Ninth Grade Hispanic Students’ Perception of Bullying at school in Texas

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Abstract

This study surveyed 202 Hispanic 9th grade students in 7 schools in Texas about their perception of bullying at their school. Findings indicated that at least sometimes 85.6% of students observed name calling, 80% reported spreading rumors, and nearly 75% reported unpleasant teasing. At the same time, less than 3.5% of bullied students told teachers about being bullied and less than 1.5% reported this behavior to an administrator.

Bullying is a serious problem among secondary school students (Harris, Petrie & Willoughby, 2002). In fact, it has been suggested that the perpetrators of instances like the tragedy of Columbine were responding to frustration from being bullied over long periods of time (Lindsey, 2001). Relatedly, the National Threat Assessment Center linked the anti-social behavior of bullying to violent deaths on many occasions (Ballard, Argus, & Remley, 1999; Boatwright et al., 1998; Olweus, 1996). At the same time, anywhere from 20% (Olweus, 1997) to 75% (Kass, 1999) of the student population is being affected by bullying at school. Although bullying has been documented as a problem around the world (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996), the extent of the problem for ninth grade Hispanic students has not been identified. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore incidences of bullying that occur within the ninth-grade Hispanic community in Texas.

Bullying Defined

Smith and Brain (2000) defined bullying as aggressive behavior normally characterized by repetition and imbalance of power. It may be considered as normative in many group settings, but socially unacceptable within the ethos of a democratic society. Olweus (1996) and Rigby (1996) further defined bullying as when a student is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. Bullying occurs as direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing. Sometimes bullying behaviors are indirect, causing students to be socially isolated by intentional isolation or having rumors spread about them.

Pellegrini and Bartini (2000) suggested that aggression in the form of bullying was a strategy used by “low ranking individuals” when they entered a new social structure, such as moving from elementary school to middle school (p. 718). Crick and Werner (1998) concurred and declared that youngsters making the transition to adolescence actually increased their use and endorsement of bullying behaviors. Olweus (1996) estimated that some 9% of the students in grades 1 through 9 were fairly regular victims of bullying and that 6-7% engaged in bullying others on a regular basis.

Multicultural Perspective

According to U.S. Census (Bureau of the Census, 1998), it has been estimated that Hispanics will be the largest minority group in the United States by the year 2005 and will reach a population of 96 million by the year 2050. Likewise, the Texas Population Estimates and Projections Program (TAMU, 1996) predicted that the Texas Hispanic population will more than triple by the year 2030. Relatedly, Texas total enrollment in public schools increased by 62,902 students from 1997 to 1998. Hispanic students accounted for 69.1% of this growth (Texas State Board for Career and Technology Education, 1998).

Sue and Sue (1999) expressed concern that educationally, Hispanic Americans have not fared well in the public schools. Hispanic students experienced a very high dropout rate, in fact, one third dropped
out before completing high school. This was more than double the rate of the African American students and 3 times higher than the rate for white students. Gersten and Woodward (1994) maintained that only 10% of children of migrant workers completed school. Twenty-five percent of Hispanic eighth-graders repeated one grade, and over 15% have been retained two or more times in their school careers.

**Crossing Cultures**

Based on the notion that schools are the transmitters of culture (Spindler, 1955), the development of academic competence is seen as related to academic socialization, instruction, the schooling enterprise, and student learning (Erickson, 1986; & Treuba, 1987). Ethnographic studies by Erickson (1986) reported a significant relationship between cultural congruency in instruction and children’s control of academic literacy (Treuba, 1987). From this perspective, schooling is not only about cognitive development and the acquisition of knowledge; it is also a process of socialization (Spindler, 1955). Imbedded in this perspective is the understanding that children’s development and learning are best understood as the interaction of linguistic, socio-cultural, and cognitive knowledge and experiences (Treuba, 1987), therefore making bullying a very powerful social issue.

**Bullying Effects**

Bullying has been documented in many settings (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Borg, 1999). For example, in a mid-sized school, bullying occurs once every seven minutes (Pepler, 1997, p.1). Yet, bullying remains for the most part unacknowledged, underreported, and minimized by schools. Generally, bullies are older or the same age as their victims. Borg (1999) found that a boy or a group of boys has bullied most victims. Approximately three times as many bullied students found school difficult and reported being in trouble when compared to their peers. More than twice as many bullied students felt afraid at school than did their peers. Bullies were often aggressive toward adults, both teachers and parents. Generally, bullies have a more positive attitude toward violence than students in general.

Olweus (1996) estimated that some 9% of the students in grades 1 through 9 are fairly regular victims of bullying and that 6-7% have engaged in bullying others on a regular basis. Kass (1999) reported that 75% of students were bullied, victimized, or both bullied and victimized during the 1998-99 school year. More than 160,000 students skip school every day because they fear bullies. As many as 80% of middle school students engage in bullying behaviors. More than one-third of the respondents reportedly experienced bullying and about one-fifth reported bullying others. Both victims and bullies indicated that the two most popular places where bullying happened were on the playground and in the classroom. Not only have bullies and their victims suffered, but those who have witnessed the various acts of bullying and have done nothing about it, also have suffered (Hazler, 1996). Additionally, bullying often results in life-long behavior problems that can lead to depression, dysfunctional relationships, imprisonment, and, even, suicide (Harris & Petrie, 2003).

**The Study**

**Research Questions**

The primary research question explored how ninth-grade Texas Hispanic students perceived bullying at school. This question was sub-divided into the following: 1) What was the incidence of different kinds of bullying, where did it happen on campus, and what was the perceived hurtfulness of the behavior? 2) Which students were being bullied, how were they bullied and how hurtful did they perceive bullying to be? 3) Who was doing the bullying on campus? 4) Whom did students tell, what happened after they told, and why did they or why did they not report bullying?

**Sample**

Ninth grade students were surveyed in 7 schools in Texas during their ninth-grade English I class. Two of the schools were urban, two were suburban, and three were rural. A total population of 2100 students was surveyed. The Hispanic sample was extracted from that population leaving a sample of 202 Hispanic ninth-grade students. All students were in the ninth-grade and were self-declared to be Hispanic. Students ranged in age from 14-18 years of age with 45% of the students 15 years of age. Fifty two percent of the sample was female and 48% were male.

**Data Collection**

The Harris/Petrie Bullying Survey (2000) was the instrument used in this study. The survey was piloted among high school students in a 5-A high school in East Texas. A panel of experts evaluated the survey after pilot testing and revisions were made. The reliability of the instrument was measured by the Spearman-Brown split half at .7806 for the equals and .7807 for the unequals. Using Bubble
Publishing of Scanning Dynamics Inc. for scanning surveys further enhanced the validity and reliability. The survey was divided into five sections: acts of bullying (12 Questions), frequency and location of bullying in the school (14 Questions), how the student felt about being bullied (10 Questions), questions about the bully (5 Questions), and reactions of the students to bullying (9 Questions).

The data collection followed the design of Gay and Airasian (2000) for cross-sectional survey self-report research. Signed letters were received from the principals giving permission to conduct the study in their school and informed consent forms were obtained from parents. Data Analysis

Data were entered directly into SPSS 11.1 from the scanning without human data entry. Data analyses were descriptive.

**Results**

**Acts of Bullying**

The students were questioned about how often they had noticed several types of bullying going on at their school or school related events within the past year. The largest response for each question fell within the category “sometimes.” However, when categories “sometimes,” “often” and “all the time” were summed, the types of bullying that occurred the most were: 1) hurtful name calling (85.6%), 2) spreading rumors (80.1%), 3) teasing unpleasantly (74.8%), 4) stealing (67.8%), and, 5) leaving others out on purpose (66.3%).

Table 1 reports how hurtful students considered the various forms of bullying. When frequencies of “somewhat,” “hurtful,” and “very hurtful” were summed, Hispanic ninth graders considered name calling (80.2%), teasing (77.2%) and threats (76.7%) as most hurtful. They were least bothered by being “left out on purpose” (65.8%). When just considering the category of “very hurtful” students reported that “spreading rumors” was the most hurtful, followed by threats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teasing</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Threats</th>
<th>Hit/Kicked</th>
<th>Things</th>
<th>Left-out</th>
<th>Rumors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just a little</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>9.</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurtful</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Hurtful</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N=202)

When asked how often within the last year, students had been bullied by another student or group of students, the majority (55%) indicated that they had never been bullied, while 20.8% indicated that they had been bullied at least once a month, and 11.4% said they had been bullied either daily (5%) or more than once a week (6.4%). However, self-report scores regarding being a victim are often suspect, as Rigby (1996) indicated that students are often more likely to report of being aware of others being bullied, than they are to report that they are bullied.

**Frequency and Location**

When asked where bullying occurred in their school students reported classrooms (at least “often” 60.7%), hallways (at least “often” 65.4%) as the most common locations. “On the way to school” and “on the way home from school” were the least likely locations for bullying to occur with 38% saying they were “never” bullied going to school and 31% indicating they were never bullied “on the way home from school.”

Over one fifth of the students responded they were bullied at least once a week, with 5% indicating they were bullied daily. Twenty one percent of the students indicated they had been bullied at least once in the last year.

**The Bully**

Males were twice as likely to bully as females, although almost half of the students surveyed indicated they had observed both male and female bullies. The age and grade level of the bully were usually the same as or older than the one being bullied. The ethnicity of the bully of Hispanic ninth-grade students was primarily Hispanic or African American.

**How the Student Felt about Being Bullied**
Over 20% of the students admitted to feeling at least “not very safe” while at school. In fact, 39% were concerned about their safety at school. An even more disconcerting finding was that 47% of the students indicated they had thoughts of retaliation. Ten percent admitted to thinking about retaliation “all the time.” While nearly 21% of students admitted to “sometimes” having thoughts of retaliation, 7% felt this way “often.”

Reactions of the Students to Bullying

Seventeen percent of students told their friends about being bullied at school. Twenty two percent told their families about being bullied at school. Only one and a half percent (1.5%) told administrators and only 3.5% told teachers about being bullied at school. In fact, 80% of the students thought teachers and administrators were not interested in stopping bullying. Twenty five percent of students thought they could handle the bullying themselves. Forty percent would like to talk about the problem of bullying with someone. However, after telling someone about their bullying experiences only 19.3% reported that they “felt better,” and 3.5% indicated that “things got worse,” while 14.4% indicated that the “situation did not change.” When asked if they would tell if they saw someone being bullied, the students responded: “maybe” and “I’m not sure” (45%), “definitely” and “probably” (32.7%), “would not tell” (13.4%), and “It is not my place to tell on someone” (26%).

Conclusions/Discussion

This study suggests that bullying is an important issue for Texas schools to address. It is occurring often, yet teachers and administrators are sending mixed signals to the students about their interest in stopping bullying. Many of the 9th grade Hispanic students in this study do not feel safe at school because of bullying. In the lives of these students, bullying is part of their daily life. Although most of the bullying is confined to teasing and name-calling, such treatment is still considered hurtful and cruel. Victims are most likely to tell a friend, but they rarely tell a teacher or administrator. Yet, these students often have feelings that indicate a need for revenge, which can lead to dangerous consequences for the victim, the bully, and innocent bystanders.

Clearly this study suggests to educators that bullying needs to be addressed within the schools. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

• Faculty need to be involved in training to become more comfortable talking about bullying with students.
• The perception that principals and teachers are not interested in bullying needs to be changed to one of caring about students’ well-being at school regarding bullying.
• Students need to be provided with strategies that help them respond when they are being bullied, as well, as strategies that help them respond when they see others being bullied.
• Supervision needs to be increased in areas where bullying is likely to happen more often.
• Bullying is a serious problem in schools throughout the world (Olweus, 1996; Rigby, 1996), yet, awareness of the problem is the first step in reducing bullying. All adolescents should be able to focus on academics when in school, but bullying behaviors are a barrier to learning. This study indicates that bullying is a problem among 9th grade Hispanic students in Texas and must be addressed by the schools.
References


Texas A&M University System (Feb 1996). *Projections of the population of Texas and counties in Texas by age, sex and race for 1990-2003*. College Station, TX: Texas State Data Center.
