

Multiple perspectives on the targets and causes of school bullying

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Clarification of how individuals in different roles perceive the victims and causes of bullying is of great importance to educational research and practice. The present study aimed to investigate the opinions of individuals in different roles (bullies, victims, bystanders, educators) regarding the targets and causes of bullying and to identify differences among various perspectives. A total of 1558 participants from 77 secondary schools in Taiwan responded to the questionnaire, including 537 bystanders, 217 bullies, 213 victims, and 591 educators. Grounded-theory method was employed to analyse the qualitative data. A theoretical model addressing commonalities among the perspectives held by individuals in different roles suggested that at-risk targets, including provocative, vulnerable, and atypical students, had poor interpersonal relationships. The bullies selected their targets based on different motivations, which included having fun, releasing emotions, and achieving status or benefits. The research found differences between the perspectives of educators and those of student participants regarding the causes of school bullying with respect to blaming victims, the intentions of bullies, intolerance of diversity in peer cultures, and the influence of contextual factors. Increasing awareness and minimizing these differences may help efforts to prevent and intervene in bullying.

Keywords: school bullying; bullies; victims; causes; participant roles; bullying prevention; intervention

Introduction

School bullying, a pervasive international problem, has attracted the concern of the global research community. Researchers around the world have devoted attention to various issues related to bullying including intervention, anti-bullying policy, the measurement of school bullying and its connections to related variables (Chen, Liu, & Cheng, 2012; Cheng, Chen, Liu, & Chen, 2011; Reid, Monsen, & Rivers, 2004; Smith, Smith, Osborn, & Samara, 2008).

Bullying is an act of intentional aggression involving the selection of specific targets by bullies for specific reasons. Investigation of which students are most likely to be targeted by bullies will help in understanding the occurrence of bullying incidents and facilitate early intervention. Studies have shown that physical appearance (Magin, Adams, Heading, Pond, & Smith, 2008), looking weak or fat (Fox & Farrow, 2009), sexual orientation (Mooij, 2011), physical or mental impairments (Frisén, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008; Estell et al., 2009), speech and language problems (Savage, 2005), oddities (Terasahjo & Salmivalli, 2003), social isolation (Veenstra et al., 2007), and excessive obedience (Olweus, 1993) result in a higher

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risk of being bullied. It is possible that these students look and act differently from typical students, rendering it difficult for them to find acceptance or support from peers (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2008).

The aforementioned characteristics may put students at high risk of being bullied, but the act of bullying nevertheless has its own rationale and background. Studies have shown students initiate the act of bullying for various reasons, which include: establishing social status, obtaining material rewards, having fun, emotional release, obtaining a sense of security in school, conforming to group norms or group pressure, for revenge, and punishing deviants (Frisén et al., 2008; Lam & Liu, 2007; Sitsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009; Thornberg, 2010).

While vulnerable students confront aggressive students with specific motives, a bully–victim relationship may be established under certain conditions. Research has suggested that bullies choose victims who are not likely to be defended by peers so as to minimise loss of affection and support from significant others (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munniksmä, & Dijkstra, 2010). Furthermore, the probability of participation in a bully–victim relationship has been found to be higher when the bully is more dominant than the victim and when the victim is more vulnerable than the bully and more rejected by his or her classmates (Veenstra et al., 2007). This indicates that bullies, who wish to dominate, seek out weaker, isolated students to fill their needs and desires. Witnesses may precipitate or aggravate the bullying behaviour by laughing, watching, and encouraging the bullying from the sidelines (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). When bullying continues, these behaviours may be construed as unproblematic and justified among students (Terasahjo & Salmivalli, 2003).

Several studies examining targets and causes of school bullying were examined from the perspective of students (Frisén et al., 2008; Mooij, 2011; Terasahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2010). However, students were investigated without regard to roles that they occupied within the bullying dynamic. Some studies have examined bullying from a particular viewpoint or a participant's role in the bullying. For example, researchers have interviewed bullies to understand the process of becoming a bully (Burns, Maycock, & Cross, 2008; Lam & Liu, 2007), or they have interviewed victims to explore the process of becoming and being a victim of school bullying (Thornberg, Halldin, Bolmsjö, & Petersson, 2013). Such investigations provide a deeper understanding of the role of a particular participant in the bullying episode; however, the issue of whether individuals in different roles hold different views toward bullying victims and the causes of bullying requires further research. There is an absence of these data from previous studies.

Studies supporting the opinion that the views of participants in different roles differ have shown that bullies tend to blame the victims more than do other students, and bullies tend to believe that the bullying was due to the victims' own personality or behaviour (Hara, 2002). Bullies generally blame others, whereas victims usually place the blame on themselves (Morrison, 2006). Teachers have been shown to believe that bullying usually arises from the context in which the act occurs, including the socio-economic status of the students' families, the students' relationships with their parents, and the influence of the media and the internet (Sahin, 2010). Thus, teachers and individuals in different participant roles have traced the causes of bullying to different sources. However, studies in support of the opposite position have argued that individuals in different roles view the causes of bullying in more or less the same way. For example, most students and school administrators agree

that external appearance and behaviour (for example, staring, eye contact, and ways of speaking and dressing) are directly related to school bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). No consensus about whether educators and students in different roles hold different views about the victims and the causes of bullying has been established.

The clarification of how individuals in different roles perceive the victims and causes of bullying is of great importance to educational practice. It helps to identify what kinds of students are easily picked on, and to understand why bullies exert bullying behaviours to fulfill their own purposes. Educators can benefit from these results and attempt to narrow down perspective differences in different roles. Having an enhanced understanding of the perspectives of different roles and educators will inform interventions which aim to increase adult–student collaboration to prevent bullying. This study aimed to investigate the opinions of students in different roles (bullies, victims, bystanders), and of educators, regarding victims and causes of bullying and to identify similarities and differences in these views.

Method

Participants

The sample was selected from 13 counties in north, central, south, and east Taiwan. Five junior high schools (grades 7–9, age 13–15), three senior high schools (grades 10–12, age 16–18), and three vocational high schools (grades 10–12, age 16–18) from each county agreed to participate in this study. The researchers provided 21 copies of a qualitative questionnaire to each school. In each school, the questionnaires were allocated to five school administrators, three class tutors, and 13 students (three bullies, seven outsiders, and three victims).

A total of 1558 participants from 77 secondary schools responded to the questionnaire including 967 students (60.9% males and 39.1% females) aged 12–19 years [mean (M) = 15.35, standard deviation (SD) = 1.60] and 591 educators (60.0% males and 40.0% females) aged 24–64 years (M = 42.65, SD = 8.75). The student group consisted of 537 bystanders, 217 bullies, and 213 victims; the educator group consisted of 75 principals, 223 division directors, 71 section chiefs, and 222 class tutors.

Procedures

A one-hour preliminary meeting was held by the researchers in each of the 13 counties to review the project. Secondary school principals or their deputies in each county were invited to join this meeting. Following these schools' standard agreement policies, each principal was invited to convene a meeting with school staff and teachers to decide whether or not to participate in this study. After obtaining consent from these schools, questionnaires, survey instructions, and ballpoint pens were provided for each participant, and a stamped return envelope to a designated agent at each school.

Two types of questionnaires, the AB form for bullies and outsiders and the C form for victims, were designed for students.

The AB questionnaires, which asked students to respond from others' perspectives, were given to three bullies and seven outsiders, who were selected by each school. These students answered the questions at the same time and in the same

place to avoid a labelling effect. When collecting the questionnaires, the school representative checked box B on the bullies' questionnaires and box A on the uninvolved students' questionnaires. The C questionnaires, which asked students to respond from their own perspective, were given to three victims selected by each school. Victims answered the C questionnaire on a separate occasion to prevent their being viewed as informers.

Typical bullies and victims were purposefully identified on the basis of teacher records (episodes of classroom and playground bullying). Inviting staff or teachers to identify students with specific participant roles of bullying is common in previous studies (Cranham & Carroll, 2003; Timm & Eskell-Blokland, 2011). It helps to find appropriate informants who are viewed as typical bullies or victims.

Several statements on the front page of the questionnaire explained the purpose of the research, participants' rights, and contact information for inquiries about research questions. The principles of anonymity and confidentiality were explained prior to the survey to ensure that the interests of students, teachers, and schools would not be compromised. Students were free to participate or withdraw from the survey. Next, the school representative gave the questionnaires to students. Participants were encouraged to write anything they wanted without worrying about being punished. The questionnaire required 10–30 minutes to complete.

Questionnaires (T form) were given to teachers and administrators by the schools' representatives. This subsample was informed about the anonymity of the procedure and then answered the questions at their convenience and subsequently returned the questionnaires to the representative. All questionnaires were mailed to the researchers by school representatives.

Data collection

Open-ended questions, which have been used frequently in recent studies (Monks & Smith, 2006; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006; Vaillancourt et al., 2008), were asked in this study. The qualitative questionnaire in this study consists of 10 questions which involve definitions, targets, causes, locations, time, feelings, and intervention suggestions. Only two of the 10 questions which related to the purpose of this study were utilised and analysed. Educators, bullies, and outsiders were asked to write their responses to the following questions: "What kinds of students are likely to be the targets of bullying?" and "Why have these students been targeted by bullies?" Victims were asked to write their responses to the following question: "Why are you being targeted by bullies?" Participants were asked to provide anonymous answers and informed of the confidentiality of all data.

The completed questionnaires were transcribed verbatim by the researchers' part-time assistants, who had participated in a 30-minute training session. The transcripts were then proofread, filed, and coded by the research team. The coded transcripts facilitated the citation and annotation of the data. For example, the code P1-05-T003 includes the following information: P1 indicates coder no. 1, 05 is the school code, T indicates the participant's role (A: bystander, B: bully, C: victim, T: educator), and 003 indicates line 003 of the transcript.

Data analysis

Grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to analyse the qualitative data. This method provides detailed procedures for coding and

analysis of data, including open coding, axial coding and selective coding, which all help to unpack the black box of data analysis. This method was chosen for the following reasons: first, the grounded theory is a common data analysis method selected by other researchers in the field of school bullying (Cheng, Chen, Ho, & Cheng, 2011; Cranham & Carroll, 2003; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2011). Second, this method emphasises the connections among different coding categories, and this contributes to a comparison of the multiple perspectives on the targets and causes of school bullying. Third, this method emphasises the development of a process that identifies the context, actions, results, and their relationships, and which is appropriate for exploring how at-risk victims are targeted by potential bullies.

Each coder read the transcripts at least once before coding. During open coding, emerging concepts were coded and categorised through constant comparison. During axial coding, the researchers examined connections among conditions, actions, and consequences to construct a hypothetical framework and then correlated categories at the level of dimensions. Inconsistencies and exceptional cases were used to modify the theoretical framework. During selective coding, memos and the construction of narratives were used to integrate and refine the theoretical framework.

Throughout this process, the data were assessed with an open attitude. The characteristics of the grounded-theory method, such as constant comparison and memo writing, were the main skills employed in the data analysis (Cutcliffe, 2005; Locke, 2007; Wiener, 2007). When the stage of theoretical saturation was reached, the researchers stopped processing the data.

Research quality

Confidentiality and anonymity were particularly emphasised during the research. The participants would have opportunities to express themselves (Glesne, 1999) by responding to the questions about bullying.

Researchers' beliefs and values can affect the analysis of their data. Reflection helps to ensure rigorous and high-quality research (Lynch, 2000; Mruck & Mey, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Before analysing the data, the researchers made note of their own prior knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions about school bullying. They were constantly mindful to be alert to prevent the intrusion of their own concepts into the data analysis. Questions were asked, such as whether the research closely followed the procedure of the grounded-theory method or whether the analyses reflected the content of the source material.

The personal views of a single coder working in isolation may result in the neglect of important meanings contained in the data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Collaborative coding was employed in this study to avoid previous problems. The collaborative coding team consisted of three researchers and a school counsellor. All four members had learned about coding methods in qualitative research courses and had received a three-hour training course prior to processing the data. When members finished coding their allocation of the questionnaires, they sought to reach a consensus on the coding units. The intercoder reliability of this study was 0.73 (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Results

At-risk victims

Analysis showed that three types of students were most likely to be targeted by potential bullies: provocative students, vulnerable students, and students whose behaviour was considered “atypical”.

Provocative students

These students trigger others’ anger through inappropriate speech or misbehaviour. Inappropriate speech included gossiping about others, speaking ill of others, talking “trash” frequently, shouting and cursing, and deliberately disagreeing with others. Inappropriate behaviour included staring at others, taunting others, engaging in unruly actions, not apologising after mistakes, disrupting classes, provoking others, frequently engaging in mischief, showing conceit and contempt towards others, being bossy towards others, and showing off. This type of students can be analogised as bully/victims (Olweus, 1993) because of their irritating behaviours and victimisation.

Even when other people are already angry, they still carry on. (P1-06-A212)

People who have no sense of shame, who are selfish, or who do not know how to keep their hands to themselves (taking other people’s stuff, touchy-feely with other people), who do not listen to others and have a bad temper, who are show-offs, who have a bad mouth, who like to disagree with everyone. (P2-05-T132)

Students who are very proud; students who like to provoke and play pranks on others. (P3-04-B032)

Vulnerable students

This group includes students with physical and/or mental disabilities, (for example hyperactivity, learning disabilities, autism, or movement problems; or those who are enrolled in special education), those who are shy or introverted (for example overly obedient, quiet, or fearful), and students with a stigmatised appearance (for example short, tall, sickly, overweight, or clumsy). Such disadvantages may lead to a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993) because these students are at a disadvantage in terms of their ability to communicate, respond, learn, or meet physical norms. They appear to be easy targets for abuse and are therefore frequently singled out by bullies.

Students who say “yes” to everyone, who are very meek, who do not know how to express themselves. (P2-24-B002)

Students who are physically or mentally challenged often fall into victims in bullying. (P3-03-A177)

Students who look very small or very large and behave like cowards are often bullied. (P1-08-T111)

Those who have different appearances, small in stature, and disabilities. Students with chicken-hearted or bad characteristics. (P1-10-A010)

“Atypical” students

“Atypical” students, whose background or behaviour sets them apart from others, are also at high risk of being bullied. This group includes students who have exceptionally good or bad grades, perform especially well or poorly, come from certain family backgrounds, have bad hygiene, have a stigmatised sexual orientation, do not conform to traditional sex roles, or who are transfer students, returning students, students from aboriginal cultures, and so on. It is important to note that targets are not limited to students with negative attributes: students who have pronounced positive qualities (such as exceedingly high grades, handsomeness or beauty, and wealth) may also fall victim to bullying. Indeed, students may be bullied because they are different in any way.

Kids who are the “odd ones out” and “uncommon” in groups, like a kid who has a highly developed sense of justice in a class full of defiant students. (P3-11-T072)

Students who are special, no matter whether it is with regard to grades, appearance, character, or behaviour. (P1-09-A033)

Aboriginal students, children of new immigrants, children with a single parent, children being raised by grandparents, children without parents. (P2-08-B015)

Students with a corpulent shape or pockmarks, those who have impulsive personalities, students who came from wealthy or poor family, and those who have excellent or bad academic performances. (P1-16-A072)

Causes of bullying

The causes of acts of bullying can be divided into emotional and instrumental. Emotional causes imply that aggressive acts or pranks are a means for entertainment, or that bullies aim to vent their dislike of victimised high-risk students through acts of aggression. Instrumental causes include those in which the bully attacks recalcitrant victims to obtain possessions, power, or status.

Some students bully others just for fun, or to show off their temper. Most of all, they are too bored and are trying to find something to do. (P2-08-A029)

If someone tells him to do something and he objects, I beat him up. Sometimes it is just because I feel it is fun or because I am in a bad mood. (P1-21-B049)

When bullies are in bad mood, they will vent their anger on victims. Victims are so funny when they get worked up. Bullies try to tease victims and wait for the fireworks. (P2-03-T073)

Someone will bully others for fun, for money, or to show one’s power and prestige. (P1-33-A030)

Students at high risk for being bullied often have poor relationships with other students. These may have been caused by ill-advised words or actions that elicit the dislike of others, by not fitting in with other students due to peculiarities or eccentricities, or by misunderstandings that result from poor communication skills. After students are bullied, poor relationships result in a lack of support or intervention

from others, and potential bullies may misread this passivity as a sign that other students tolerate or even condone acts of violence.

Victimised students usually do not have friends in school, and they do not have many interactions with others. (P1-37-A068)

Bad personal relationships, problems in communicating with others, or people who keep to themselves. (P3-08-B034)

Introverted, lack of self-pride, difficulties in mixing in with the group, or difficulty in keeping up with others. (P2-03-C059)

Victims cannot get instant assistance or they have nobody to turn to. (P1-23-T022)

People who like to tease around get struck back, show-offs whom everyone hates; if these people get bullied everyone will most likely tolerate it. (P2-03-T072)

Because those at high risk of bullying have poor relationships with others, other students form negative opinions of them due to a lack of understanding or the development of misunderstandings. When potential bullies see high-risk students as easily harassed or as sticking out, they may engage in attacks or pranks for emotional or instrumental purposes. After the initial aggressive behaviour, victimised high-risk students may be unable to strike back due to a power imbalance and may not inform others due to fear of retaliation. Bullies may find enjoyment in seeing their victims' reactions. These factors can result in further aggression, facilitating a sustained series of bullying acts.

Because they do not have many friends, other classmates do not like them and will tease and taunt them even further. (P1-18-A069)

All of us do not understand him and think he's a freak. We started it off as a joke, and he did not really object; but we gradually grew more and more intense, and it turned into bullying him. (P1-03-B008)

Other people do not like me. They think I am easily bossed around. They see how I reacted when I was bullied and decided to bully me again. (P1-05-C007)

Victims were isolated by other classmates. They did not tell the teacher immediately due to fear of being isolated or hit back. Or the teacher mishandled the situation, (P3-13-T052)

Different perspectives

Blaming victims

Bystanders, bullies, and even teachers tend to blame the victims, believing that acts of bullying were caused by the victims' provoking others through ill-advised words, lack of self-awareness of their speech and behaviour, or bullying acts against others. Teachers also claimed that victims often did not listen to others and silently endured the emotional reactions of others. In the first instance, victims had already been frequently informed of the potential consequences of their behaviours and chose not

to change but to continue as usual. In the second instance, victims just endured the bullying, holding their emotions in without telling anyone, thereby precluding help.

They may have angered others because of their behaviour, and they are the only ones to blame! (P1-09-A038)

Basically, people who pull for pity must have an attribute that everyone dislikes, or maybe it is because that person is too weak or too much of a jerk. (P2-10-B016)

Students who are bullied have done something to bring it upon themselves. Sometimes it is because they made a mistake, and others pointed it out to them and gave them one or two chances, but if they do not change even after recognising it, it may make others bully them in the future. (P1-25-T123)

If the victims do not speak out and ask for help when bullied, this will add fuel to the fire for aggressors. (P1-21-T085)

Purposes behind bullying

Bystanders and teachers believed that the act of bullying is aimed at establishing social status or procuring benefits, such as money, property, or the ability to dominate others; however, these goals were not mentioned by bullies or victims. Furthermore, victims often did not know what made them targets and were ignorant of the reasons behind bullying.

Students who bully others may want to benefit from it. (P1-28-A007)

Bullies want to display their power and control and wish to be treated as leaders among their peers. (P4-04-T216)

I do not know why; I just got bullied for no reason. (P1-02-C025)

Intolerance of diversity in peer cultures

With the exception of victims, all groups mentioned that intolerance of diversity in peer cultures may lead to those holding unpopular opinions or those with major differences from the group having difficulties in interpersonal bonding and encountering unfriendly or uncooperative attitudes; this may, in turn, lead to acts of bullying. This may explain why atypical students are high-risk targets for bullying.

If differences between peers are too large, there might be abuse. (P1-05-A050)

People who are disabled in some way and who cannot mingle with the group. (P1-07-B007)

Classmates who are not in sync with their peers, such as those with a lack of self-confidence, stubbornness, and those who are tattlers. (P2-05-T005)

Contextual factors

Teachers provided more detailed accounts than did students, especially with regard to the contexts in which bullying arises, such as tolerance and apathy on the part of bystanders, lack or failure of interventions initiated by teachers, or dysfunctional

family or school systems. In other words, acts of bullying do not arise solely out of the relationships between bullies and victims, according to the perspectives of teachers; instead, they believe that wider contextual factors (for example family and school systems) should also be considered when examining the reasons behind bullying.

Peer groups take an apathetic and tolerant stance (other people will just look on while evildoers continue to misbehave). (P1-17-T276)

Environmental factors (out-of-the-way corners on campus) or because teachers did not get involved in time. (P1-18-T015)

Family education: does not instill the correct attitudes in victimised students. School education: does not supplement what family education cannot give, too few teachers to provide comprehensive care. (P2-13-T011)

Theoretical model

Provocative, vulnerable, and atypical students are at risk of being bullied, and all of these groups suffer from poor relationships with others. Potential bullies will begin to attack or pull pranks because they dislike their targets, for entertainment, to achieve elevated social status or benefits, or due to their intolerance of diversity in peer cultures. Victims cannot fight back because of an imbalance in power, which, when coupled with a fear of retaliation for speaking to others about being bullied, allows the bullies to assume that their victims are easy targets of abuse and to continue their attacks. In other words, when bullies are given an inch, they will take a yard.

Bullies, bystanders, and teachers tend to blame the victims, arguing that they need to be held responsible for their own mistakes in words and deeds or for the lack of courage reflected in not speaking out. However, teachers also considered wider contextual factors when analysing the reasons behind bullying, such as the apathy of bystanders, the lack or failure of interventions by teachers, dysfunctional families, and problematic school environments. These potential contributors to school bullying are depicted in Figure 1.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the opinions of secondary school students and educators regarding the victims and causes of bullying, and further, to identify differences in these views. Results showed that middle school students and educators share the opinion that provocative, vulnerable, and “atypical” students are high-risk targets for bullying. These results are consistent with previous findings (Olweus, 1993; Terasahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2008). In general, students who are provocative, are different, disadvantaged or who have poor relationships with their peers, are at greater risk of being targeted by potential bullies. This may be the result of intolerance towards diversity on the part of those who bully, or be due to lack of adherence to peer-group norms, on the part of the victims (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Thornberg, 2010). A crucial factor in the prevention of school bullying may involve changing the norms or attitudes held by student groups; this subject warrants further research. Educators could profitably also focus more

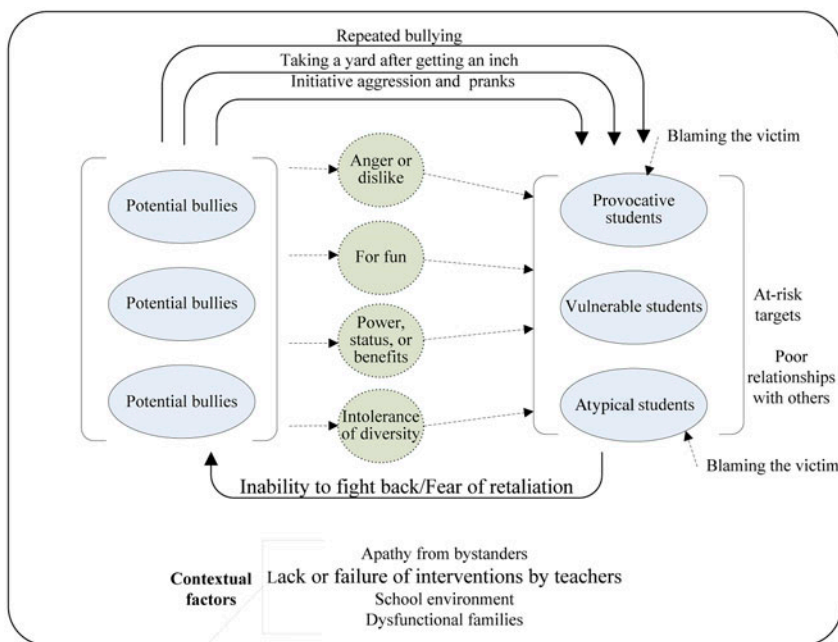


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

attention on students who have poor relationships with their peers, especially those who tend to perform provocatively, or demonstrate unusual behaviour, and those who are in some way vulnerable.

The present study found that bullies may initiate acts of bullying for varying reasons, including having fun, emotional release, intolerance of diversity in their peer culture, and achieving status or other benefits. Results are supported by previous findings (Cranham & Carroll, 2003; Frisé et al., 2008; Lam, & Liu, 2007; Sitsema et al., 2009; Thornberg, 2010). Therefore, bullying prevention and intervention should take into consideration the variety of possible motives for initiating the act. For example, anger-management courses (Rigby, 2002) may be ineffective for those who bully just for fun. The intentions of the bullies should be clarified when conducting programmes to prevent bullying, so that different intervention strategies can be employed in different situations.

Students and teachers may hold different opinions about the causes of bullying. The bullies, bystanders and educators tend to blame the victims, yet this is seldom the opinion of the victims. The evidence on this issue is inconsistent, as studies exist that both support (Gini, 2008; Hara, 2002) and oppose (Baldry, 2004) the view that students blame the victim. In this study, some bullies, bystanders and educators believed that the victims should take responsibility for provoking the bullies, and they also blamed victims for keeping silent when they have been bullied. Educators and students should be made aware that bullies may rationalise their bullying behaviour by blaming the victims, and they should also be aware that no excuse can justify bullying behaviours. In addition, victimised students need adults' or peers' help, even if they have been provocative. It is suggested that educators use group counselling to provide feedback for victims' personal development and

self-exploration to eliminate provocative behaviours. Moreover, those who are provocative may be bully/victims. They may tease and bully others, and also be teased and bullied by others. Educators can help bully/victims to raise their self-awareness regarding their teasing, bullying, or provocative behaviours, and thereby decrease, or preferably eliminate, these behaviours.

Secondly, all groups in the present study, with the exception of the victims, identified intolerance of diversity in peer cultures as a cause of bullying. This may be because students and teachers may hold some group norms and social expectations that the victims are unaware of, given their poor relationships with others. This finding supports the argument that victims are viewed as deviant students who do not behave as they should, and provides additional evidence to support the social misfit hypothesis (Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986). Victims need to develop their social skills so as to fit into peer groups, but other students also need to learn to respect diversity among their peers.

Third, bystanders and teachers believed that the act of bullying is aimed at the establishment of social status or the procurement of benefits, but these goals were not mentioned by bullies or victims, possibly because bullies hide their true intentions and victims were often unaware of the reasons behind the bullying. The results of the present study indicated that bullies are reluctant to reveal their motivation for bullying, whereas the bullies in the Lam and Liu (2007) study were willing to disclose their reasons for bullying others. This inconsistency may be the result of methodological differences. It may be that the short-answer format used in the present study was less likely to evoke self-revealing responses from bullies than the long interviews used by Lam and Liu (2007).

Additionally, results showed that teachers considered contextual factors. However, contextual factors were rarely addressed by students. This difference reveals that teachers interpret the causes of bullying as being on both the extrapersonal (contextual) and interpersonal levels (interactions among bullies, victims, and bystanders), whereas students focused on the interpersonal level.

These differences in perspective indicate that the views of individuals in all relevant roles should be considered when examining the causes of bullying, so as to arrive at a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, and one that can serve as a basis for comprehensive approaches aimed at combating and preventing school bullying. Increasing awareness and minimising differences may contribute to the efforts aimed at prevention and intervention with regard to bullying.

Those engaged in efforts to prevent or intervene in bullying can benefit from the theoretical model. First, the model suggests that at-risk victims have poor relationships with others. Helping these students to improve their interpersonal relationships may contribute to the prevention of bullying. Second, victims often do not reveal their situations because they fear retaliation. Adults can encourage victims to talk, provided they take the necessary steps to protect their safety. Students need to understand that telling others about their victimisation has to do with helping themselves, rather than with getting bullies into trouble. Third, a bullying incident needs to be stopped as soon as possible. Immediate intervention by adults or bystanders helps to break the vicious circle in which bullies may go on to “take a yard” after getting an initial “inch”. Such an approach also prevents the escalation of teasing into bullying, or into more serious bullying.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. First, using an anonymous questionnaire helps to collect a large amount of data, and to minimise the resistance of the participants, but this method does not allow the researcher to gain in-depth perspectives. Future studies should also utilise interviews to gain fuller descriptions. Second, perspectives on the targets and causes of school bullying may be rooted in their contexts. The researchers and practitioners should keep this possibility in mind. Future studies can explore this issue in order to validate whether other cultures have different perspectives regarding the various roles. The authors suggest that more studies should be conducted to contribute to a better understanding of the nature of school bullying.

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