also emerged in the past few decades, with one of the earliest studies conducted by the scholar Dan Olweus in 1978.

Nonetheless, bullying at academic institutions deserves serious attention as young lives are at risk. Over the years there have been numerous cases of bullying which have attracted the attention of the media and the public. In 1982, three students committed suicide in Norway due to being on the receiving end of continuous peer-based bullying. In Japan, the suicide of a young boy attracted widespread public attention in 1986; however, it was much later on, in 1994, when another child committed suicide that led to Japan's Ministry of Education taking serious steps to address bullying problems in Japanese schools. Furthermore, in Canada, a 14-year-old boy was brutally tortured and murdered at the hands of seven of his peers in 1997 (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010).

At present, the phenomenon of bullying is of considerable public interest in Bangladesh also, as recent years have seen students bullied within their academic institutions, and some have even lost their lives as a result, attracting considerable public and media attention. Recent cases of bullying at academic institutions in Bangladesh include the killing of a student at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Abrar Fahad, and the death of a 19-year-old, Nusrat Jahan, in 2019. Abrar Fahad was tortured to death by his fellow peers within his campus dorm; whereas, Nusrat Jahan was harassed by her own school principal and then burned to death by her fellow peers. Tragic deaths such as these of students in Bangladesh as a result of bullying has led many to question the morality behind such behaviors.

Research on bullying in Bangladesh has previously been very limited, and further research clearly needs to be conducted on this serious issue. Studies conducted on bullying are deemed to be crucial in helping to raise public awareness regarding the seriousness of the issue, and also stimulates social discussions on how to take steps towards resolving this problem. Therefore, the current study aims to address the following questions:

- What is bullying and what are the different forms of bullying?
- What factors trigger children to engage in bullying practices?
- What are the potential consequences of bullying, both for students who bully others and for their victims?

Finally, this qualitative study's findings will be discussed and recommendations put forward on how to resolve the issue of bullying within Bangladesh's academic institutions. It is hoped that the study's findings will assist academic institutions in Bangladesh to take appropriate preventive measures in order to address the issue of bullying at all levels, in the country's schools, colleges, and also in universities.

Literature Review

Previous studies on bullying

According to Pikas (1975), bullying can be described as violence in a group context, whereby children try to reinforce each other through their interactions. DeRosier, Cillessen, Coie, and Dodge (1994) pointed out that aggression, of which bullying is a subtype, can be described as an interpersonal activity which often arises within the context of a group of peers. A study by Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Kaukiainen (1996) showed that although children may not actively participate in bullying, they may become inadvertently involved in the bullying process through assisting or supporting the bully and their actions. Despite the stereotypical perception of many that those who bully others are social outcasts and are often lacking in social competence, various researchers such as Kaukiainen et al. (1999), and also Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Kaukiainen (2000) have pointed out that bullies often have high social intelligence and social skills. Cairns, Cairns, Nackerman, Gest, and Gariepy (1998) found that school classroom bullies belonged to social clusters, whereby their peers acted in support of their malicious activities.

Children who engage in bullying behavior, either as the instigator or accomplice, generally have a large peer network or are part of a wider social group. On the other hand, child victims of bullying are likely to be less social and do not belong to a wider social group. According to Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992), "girls manipulate and boys fight". Their findings indicate that male victims of bullying mostly experience direct forms of bullying such as physical attack. However, female victims are more likely to experience indirect and more subtle forms of bullying such as the spreading of negative or malicious rumors, or in having their friends manipulated so that they avoid the victim in social settings. A view commonly held by many is that children who bully others are themselves very insecure under the surface. However, some researchers have proven this not necessarily to be true. Their findings indicate that bullies exhibit low-level anxiety as well as insecurity (Olweus, 1986; Pulkkinen & Tremblay, 1992). Another common perception of bullies is that they are often very popular in their class group. However, several studies have found bullies to be of slightly below average in their popularity (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Berts, & King, 1982; Olweus, 1973, 1978).

Bullies are often surrounded by a small close-knit group of people who support their activities. Patterson, Littman, and Bricker (1967) pointed out that bullies tend to coerce their victims in order to acquire items such as money, assignments, or cigarettes. In some cases this aggressive behavior of bullies is rewarded in the form of increased prestige and popularity (Bandura, 1973). Some previous studies affirmed that youngsters who are highly aggressive tend to bully others on a continual basis, and often become engaged in criminal activities later on in life (Loeber, & Dishion, 1983; Magnusson, Stattin, & Duner, 1983).

Forms of bullying

Bullying is a unique form of interpersonal aggression which generally arises when one individual has some form of power or advantage over another individual. It is often difficult for parents to understand whether their child is actually being bullied or whether their child is just overreacting to a negative social situation. Sometimes, the act of bullying itself can be ambiguous to the external observer. When students engage in forms of physical bullying, it is often perceived by others as playful fighting, whilst verbal bullying is often considered as being just playful teasing.

Bullying can take many forms such as verbal, physical, social, and more commonly today, electronic, known as "cyberbullying." Moreover, bullying often overlaps with interpersonal prejudices including discrimination based on race, gender, weight, disability, or sexual orientation (Kowalski, 2000; Pearce, Boergers, & Prinstein, 2002). Some of the more common forms of bullying are teasing, taunting, hitting, and threatening. In general, bullying can be classified in two ways: "direct bullying" and "indirect bullying." Direct bullying involves direct attacks which are initiated by one or more individuals against the victim, and are often characterized as threatening and/or hitting. Indirect forms of bullying are more subtle, and can manifest through strategies such as enforced social isolation, the spreading of malicious rumors, and bad-mouthing are utilized in order to cause psychological harm to the victim. Irrespective of whether direct or indirect bullying tactics are used, the act often involves continuous physical and/or psychological intimidation that creates an ongoing pattern of abuse and harassment towards the victim (Olweus, 1993).

In Bangladesh, usage of the Internet has seen a staggering 800-fold expansion since 2000, with most of today's children having started to use the Internet from a very young age. As a result of this, large numbers of children are today experiencing some form of cyberbullying. According to study by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), at least 32% of children between the ages of 10 and 17 years old in Bangladesh have been exposed to cyberbullying and/or digital harassment (UNICEF, 2019). As a result, victims of cyberbullying are more likely to consume alcohol or illicit drugs, engage in truancy from school, and receive poor academic grades. Hence, it is important for the Bangladeshi government, the academic authorities, both local and national, and the families of students to do more to protect children from all forms of bullying.

Factors which trigger bullying

Some of the factors and conditions which often trigger students to engage in bullying behaviors are as follows:

Lack of morality: Morality can be defined as "an act's harmful consequences" (Turiel, 1998), and bullying has often been linked to the subject of morality. Arsenio and Lemerise (2004) tried to associate morality with different forms of aggression, and argued that proactive aggression, which they considered to be synonymous with bullying, was more directly linked to issues of a moral nature. Children who engage in bullying practices often exhibit low moral values, and appear to fail to understand the consequences of their actions on others (i.e., the victim).

Lack of empathy: Empathy plays a vital role in almost all human interactions, and also in the development of social relations. Research on the relation between empathy and aggressive behavior among children has demonstrated that empathy provides a buffer against aggressive tendencies and behaviors. Moreover, it was revealed that highly empathic individuals can emotionally anticipate the harmful effects of their behavior on others, hence they often prevail in steering clear from any form of aggression or violence (Hoffman, 2000). Previous studies have shown that children who bully others often have lower levels of cognitive and affective empathy (Endreson & Olweus, 2001; Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004); whilst in extreme cases, these children can draw satisfaction from the infliction of pain and injury on others.

Uneven power distribution: Children who engage in bullying behaviors often display a need to exert control and power over others. People usually bully others due to a primitive

instinct to demonstrate their perceived power or superiority over others (Patterson et al., 1967). Children who engage in bullying often display some assumed level of superiority or advantage over their peers. This superiority can be in the form of family background, gender, religion, or age etc.

Peer influence: Harris (1995) stated that a child gradually adopts the moral standards of the social group to which they belong over time, and that these standards of right and wrong become internalized. Cairns and Cairns (1994) pointed out that friendships can have either positive or negative consequences on a child's development; hence, it is important for parents and guardians to look at not only whether a child has friends, but what type of friends or social groups they are part of in life. Nevertheless, as morality and beliefs are subjective concepts, making any final judgments regarding the moral underpinnings of bullying among children can indeed be a difficult task.

Poor childhood development: Some former students have affirmed that bullies often come from dysfunctional families, where parents/guardians impose very strict rules and hence their children often display rebellious attitudes whilst growing up, and are often seen as the rule breakers in society. Moreover, the use of power-assertive child-rearing tactics by parents was seen as a common factor. Most bullies have been shown to have experienced physical punishments and violent emotional outbursts during their own childhood. The primary caretaker in the family (usually the mother) may have been overly tolerant, and failed to set adequately clear boundaries on what was deemed to be acceptable behaviors for the child at home. Another common childhood experience of bullies is where their parents displayed negative emotional attitudes towards them such as a lack of warmth or emotional support (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Olweus, 1980).

Consequences of bullying

Bullying is seen as a serious issue in many academic institutions today, which can dramatically and detrimentally affect the students' ability to live a normal life. Victims of bullying often suffer from chronic mental illnesses, which can negatively influence their ability to develop and maintain positive relations with others. Bullying can also lead to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, which the victim may then carry into adulthood (Olweus, 1993). Students who experience bullying within their academic institutions often fear attending school, and therefore associate school with somewhere that is not safe or simply an unhappy place. These students often lose interest in learning, resulting in unnecessarily poor academic performance (i.e., much lower achievement than they would otherwise have accomplished).

Moreover, victims of bullying often face social isolation, where their peers do not want to befriend them in fear of losing or downgrading their own status within their respective social circle. Students who suffer from bullying also report various physical complaints such as suffering from stomachaches, headaches, or abnormal eating or sleeping habits etc. In the worst case scenarios, victims of bullying can themselves engage in self-destructive behaviors, which may even lead to attempted or actual suicide. Hence, bullying is a very serious offence which can have a devastating and lasting effect on both a child's current and future life. Furthermore, individuals who bully others may also suffer themselves as these they are more likely to progress in life to engage in criminal activity and/or alcohol/drug abuse in the future (Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Magnusson et al., 1983). Students who engage in bullying

practices themselves due to peer pressure may suffer from depression, due to an inability to manage feelings of guilt, and sleeping disorders such as insomnia.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study which was based on personal interviews held with 60 undergraduate students in Bangladesh. The 60 participants were equally spilt between 30 male and 30 female students, who were each studying in their final year of Bachelor Studies at various private universities in Bangladesh. The convenience sampling method was employed in selecting the sample based on criteria such as familiarity, accessibility, and similarity of academic background. First, only those students who were studying in their final year of undergraduate programs were deliberately selected, as the researchers specifically wanted matured participants who had already completed a major part of their academic life, including school, college, and university. Second, only students who had some form of prior personal contact with the interviewer were selected in order to ensure that the participants felt comfortable with their interviewer and would thereby more likely share their personal experiences without hesitation. Hence, familiarity and accessibility were factors used in the selection of the study's participants.

The primary data of the study was obtained through a survey questionnaire that was applied as an instrument to collect the study's data. The design of the questionnaire combined both open-ended and close-ended questions. Moreover, both structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 60 of the study's participants.

By listening to and then analyzing the participants' personal experiences, valuable information was obtained on the current bullying issues across various academic institutions in Bangladesh, including schools, colleges, and universities.

Results and Discussion

The participants were first asked about how they perceived bullying in Bangladesh's academic institutions. Around 95% ($n = 55$) of the participant students reported that bullying was perceived by them as being a negative issue, and used words such as "bad," "disgusting," and "violent." The remaining five students stated that bullying was seen as a normal aspect of academic life, and used words such as "ragging," "teasing," and "name calling" during their interviews.

For the second question, the participants were asked whether or not they had ever experienced any form of bullying during their academic life. Perhaps surprisingly, all of the participants gave a positive response, and confirmed that they had experienced bullying of some form or other whilst attending their school, college, and/or university. Then, as a follow-up question, the students were asked what type of bullying they had faced. The students' responses indicated that most of the males had been exposed to direct bullying such as physical or verbal attacks, whereas the majority of the females had experienced some indirect form of bullying such as gossip, rumor, and social abandonment. This corroborates with the findings of Bjorkquist et al. (1992), who reported that "girls manipulate and boys fight". The students were then asked in what ways they had resolved the bullying problem they had faced. Almost 81% ($n = 49$) of the students reported that they did not take any action, whilst eight of the students stated that they shared news of the bullying incidents with their parents, and three had lodged a complaint with their academic institution. This finding is a clear indication that most students in Bangladesh who suffer

from bullying often fail to share their experiences with either their parents or the academic authorities.

In the third question, the students were asked whether or not they had personally engaged in any form of bullying within their academic institutions. All of the respondents stated that they had never engaged in any form of bullying practices. As a follow-up question, they were asked what had prevented them from engaging in bullying behaviors. Most of the students stated that they were aware that bullying was a wrong action and did not want to be part of such an activity. Some earlier studies have demonstrated that an individual's personal attitude and beliefs can play a significant role in their engagement in aggressive behaviors such as bullying (Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2004). The remaining students in the current study's survey reported that there were strict rules in most academic institutions against any form of bullying, hence they did not want to incur any form of punishment from the academic authorities.

In the fourth question, the students were asked whether or not bullying negatively impacts on students' lives, and also in what ways. All of the participants affirmed that bullying negatively impacts the victims, and that they may suffer from depression, humiliation, and isolation etc. as a result.

Finally, the participants were questioned as to whether their academic institutions had taken necessary precautionary steps to curb bullying practices. Approximately, 68% ($n = 41$) of the students reported that their academic institutions had taken all necessary actions in order to prevent all forms of bullying practices, whilst the remaining 19 participants provided a negative response; stating that in some academic institutions, there were no strict rules on bullying, hence most of the time they were subjected to bullying from their peers. Moreover, the students provided suggestions that included student complaint boxes, full campus-wide CCTV coverage, and strict rules in order to curb today's bullying practices.

The research provided an overview of the opinions of youth workers with regard to their undergraduate university studies within the context of the development of health awareness and movement-related activities, as well as their own health awareness and their considered importance of health education, content, and resources in the practicing of youth work.

Recommendation

As previously discussed, bullying can vary in form and severity, hence reliance on a singular approach to resolving the issue will unlikely be effective. A report released by UNICEF entitled "An Everyday Lesson: END Violence in Schools" stated that in Bangladesh, 35% of students aged 13 to 15 years old had reported being bullied for 1 day or more in the proceeding 30 days (UNICEF, 2019). Unfortunately, most cases of bullying remain unnoticed, or go unreported, and therefore remain unaddressed until some form of recognizably destructive behavior is exhibited. As bullying is a widespread problem affecting many of today's academic institutions in Bangladesh, the respective authorities need to adapt and employ various strategies in order to actively curb bullying practices.

Disciplinary action: It is a key responsibility of all academic institutions to protect their students from peer victimization, including harassment and bullying. All students should be informed properly about the consequences that they will have to face if they engage in any form of bullying practices at their school, college, or university.

Create awareness: Most people do not understand the concept of bullying and often perceive such actions as friendly teasing and normal infighting between children or adolescents. Hence, it is vital for academic institutions to educate parents/guardians and students alike about the different forms that bullying can take, and to provide them with multiple ways of seeking assistance whenever the situation demands.

Zero-tolerance rule: All academic institutions should implement zero-tolerance policies for any type of bullying within the campus. Students should be informed about the consequences of violating these rules, regardless of their gender, religion, or family background etc.

Anti-bullying monitoring cells: Victims of bullying often hesitate to report such incidents due to a sense of confusion as to where they should go and what they should do. In some institutions, the reporting of such incidents requires the victim to go through complicated and often time-consuming procedures. In order to prevent this, academic institutions need to establish one-stop centers or student protection cells where immediate intervention strategies will be initiated so as to protect the victim from any further bullying. Nevertheless, it is important to resolve bullying issues by employing evidence-based approaches, rather than simply responding to the emotional appeals of the victims.

Staff training: Academic institutions should direct all teaching staff in how to assess whether or not students in their classes are the victims of bullying by others, and also to identify any students who are engaged in bullying practices. Moreover, all staff members should be provided with appropriate training in order to prevent, identify, and appropriately respond to any incidents of bullying.

Complaint boxes: Academic institutions should set up complaint boxes whereby students can lodge complaints about being on the receiving end of any discourteous, annoying, or indecent behavior. Moreover, students should be encouraged by the appropriate academic authorities to submit complaints regarding any form of bullying, whether direct or indirect in nature.

Appointment of psychiatrists and/or student counsellors: Most victims of bullying fail to tell their parents and/or friends about their negative experiences due to a misplaced sense of shame and embarrassment at not being able to stand up to someone who is bullying them and to deal with the problem themselves. Hence, in most cases, bullying incidents remain unreported and therefore go unnoticed by others. Moreover, students who engage in bullying practices have often had negative childhood experiences themselves, which has then, over time, triggered them to participate in such negative actions. It is therefore vital for all academic institutions to appoint appropriately qualified and experienced psychiatrists or student counsellors who possess all the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with such sensitive issues.

Change in classroom culture: Teachers themselves sometimes use abusive words in the classroom and intentionally try to humiliate an individual or a specific group of students in front of their classmates. It vital for academic institutions to instruct all teaching staff that the use of any bullying tactics in order to control their classes is unacceptable and will not be tolerated, and to avoid administering forms of corporeal punishment on their students.

Conclusion

Education is the key to building any strong and stable society. However, many students worldwide experience various forms of bullying within their academic institutions. In the current study, it was found that although none of the participants admitted having personally engaged in any form of bullying, a large number of students reported in the survey that they had experienced bullying in one of their previous academic institutions. Moreover, it was found that both females and males had been exposed to bullying at school, college or at university, but that the females were more likely to be the victims of psychological bullying, whilst the males were more at risk of physical violence and verbal threats.

In order to stop all forms of bullying practices, it is vital for the relevant academic authorities to strengthen their preventive and responsive measures by taking various initiatives such as installing a complaints box system, CCTV systems with campus-wide coverage, the appointment of student counsellors, and to invest in training all of support, administrative and teaching staff. Moreover, academic institutions need to implement policies that protect all students from all forms of aggression and violence within the campus. They also need to establish anti-bullying monitoring cells which will regularly monitor the activities of students, and collect information on any bullying incidents within and around the campus.

The evidence indicates that children who are the victims of bullying often suffer from sleeping disorders, stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, poor appetite, anxiety, depression, and misplaced feelings of shame, guilt, or even suicidal thoughts. Some of these psychological and emotional scars may persist through into adulthood, hence it is imperative for all academic institutions in Bangladesh to form appropriate initiatives and to implement them in full so as to prevent long-lasting negative effects from bullying which can damage the lives of so many children.

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Appendix

Sample Questionnaire

1. What do you understand by the term "bullying"?
2. Have you experienced any bullying in academic institutions in Bangladesh?
    2.1. If Yes, what type of bullying did you experience?
    2.2. If Yes, how did you tackle the bullying problem?
3. Have you personally engaged in any form of bullying practices at academic institutions?
    3.1. If Yes, what triggered you to do that?
    3.2. If No, what factors prevented you from doing that?
4. Do you think victims of bullying suffer many problems due to their negative experiences?
    4.1. If Yes, in what ways they are affected?
5. Do you think that academic institutions in Bangladesh have taken all necessary steps to curb bullying practices?
    5.1. If No, suggest what steps can be taken to prevent bullying practices in academic institutions in Bangladesh?