THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BULLYING INVOLVEMENT AND THE SELF-CONCEPT AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN TURKEY

Aynur Oksal  Hülya Kartal*  Asude Bilgin

Uludag University Faculty of Education Elementary Department

Bursa / Turkey

ABSTRACT

Bullying is a growing and significant problem in schools worldwide. Involvement in bullying of any form can have long-term effects on those involved, including both bullies and victims. The present study aims to provide important insight into the nature of bullying in Turkish elementary schools by examining the relationship between types of bullying involvement (victim, bully, bully/victim, neither bullies nor victims) and students’ school achievement and self-concept. Participants were 259 girls (50.8%) and 251 boys (49.2%), aged 10-15 years (M = 11.62, SD = 1.27), who came from a public elementary school located in the West Anatolian region of Turkey. Results revealed significant overall differences in self-concept between the different types of bullying involvement.

Key words: Bullying, self-concept, school achievement, elementary school

1. Introduction

Bullying is a growing and significant problem in schools worldwide (Smith et al., 1999). It is defined as physical, psychological, verbal and/or social behavior that is repeated, intentional and aggressive. Bullying involves an imbalance of power. Conflicts or fights between equals are not defined as bullying. A bullying victim feels afraid and anxious about going to school, and this feeling can start as early as kindergarten. Bullying of any form is a type of group aggression and can have long-term effects on those involved, including both bullies and victims.

In general, children who are involved in bullying are categorized as victims, bullies, bully/victims or neither bullies nor victims (Salmivalli, 1998). Olweus’s (1993) original research found that 6% of students were bullies, 9% were victims, 1.6% were bully-victims, and approximately 83% were neither bullies nor victims. Nansel et al. (2001) conducted a study of 15686 students in grades 6-10. The results, when compared with Olweus’s, showed a significant increase in the numbers of bullies and bully-victims, with only a slight change in the percentage of victims. Nansel et al. (2001) found that 13% of students were bullies, 10.6% were victims, 6.3% were bully-victims, and approximately 70% were bystanders.
Instead of approaching bullying as a phenomenon that can be explained and defined by one component (e.g., aggression), researchers have started to consider bullying as a complex phenomenon that emerges from interactions among a variety of social, physical and subjective forces such as gender, sexuality, race, class, teachers, school principals, parents, classroom culture, children’s multimedia experiences and social norms (Schott & Søndergaard, 2013).

Current research on school bullying in several countries on multiple continents indicates that the phenomenon is not limited to any specific country or culture, but it appears to be universally human (As cited in Björkqvist, 2001). Estimates indicate that at least 1 in 6 students is bullied on a weekly basis at school (Rigby & Slee, 1999). Similar rates have been found in schools in Canada, Scandinavia, Ireland and England (Smith et al., 1999). Findings from the 2009 U.S. National Crime Victimization Survey indicated that approximately 3.9 percent of students aged 12 through 18 were the victims of a crime at school. A larger percentage of males were victims of a crime at school (4.6 percent) than were females (3.2 percent). Another study reported that 79.6% of Turkish elementary school students were bullied during the prior month. The types of bullying that students experienced most often were found to be verbal and physical bullying (Kartal, 2009). In 2009 Wang, Iannotti and Nansel published the most comprehensive bullying statistics study to date. Their research was based on data obtained from the U.S. Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) 2005 Survey from 7,182 students from grades 6-10 and examined four types of bullying: physical, verbal, relational, and cyber. The survey’s findings showed that 53.6% of students reported verbal bullying (name calling, teasing, etc.), 20.8% of students reported involvement in physical bullying (being pushed, hit, kicked, etc.), 51.4 percent reported relational bullying (social isolation, spreading rumors, etc.), and 13.6% of students claimed involvement in cyber bullying. That study also found that whether a student was a bully, victim, or bully/victim depended on a number of factors, such as the following:

Boys were more likely than girls to be involved in physical bullying (as bullies, victims, or bully-victims) and verbal bullying (as bully-victims), but were less likely to be involved in relational forms of bullying (as victims or bully-victims). Boys were more likely to be cyber bullies, whereas girls were more likely to be cyber victims.

Parental support was negatively associated with involvement in bullying across all forms of bullying (physical, verbal, relational and cyber bullying).

Physical, verbal and relational bullying were related to students’ number of friends, but cyber bullying was not related to this variable. Students with more friends were more likely to be bullies but were less likely to be victims and bully-victims.

Bullying can generate very serious consequences. A compromised self-concept of the victim is one such result. The term self-concept is a general term used to refer to how an individual perceives him/herself. Baumeister (1999) defined self-concept as "the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is". Carl Rogers (1959) suggested that self-concept has three different components (as cited in Baumeister, 1999):

“The view you have of yourself (Self-image)
How much value you place on yourself (Self-esteem or self-worth)
What you wish you were really like (Ideal self)"
It is possible to explain the link between bullying, self-concept and school achievement using a social stressor model. This model supposes that emotional distress in peer relationships competes with cognitive processing and achievement (Meyer, 2003). Laboratory experiments on animal models suggest that social stress may result in a wide variety of severe symptoms. For example, Koolhaas et al. (1999) indicated that the long-term effects of social defeat in male rats seemed very similar to depression in humans. In a similar finding, Blanchard et al. (1985) found that male rats living with aggressive males showed a number of symptoms that are typical of depression (As cited in Björkqvist, 2001).

Bjorkqvist et al. (1994) reported that bullying victims feel depressed, have poor self-esteem, and feel they are ineffective, unintelligent, unattractive, and academically unsuccessful. Olweus (1993) found high levels of anxiety among victims. Hawker and Boulton (2000) reviewed the literature and found that male and female victims typically show the following characteristics: “loneliness, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, submissiveness, social withdrawal, and unpopularity among peer”. Several studies have revealed that victims tend to have a more negative self-concept than other children (Olweus, 1978, Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Houbre et al. 2006; Houbre, Tarquinio, & Lanfranchi, 2010). Houbre, Tarquinio and Lanfranchi (2010) showed that lower self-concept is related to being bullied. Egan and Perry (1998) revealed that low self-concept led to additional victimization over time.

A negative self-concept in academic and social skills appears to be the most important cause of victimization, but, at the same time, bullying also seems to lower self-concept. In other words, bullying may increase the self-concept of bullies, but being bullied decreases the self-concept of victims. Thus, a negative self-concept and victimization reinforce one another. Juvonen and Graham (2004) state, “bullies perceive themselves in a positive light” (p.233).

Research indicates that peers find bully/victims least popular, and bully/victims have been found to have more behavior problems than other students (Wolke & Stanford, 1999; Woods & Wolke, 2004). Bully/victims have the most negative self-concepts of any student type in almost every aspect of self-concept (Houbre et al., 2006).

In comparison with victims and bully/victims, bullies compose the group of students who seem to have the least problems with their self-concept (Houbre et al., 2006). However, some studies have shown that bullies are popular in their peer group, but not outside this group (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1993, in Houbre et al., 2006).

To summarize what is known about bullying and self-esteem to date: a- Most bullies have at least average self-esteem. b- Pure victims and bully-victims suffer from low self-esteem and have serious psychosocial problems as a result of bullying. c- Neither bullies nor victims generally have high self-esteem (Allen, 2006).

Nakamoto and Schwartz (2009) analyzed 33 recent studies and concluded that bullied students generally have lower grades on standardized achievement tests (as cited in Juvonen, Wang & Espinoza, 2011). Although a large amount of research on this issue has been performed, only a few studies have examined the relationship between victimization and school achievement in elementary school through the years. Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) reported that victimization caused school adjustment problems including academic achievement problems in kindergarten. Ladd, Kochenderfer, and Coleman (1997) showed that kindergartners who were victimized in the fall term reported higher school anxiety in the spring term. Schwartz et al. (2005) found a relationship among peer victimization, academic difficulties and depression. They showed that increased bullying is related to lower achievement scores and grade point averages. Juvonen et al. (2003) conducted a longitudinal study with 2300 students, and the results showed that high-level peer victimization is
consistently related to academic disengagement and poor grades across the 3 years of middle school. The most-victimized students had lower grades than their peers. These findings seem to support the social stressor model, which suggests that bullying affects the adaptive functioning of victims.

The present study aims to provide important insight into the nature of bullying in Turkish elementary schools by examining the relationship between the types of involvement in bullying (i.e. victim, bully, bully/victim, neither bully nor victim) and students’ academic performance and self-concept. Our hypothesis is based on the previously discussed research: Turkish elementary school students’ self-esteem as measured by the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale and their academic performance as measured by grade point average will differ according to the types of involvement in bullying (i.e. victim, bully, bully/victim, neither bully nor victim), as suggested by Fekkes et al. (2005).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 259 girls (50.8%) and 251 boys (49.2%), aged 10-15 years (M = 11.62, SD = 1.27), who came from a public elementary school located in the West Anatolian region of Turkey. During the research, there were 563 students in total who actively attended the school, and 510 of these students completed the questionnaires. Of these, 23.1% were neither bullies nor victims, 44.5% were victims, 2.7% were bullies, and 29.6% were bully/victims.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale

This scale, composed of 80 items (40 positive and 40 negative), was developed by Piers-Harris (1964). Examination of the scale’s validity and reliability was conducted among students in Turkey spanning a wide age range, from primary school to university (Oner, 1994). The scale contains 80 descriptive items and has sub-scales of happiness, physical appearance, anxiety, popularity, behavior and adjustment, and intellectual and educational situation. Participants select a yes or no response. Examples of the items include: I am clever; I am lucky; I am always sad; I am always happy; and I feel shy. A score of 0 is assigned to each positive item answered “no” and to each negative item answered “yes.” Total scores on the scale can be between 0 and 80. A high score implies positive self-concept, whereas a low score implies negative self-concept. In this study, a total self-concept score was used to assess each participant’s overall self-concept. A Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .89 for total self-concept was reported for this sample.

In the present study, students were asked to rate six bullying behaviors on a five-point scale (never, less than 1 time per week, 1 time per week, 2-4 times per week and 5 or more times per week). A student was considered to be a victim if he or she reported being bullied ‘a few times a month’ or more frequently. A student was considered to be a bully if he or she reported active bullying ‘a few times a month’ or more frequently (Fekkes et al., 2005).

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaires were given to the students during regular class hours. They were asked to reply to the questions honestly as a part of a research study. The questionnaire was administered and supervised by the researcher because the students had questions and frequently needed explanations. The questionnaire administration was performed in the spring term of the 2010-2011 academic year. Grade point averages for the students were obtained from school administrators.
3. Results

To determine the relationship between the type of bullying involvement (i.e. victim, bully, bully/victim, viewer) and students’ self-concept and academic achievement, a one-way MANOVA was performed on the two dependent variables, self-concept and academic achievement. The independent variable was the type of involvement in bullying (i.e. victim, bully, bully/victim, viewer). An alpha level of 0.05 was used as the threshold for statistical significance. One-way MANOVA revealed statistically significant overall differences in self-concept between the types of involvement in bullying \([F(3, 506) = 8.211, p<.001]\). No significant difference was found between grade point average and the bullying involvement of the students.

To identify the source of the differences among the types of involvement in bullying related to self-concept, Scheffe’s post-hoc tests were conducted. These tests revealed that the main differences in self-concept were between students who were neither bully nor victim, bully-victim, and victim. Students who were identified as bullies (M=51.7), neither bullies nor victims (M= 51.3) and victims (M=48.9) reported more positive self-concept than bully-victims (M=45.3), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. School achievement and self-concept scores and univariate tests for different types of bullying involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Types of Bullying Involvement</th>
<th>0 (Neither bullies nor victims)</th>
<th>1 (Victims)</th>
<th>2 (Bullies)</th>
<th>3 (Bully/victims)</th>
<th>F(3,506)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School achievement</td>
<td>N=118</td>
<td>N=227</td>
<td>N=14</td>
<td>N=151</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>1.973</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-concept</td>
<td>M 51.3\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>48.9\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>45.3\textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td>8.211*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means with different subscripts differ at the .05 alpha level based on Scheffe’s post-hoc tests. No subscript indicates any significant difference.

*p<.01

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to elucidate the differences between the involvement of students in bullying (as bully, victim, bully/victim or neither bully nor victim) and students’ self-concept and school achievement. The study tested two hypotheses, which were based on the existing literature on bullying. The hypotheses were that students’ self-concept as measured by the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale and their academic performance as measured by grade point average would differ according to the type of bullying involvement (i.e. victim, bully, bully/victim, neither bullies nor victims) as suggested by Fekkes et al. (2005).

Hypothesis 1 was concerned with self-concept. It was expected that the mean self-concept scores of bullies’ would be higher than the scores of other students. The results of this study supported this hypothesis. The self-concept scores of the bullies (M= 51.7) were significantly higher than those of victims, bully/victims and neither bullies nor victims (p<.01). Houbre and
colleagues (2006) reported that bullies seem not to have any serious problem with their self-concept among others. Bullying may in fact serve to increase the self-concept of bullies (Parada et al., 2013).

The literature revealed that victims tend to have a more negative self-concept than other children (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Juvonen & Graham, 2004; Houbre et al., 2006; Lodge & Feldman, 2007; Olweus, 1984; Houbre, Tarquinio, & Lanfranchi, 2010). Being bullied decreases the self-concept of targets (Parada et al., 2013). The present study showed that victims (M=48.9) have a more negative self-concept than do bullies (M=51.7) and students who are neither bullies nor victims (M=51.3) but have more positive self-concept than bully/victims (M=45.3).

Consistent with previous studies, in the present study, students who were neither bullies nor victims (M= 51.3) and victims (M=48,9) reported better self-concepts than bully-victims (M=45,3). According to the literature, bully/victims have the most negative self-concepts and tend to have more behavior problems than other students (Wolke & Stanford, 1999; Woods & Wolke, 2004).

The development of a positive self-concept in childhood is the key to a positive self-concept during later stages of life. Self-concept is an important factor in the improvement of self-esteem. A positive self-concept can help to foster an “I can” attitude that leads children to think, create, explore, and be motivated to achieve. Houbre and colleagues (2006) also found that self-concept may determine children’s future social relationships. “A positive self-concept is one of the most valuable gifts a teacher can give a child. Although this takes time, the results of a positive self-concept are well worth the effort” (HighReach Learning, 2007).

Hypothesis 2 was concerned with the academic achievement of students. It was expected that there would be a significant relationship between the bullying involvement and grade point averages of the students. A literature review showed that bullied students generally have lower grades on standardized achievement tests (Nakamoto & Schwartz (2009). In the present study, this hypothesis was not supported. In many urban areas of Turkey, however, academic pressure is so intense that students may be focused on raising their grades despite having emotional problems. As Turkey is a developing country, Turkish families perceive education as a way to improve social status. Thus, parents in urban areas push their children to achieve high grades in school.

Although the present study provides data on the relationship between bullying involvement and the self-concept and school achievement of elementary school children in Turkey, further research is needed to determine the direction of causality. Houbre, Tarquinio and Lanfranchi (2010) asked whether a negative self-concept is a cause or a consequence of bullying. Schwartz, Farver, Chang, and Lee-Shin (2002) posited that academically challenged children tend to become easy targets of bullying. Thus, further research should explore whether low self-concept and/or poor academic achievement leads student to be involved in bullying or whether being victimized causes low self-esteem and/or poor grades in school.

It is very important to understand the relationship between student involvement in bullying, self-concept and school achievement. If this relationship is clarified, appropriate interventions can be designed to reduce bullying. In addition, longitudinal studies would be valuable to further our understanding of the nature and long-term consequences of bullying involvement.
References


