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Effects of Bullying on Elementary School Student's Learning and Well-Being

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Abstract

This senior capstone project identifies the relationship between students' learning and bullying, and how educators/parents can learn how to identify signs of bullying and how to prevent it. Through the use of literature reviews, an interview with one experienced teacher, and two anonymous interviews, one with a parent of a child who has been bullied and one with a person who has personally been bullied themselves, the result findings showed that bullying has a significant amount of negative effects in students education and overall well-being. However, the relationship between bullying and its effects on students' education and well-being can be complex as identifying the root causes of bullying and having access to the bullying is harder with technology advancing everyday online. This project aims to educate teachers and parents on signs of bullying and how to help students who are involved in bullying, prevent and help end it.

Introduction

First, we should examine what bullying is and the different types of bullying that can occur. "Bullying is commonly known for repeated actions of aggression, which can be physical, verbal, or relationship focused that is prolonged in time, in a physical or web network context" (Gomes, 2020, p. 245.) In other words, bullying can also be defined as the intentional and systematic disturbing behavior of a socially, emotionally or physically stronger individual to a less powerful individual" (Ozbec, 2022, p. 264.) The main question I want to answer in this research project is how bullying can affect an elementary school student's education and how teachers can help combat bullying. This is significant, because bullying is not always easy to

spot, bullying can be subtle and happen online, which is why it is important to look out for the warning signs and learn how to help the students develop healthy social behaviors.

This research is valuable to educators, parents, and even young students who want to learn more about why bullying happens and how to create a solution to those bullying behaviors. According to data shown from the US National Center for Education Statistics, “one out of every five students is bullied” and “worldwide, approximately 32% of children aged 11-15 have experienced bullying at least once” (Ozbek, 2022, p. 266) This is important, because with these statistics, we know that bullying during elementary school is common and this information will be useful for educators, parents, and students who experience this. I came up with my primary and secondary research questions by questioning how I would handle a bullying situation in my future classroom, and thinking of how bullying has changed with the expansion of technology. With these ideas, I also wanted to find what the different resources or strategies are for teachers who want to create a healthy social environment.

My primary research question is How does Bullying Affect Elementary Students Education and their well-being? My secondary research questions include: What is bullying and the types of bullying? What are the causes of bullying and how has it evolved and affected students over time? What does research say about the effects of bullying on students' learning and well-being at the elementary school level? How have the different types of bullying affected elementary students' learning and well-being according to teachers and students? How can elementary school teachers know that their students have been bullied? In other words, what are the signs of bullying and what could teachers do to prevent bullying from happening in their own classrooms? Are there school policies to deal with bullying? If there are, how do school officials,

including teachers, implement the policy? Are there resources for teachers who work with students who are being bullied in their own schools? If there are, what are they?

Literature Review

The effects of bullying on elementary school children are damaging not only to their education, but to their quality of life. In this section we are going to synthesize the different topics related to the effects of bullying on elementary school children's lives, since the effects of bullying carries on to adulthood and can be extremely damaging if victims and aggressors are not aware of the situation and ways to navigate through overcoming such a sensitive situation. This is important to pay attention to, because “untreated psychological distress that appear early in life could be the gateway to poor health, both mental and physical” (Arseneault, 2017, p. 412) Some common themes in my research are family life, effects of bullying such as eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, unhealthy adult life, such as losing jobs, losing relationships, and difficulty maintaining relationships. Another common theme in my research were solutions to helping these children overcome daily struggles of bullying such as bullying interventions and the many approaches one can take to help de escalate the bullying, such as teaching empathy and kindness. Tackling the source of bullying and finding a solution was another common theme in my research, as teachers and parents often feel helpless in these situations, especially those of cyberbullying. Even though there is little research specifically conducted on responses to cyberbullying, results from the research of Cassidy, Brown, and Jackson (2012) does shed light on the number of ways parents view cyberbullying. Specifically, in their study, parents of early adolescents were asked what they perceived to be the best ways to prevent cyberbullying, with results showing that 40% endorsed monitoring, blocking, and limiting access to technology, over half suggested that communication, support, and education

were the most effective solutions, and 5% of parents were pessimistic that there are any solutions to cyberbullying at all (Cassidy et al., 2012). These themes were broadly replicated in recent qualitative research by Helfrich, Doty, Su, Yourell, and Gabrielli (2020) who found that parents believed communication, monitoring online activities, and engaging in professional resources were the most effective strategies of dealing with cyberbullying.

Bullying and its effects on Education

It is no surprise that schools are the central location for bullying to occur. In North America, 1/4 to 1/3 of all school-age children are bullied, with 15% of those experiencing cyberbullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017, p. 241). Up to 10% of students engage in bullying behavior (Downes & Cefai, 2016, p. 22). These behaviors peak in junior high schools and subside by the end of high school (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017) "Governments around the world have recognized the need to install anti-bullying strategies and practices in order to protect the well-being of our children, for example, many Canadian and international jurisdictions have codified anti-bullying measures into law" (Khnich, 2021, p. 11) In the United Kingdom, all schools are legally supposed to have measures/plans in place to tackle the subtle act of bullying, while also informing teachers, parents, and others about bullying (Arseneault, 2018, p. 405)

The association between bullying victimization and psychosocial problems, such as academic achievement has been examined in a meta-analysis by Nakamoto and Schwartz found a small but significant negative association between bullying victimization and academic achievement. Another study found those exposed to bullying victimization at a young age were at increased risk of involvement in criminal behavior such as carrying a weapon (Moore, 2017, p.1) Academic achievement and its correlation to bullying also depends on gender. "Risser (2012) also found the existence of a negative association between academic achievement and

manifested relational aggression with boys of the fourth and fifth grade” Manifested relational aggression was a predictor of academic achievement. When the manifested aggression is controlled, relational bullying appears as the only predictor of lower academic achievement among girls of the fourth and fifth grade. These results advance the fact that when girls involve themselves in these behaviors it clearly contributes to a decrease in their class performance. Violence and bullying are significantly associated with lower grades. Students in schools with higher levels of bullying have worse academic results. So, the school environment affects academic achievement, and this is true for all students, regardless of past exposure to violence”(Gomes, 2020, p. 247)

Gomes also found that if these bullying behaviors persist for about 5 years, the negative impact on academic achievement, mental health issues, low self-esteem, and less optimism is significantly higher (Gomes, 2020, p. 248) It is important to recognize the warning signs of bullying early on, to diminish the long lasting effects it has on our children as adults. As a big sister to an elementary school student, I have personally witnessed what bullying can do to students' grades. I noticed that the focus on school suddenly gets shifted to fitting in and focusing on making friends, instead of only worrying about their academic performance. This is why it is very important for teachers and guardians to be educated on bullying and the warning signs, such as changes in behavior, academics, and the emotions of the children.

Causes of Bullying and Identifying the warning signs

The act of bullying is not always easy to pinpoint, in fact, as time goes on, bullying is harder to tackle, since the advancement of technology has evolved over-time. Some personality characteristics are common amongst the victims of bullying such as, not being able to fit in, displaying insecurities, and acting timid or submissive (Khnich, 2021, p. 12) Victims also tend to

internalize social conflicts, blame themselves, and often view setbacks, or mistakes as flaws in their own personality (Khnich, 2021, p. 12) Looking into the family life of students can be helpful in understanding how much social support they are getting at home to help them combat bullying. Those who have more support at home are less likely to become victims of bullying. Another way to identify which kids are more susceptible to victimization is knowing the groups of children who are vulnerable, such as immigrants, special needs, minority groups, and students who are socially isolated (Khnich, 2021, p. 12) Warning signs that victims often portray can also look like having sleeping problems, being irritable, tearful, or even losing motivation” (Arsenault, 2018, p. 407). “Studies have shown that victims of bullying also manifest certain characteristics such as, showing increased risk of self-harm, suicidal ideation, mental health problems, felt rejected at home or were maltreated by an adult, had parents with emotional problems, or had a family history of attempted or completed suicide” (Arsenault, 2018, p. 207.)

It is also important, if not more important to identify the personality characteristics of the bully. Some of the traits we can find in the bullies are, having low empathy levels, a sense of entitlement, and a dislike for authority figures, these students can also be very aware of social cues, and social opportunities, which can include bullying others to gain the social status from others (Khnich, 2021, p.12) Bullies often seek high social status and can even be described by their peers as the “cool kids”, and since there is a low empathy level often associated with these qualities, there can also be a blatant disregard for for any consequences of their actions, such as excluding others (Khinich, 2021, p.12.)

Power imbalances are good examples of how bullies perpetuate bullying behaviors on their victims and are often the cause of bullying. “Some of the common themes among these power imbalances can include popularity, intelligence and disabilities” (Arsenault, 2018, p.

406) Another example of what can cause bullying and warning signs to look for can include the changing of someone's environment, such as a new student coming in from a different school (Arseneault, 2018, p. 406) “Studies have shown that family history, background and family relationships can contribute to an increased risk of peer victimization, such as inconsistent, abusive, punitive, hostile, high negative expressiveness, family conflict and violence” (Navarrow, 2019, p. 4)

Combating Bullying

The use of different types of interventions, strategies and legal policies are a common theme among the research. “In some countries like the United Kingdom, which mandates all school to have a anti-bullying policy in place, and these policies must include principles, and values of the school, a clear definition what bullying is, and guidance on how to record and report bullying situations” (Arseneault, 2018, p. 413) Australia is also another country that was one of the first to implement anti-bullying policies, but despite being first, studies have shown that reports of bullying have only “moderately” declined since creating the new policy when comparing cross-sectional data across 4 years. America has different result with a study using 25 states and comparing how the percentages of reports of being bullied change after implementing at least one guideline policy recommended by the Department of Education and found a 24% reduction in reports of being bullied (Arseneault, 2018, p. 413)

There are various types of bullying interventions, some are better for whole classroom interventions and some are better used as more individual based interventions, depending on the situation and the student. The different levels of interventions are in place to not only teach all students about bullying, but to also help those students who are in these bullying situations. An example of a whole class intervention created in Germany is called “Media Heros”, which relies

mainly on social learning (e.g. role-play, model learning) and the application of well established cognitive-behavioral methods (e.g. positive reinforcement, moral reasoning)., "Media Heroes" aims at changes in attitudes and beliefs through the transfer of knowledge by providing the students with definitions, the legal background of cyberbullying acts as well as the impact of cyberbullying on the victim and promoting empathy with the victim (Krumbholz, 2016)

Interventions that are better suited for individual, student based help are involving potential victims in prevention programs. This can be considered controversial to some, since categorizing students is not what we want to do. Labeling the students as a bully and even a victim, can be damaging to the students, that is why it is important to not profile, but pay attention to certain signs and help those students who can benefit from these interventions. Another students-based intervention that was created and gained much acceptance is the focus on co-development strategies with students. This intervention aims to encourage their emotional and social development, while giving the students ownership of this process. The methods included are "mediation, restorative justice, support group, and Method of Shared Concern," as well as many others. "While these strategies provide many opportunities for emotional growth, acquiring social skills, and developing intrinsic motivation for prosocial behaviors, they can have limited success with younger students who lack self-awareness. With them, a more teacher-directed approach is often more successful" (Khinich, 2021) Student- centered intervention programs also aim to replace punitive, reactive strategies with proactive methods that directly involve students in their emotional and social development. Successfully teaching genuine empathy and an appreciation for other people may require educators to forgo the traditional approach of punishing the offender and forcing compliance. A student who never had an opportunity to make

authentic decisions about the school climate and to experience the benefits of a positive social environment is limited in the ability to grow emotionally.

The students behavior in the school relating to bullying has also been managed by implementing a strategy that involves punishment and reward systems. This system has been proven to work in the short-term, but when it comes to long-term, the policy becomes less effective, and students become disobedient to the policy. This may be attributed to the lack of opportunities for the development of social skills for bullies and victims, and inadequate possibilities for perpetrators of bullying to internalize reason for exhibiting more positive behaviors. While effective at reducing bullying behaviors in the short-term, a more comprehensive strategy may be needed to create a lasting impact (Khinich, 2021)

Parents and school staff struggle to combat cyberbullying, as the bullying is often done anonymously, and most victims of cyberbullying do not reach out for help. "Some of the potential successful strategies that parents can use at home include, but are not limited to, providing emotional support, promoting prosocial behavior, increasing their victimized child's feelings of self-worth, and reporting to a teacher" (Stuart, 2022) Providing students with support at home is also crucial for their development as an adult, as going for long periods of time with being bullied can lead to serious problems for them in the future as adults.

Methods and Procedures

In order to understand this topic, I decided to research as much as I could with peer-reviewed articles and journals, and books, then compare what I learned to real life situations from people who have been in these bullying situations. To be able to do this, I first had to organize my online sources, so I can have easy access to them as I look over my data from my interviews. Before I started my research with interviews, I also did my research paper

prospectus. This helped me gather my thoughts about why I wanted to do this topic and what questions I would be searching for. The prospectus was also a great tool I used in developing my research papers, because it was easy to see all my questions and gave me an idea of how I wanted to organize my information. Developing the interview questions was interesting, because I wanted to ask questions that were a good fit for the person I was interviewing. For example, as we can see in (see Appendix #1), my questions for the experienced teacher were specific to her role as the teacher in the classroom, such as what her educational background is, if she had resources to help her students with cyberbullying and what her take on characteristics of bullies and victims are. After getting my information from the interviews, it was apparent how the research I found online and in books correlated to the information found within the interviews. I also utilized the writing center to help me make sure I got the format correct for the research paper, and after that, I was able to feel comfortable to start writing my paper.

Results and Discussion

Through my research, my results indicate that there are numerous types of interventions, prevention programs, and strategies in place to help combat bullying in elementary schools. My research also indicates that bullying does have a negative effect on elementary school students' education and well-being. There are several anti-bullying policies around the globe, but not all schools are mandated to teach about bullying/cyberbullying. My results also found that parents are not sure of strategies they can use when their child is dealing with this issue, especially when it comes to cyberbullying, but research finds it useful to help students who need it. My research also came across a controversial topic that I did not think was going to arise. The topic of characterizing the bully or victim in this situation is controversial.

These findings are important, because bullying is an act that can be subtle, but causes long-lasting effects that can interrupt healthy development into an adult. Problems such as mental health issues, failed relationships, short-lasting friendships, decline in educational success and more can develop from constant occurrence of bullying. This is why it is crucial as parents and educators to support students in this area, and be proud supporters of instilling policies and programs into schools that help with combating bullying. Going to school and being at home should be safe places for children, but as time goes by, we see that it is easier for negativity to reach students more often and more quickly, which is why teaching empathy should be a priority both at school and at home.

Problems and Limitations

Gathering my resources for my research paper was interesting, because although there are many sources on the topics of bullying, it got harder and harder to find sources that got deeper in the bullying world, such as finding resources and strategies on how to combat cyberbullying. The topic of cyberbullying in general was difficult to find resources on, because most of the bullying that happens online comes from anonymous users. Another problem I had was setting up an adequate amount of interviews to really see how the answers collected would compare to the research I found online. I was able to conduct three interviews, but planned for at least ten. Two of my interviews were not able to be done due to family emergencies and time conflicts. There currently needs to be more research on cyberbullying and strategies parents and teachers can use to combat this type of bullying, many parents are struggling watching their kids be tormented and teachers are also witnessing symptoms that are arising from the internet. Finding sources on teaching digital citizenship and learning strategies to combat cyberbullying was one of the hardest topics to research.

Recommendations

After analyzing all the data and information about bullying and its effects, I recommend for teachers and guardians of young children in school, to recognize the signs of bullying and cyberbullying, implement different strategies and intervention programs, get parents and teachers involved in legal action for anti-bullying policies/laws, get teachers and parents involved in creating different anti-bullying strategies, teach empathy to young children, and to ultimately create strong family and school relationships for the children, that involves support and a healthy/strong environment. Strategies that teachers and parents can do is educate about what bullying is, and how to interact with society in healthy ways. Getting involved in changing the laws for this topic is also crucial to helping the dangerous act of bullying for our youth. Some countries have also started implementing laws that restrict students from having phones during school, and this is a start to also helping the spread of cyberbullying, during school hours. The U.S still needs a lot of work to be done when it comes to bullying, that is why it is important to get involved and make a difference for our youth who are going through difficulties, especially as the expansion of technology is growing so rapidly.

There are different interventions and strategies created, such as having students take a class session to learn about healthy behaviors within their peers, like the "Media Heros" idea we learned about that was created in Germany. These class sessions use strategies such as "role play" to give students examples of what these behaviors can look like in real time, so they can see they can also learn how to identify bullying and have healthier ways of dealing with it. The faster the students become aware of how to maneuver through bullying, the less likely they will develop long lasting effects of bullying. Prevention programs are also helpful in identifying possible warning signs of bullying and have more individual based interventions.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will go over the most important information relating to how bullying can affect an elementary school student's education and well-being. Bullying has a negative effect on education and a negative effect on students well-being for the short-term, and can have more serious consequences for the long-term if not treated. Throughout the research, I was able to find sources that helped answer my questions. Bullying has several negative effects on academic achievement and well-being, such as poor grades, poor attendance, and even leads to higher increase of alcohol consumption, loneliness, obesity, low-self esteem, and mental health problems, victims of bullying also tend to have higher rates of depression and lack of interest in school and academics (Gomes, 2020) Studies show that students in schools with a positive climate have fewer problems with attendance, study habits and motivation, and have higher grades and test scores (Ozbec, 2022) Studies have also found that students who had been frequently bullied, also had lower educational levels at mid-life (Arseneault, 2018)

The ways in which teachers and parents can combat this bullying behavior, include having interventions, student- based interventions, anti-bullying policies, strategies, teaching empathy and much more. An example of strategies that can be used is the prevention program which aims to help students who might be more likely to be bullied, such as a new student coming from a different school, a student with disabilities, and even a student who just got new glasses. These intervention programs prepare the students to handle social interactions that could be potentially damaging and also teach them positive social skills that will help with their mental health. Overall, I found that it is getting more important to tackle the issue of cyberbullying and ways teachers, especially parents can help their students/children combat bullying.

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Appendix #1

Professor Nares-Guzicki interview/questions on December 5th, 2023

1. How many years have you been teaching or taught and what is your educational background?

She started teaching in special education and general education. She got her bachelor's degree in special education and continued to get her credentials in special education as well. Professor Irene also said that she has been teaching her life. She got her masters and started teaching at San Jose State and San Francisco State, then also went on to earn her doctorate degree. She loves to teach at any age level/grade level.

2. Do you feel like you have strategies and or resources to help you support those students who are in bullying situations?

Yes, she created her own strategies such as role playing, and facilitating her own workshops to help other teachers who needed more guidance on this topic for their students.

3. Who are the bullies and what do they have in common?

She said they do not have common characteristics, because each student is so different from one another and said so many factors can come into play, and she must see consistent patterns in order to categorize them as a bully.

4. Who are the victims ?

Cannot pinpoint exactly, varies from situation to situation, cannot put kids into categories. Usually ones that don't have boundaries, going beyond the limit of

boundaries. Haven't been trained to handle bullying, im and what do they have in common?

5. Do you feel you have control of bullying that happens outside the classroom, such as online, but makes its way to the classroom or school?

Difficult to control outside school bullying, have open communication with kids about what happened after school, and have interventions. Does not have control, but hopes it transfers to life as survival skills, controlling what we can, which is teaching. Doesn't matter what grade, you must have a relationship with students to help them.

Appendix #2 Interview with Parent and/or past student who has been bullied

Section for parents:

1. What is your name and background information?

Valerie Sierra and she graduated high school, and has some medical training.

2. Did you notice any changes in behavior or personality after your child was bullied?

Her child started to appear sad and less enthusiastic about going to school

3. How was this situation addressed by teachers or school officials?

It was not addressed by the school.

4. How did this bullying affect your child's education or well-being?

Her grades went down dramatically after losing her social group at school, and she started to appear more emotional at home. Her personality was changing and her hope for redemption socially was slim.

5. Where did the bullying occur?

Through group text.

Section for past students who was bullied:

1. What grade were you in when you were bullied?

5th grade

2. Where did the bullying happen?

On my phone

3. How was the bullying resolved, and who resolved it?

I found a new friend group eventually, I found new friends who were nice to me.

4. Did teachers, school officials or other students help you?

No.

5. Were you able to concentrate while being bullied?

No.

6. Who bullied you and why?

“My old friends”, they were not clear as to why they were treating her differently and ignoring her messages.

7. If a teacher could do anything to help you during this time, what could they have done?

Help me meet more people.

