The Culture of Bullying in Middle School

James D. Unnever Dewey G. Cornell

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to assess the nature and extent of student attitudes toward bullying. We investigated the consistency and prevalence of student attitudes across gender, race, socioeconomic status, and grade level. We also assessed whether students with positive attitudes toward peer aggression and students with higher trait anger were especially prone to support a normative structure that encourages bullying. Based on a data set including 6 middle schools and over 2,400 students, our results indicate that a culture of bullying is a pervasive phenomenon among middle school students and should be an important consideration in bullying prevention efforts.

KEYWORDS. Bullying, gender, race, aggression, middle school Most bully prevention programs include efforts to change the school cli

mate and counter prevailing attitudes that support bullying behavior (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & ShortCamilli, 1994; Olweus, 1993; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000). Presumably, a widespread, wholeschool intervention will restructure the school climate with the intent of reducing the opportunities and incentives for bullying (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1993). The purpose of this study was to assess the nature and extent of student attitudes regarding bullying behavior among middle school students. We investigated the consistency and prevalence of student attitudes across gender, race, socioeconomic status, and grade level in six middle schools. Moreover, we assessed whether students with positive attitudes toward peer aggression and students with higher trait anger were especially prone to support bullying behavior.

Bullying is a pervasive problem found in schools worldwide (Nansel et al.,

2001; Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1996; Olweus, 1993). Bullying is usually defined as aggressive behavior that is distinguished from fights or arguments between students of equal strength. Bullying can take the form of physical aggression, verbal abusiveness, or control of social interactions to harm or humiliate the victim (Olweus, 1993). Victims of bullying suffer serious consequences that can have lasting impact on their social and emotional adjustment (Olweus, 1993). A survey of 6,500 students found bully victimization rates to be twice as high among middle school students (12%) as among high school students (6%; Nolin et al., 1996).

DEFINING A CULTURE OF BULLYING

Wholeschool violence prevention programs contend that changing the social context of the school is necessary to reduce the prevalence of victimization (Astor et al., 2002). Researchers are currently in the process of defining the school climate that supports bullying behavior, verifying its existence, and understanding how it functions. Naylor and Cowie (1999) refer to the school climate that facilitates bullying behavior as the school ethos and Cowie and

Olafsson (2000) define it as a bullying culture. For the purposes of this paper, we refer to the school climate that supports bullying behavior as the culture of bullying.

Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler (1995) succinctly describe the basic components of the culture of bullying and how they facilitate bullying behavior. They argue that bullying behavior occurs within the wider system of the school and the aggression of bullies is inextricably linked to the passivity of victims in a context where adults are generally unaware of the extent of the problem, and other children are unsure about whether or how to get involved (Charach et al., 1995, p. 17). Salmivalli (1999) adds that bullying is a group phenomenon that is facilitated by students taking on different class roles including students who assist or reinforce the bully and students who are passive bystanders.

The work by Charach et al. (1995) and Salmivalli (1999) and others (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; OConnell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Pepler et al., 1993; Salmivalli, Karhunen, & Lagerspetz, 1996; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998) suggest that bullying occurs in a context where students hold a diversity of beliefs about bullying. This extant research indicates that some students have prosocial views, empathize with the victim, and, at times, will intervene to stop bullying behavior. However, it also indicates that a large percentage of students are uncertain as to how they feel about bullying behavior and tend to be passive bystanders. Furthermore, it indicates that a significant number of students support bullying behavior and may assist or reinforce the bully. A conclusion that can be drawn from the prior research is that schools rarely hold bullies accountable for their behavior.

In summary, a culture of bullying is a multidimensional phenomenon characterized by a normative set of shared beliefs that support or encourage bullying behavior (Smith & Brain, 2000). These beliefs result in behaviors that directly or inadvertently support bullying behavior (Olweus et al., 1999). Direct manifestations of the culture of bullying include students assisting and reinforcing the bully. An indirect manifestation includes students and teachers watching a student being bullied and failing to intervene. These manifestations result in bullies being rewarded, enabled, and empowered (Sutton & Smith, 1999).

EVIDENCE OF A CULTURE OF BULLYING

Researchers using a variety of different methodologies are beginning to uncover the basic contours of the culture of bullying. Cowie and Olafsson (2000) used the Olweus questionnaire and discovered that just 34% of male Australian high school students (n = 311) believed that their fellow classmates would intervene when someone is being bullied. They also found that the majority of students who were bullied failed to report their victimization to either teachers or anyone at home. Cowie and Olafsson attributed this recalcitrance to a fear of reprisals or an anxiety about appearing to be weak. They concluded, for this one all male high school in a disadvantaged area, the students responses indicated that violence, fear, and exploitation were normal parts of the pupils experiences at school (Cowie & Olafsson, 2000, p. 92).

Pepler et al. (1993), using the Olweus questionnaire, also found evidence of a set of beliefs among Canadian students that support bullying. They found that only 32% of the students (n = 211) in grades 3/4 to grade 8 reported that their peers frequently tried to stop bullying and 13% indicated that peers intervene at least occasionally. Pepler et al. noted that the majority of students reported that they personally would not try to help another student who is being bullied. They further found that only 25% of the students reported that they believed teachers almost always tried to stop bullying behavior. Additionally, Pepler et al. reported a potential social contagion effect: A third of the students indicated that they could join in on the bullying of a student they did not like. They concluded by arguing that bullying is a complex problem embedded in a number of systems that may inadvertently model, reinforce and maintain bullying interactions (Pepler et al., 1993, p. 91).

Aspects of the culture of bullying have also been uncovered using methodologies other than the survey. OConnell et al. (1999) unobtrusively video taped Canadian students in naturalistic settings and recorded targeted students who wore a small remote microphone and pocketsized transmitter. They focused on bully episodes that contained a peer group of two or more classmates. The sample included two schools and a subsample of approximately 120 students. OConnell et al. found that most often the peer group consisted of both boys and girls, and that peer groups actively reinforced the bullying behavior 20.7% of the time. Additionally, they established that peers passively reinforced the bully the majority of the time by watching without joining in and that peers only intervened in a quarter of the episodes. Notably, OConnell et al. (1999) regressed three dependent variables, time spent modeling the bully, passively reinforcing the bully, and supporting the victim on school (A or B), peer gender, and grade level. They found that older boys were more likely to join in with the bully; none of the variables was related to passive reinforcement; and young and older girls were more likely to support the victim than older boys.

Using the same data collection strategies outlined above, Craig et al. (2000)

were able to capture the culture of bullying as it manifested itself across playground and classroom settings. While limited in their sample size (n = 34), they found that peers were present as observers during most bullying episodes

regardless of the setting. However, they rarely intervened. Also noteworthy, Craig et al. found teachers seldom intervened to stop bullying. They observed that teachers only intervened 18% of the time to stop a bullying episode in the classroom and 15% of the time in the playground. Craig et al. (2000) argued that these low levels of intervention convey a tacit message that there is little discouragement and minimal risk in bullying; the lack of intervention inadvertently teaches students that bullying is acceptable and appropriate in certain settings.

Research by Salmivalli (1999), Salmivalli et al. (1996), and Salmivalli et al. (1998) considered the behavior of students other than the bully and victim. This research analyzed data representing 23 sixth grade classes from 11 Finnish schools (n = 573) collected through a questionnaire and sociometric procedures. It found that there are five basic patterns of behavior surrounding the bullyvictim dyad. These patterns include students who report that they eagerly join in the bullying, assistants, and students who actively watch the bully event by inciting or encouraging the bully, reinforcers. There are also students who comfort the victim and try to stop the student from being bullied, defenders. The largest percentage of students Salmivalli classifies as outsiders. These students do not take sides; they passively watch the bullying event. Salmivalli (1999) concluded that most students act in ways that enable the bully despite reporting that they are against bullying.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

IN STUDENT SUPPORT FOR BULLYING

We recognize that there will be important individual differences among students in their support or tolerance for bullying (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998) that may be distinguished from cultural or social influences. In order to distinguish cultural influences on bullying from individual, personality influences, and to examine how cultural influences might interact with individual differences, we selected cognitive and affective factors that are widely recognized in broader research on aggressive behavior. Prior research on cognitive influences on aggression indicates that aggressive youths believe that aggressive behavior is an effective way to solve problems and that hitting others may enhance their peer status (Bentley & Li, 1995; Cornell & Loper, 1998; Guerra, Eron, Huesmann, McConville & Cornell, 2001; Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986; Slaby & Guerra, 1988; Tolan & Van Acker, 1997). Therefore, we hypothesized that, cognitively, students who hold more aggressive attitudes, defined as attitudes that endorse the use of physical aggression in dealing with peers, would be more inclined to identify with the culture of bullying.