

Understanding the Perception of Bullying: A Study of High School Students' Discourse on Peer Aggression

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Abstract:

This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of bullying among high school students in the Philippines and inform the development of an effective anti-bullying program. Three focus groups were conducted with students in grades 11 and 12, with a total of 23 participants. The data collected

were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that verbal bullying was the most prevalent type of bullying experienced by the participants, followed by social and physical bullying. The students reported feeling anxious, helpless, and ashamed when they were bullied. They also shared that bullying occurs both inside and outside of the school, and it can happen in person and online. Students suggested several strategies to prevent bullying, including educating students on the effects of bullying, implementing consequences for bullies, and promoting kindness and respect in the school environment. The findings of this study have important implications for the development of effective anti-bullying programs in schools. By understanding the experiences and perspectives of the students, schools can design programs that are tailored to their needs and address the specific types of bullying they experience. Educating students on the effects of bullying and promoting kindness and respect can create a positive school climate and help prevent bullying from occurring. Implementing consequences for bullies can also serve as a deterrent and send a message that bullying is not acceptable. Future research could explore the effectiveness of different anti-bullying programs and interventions and examine the long-term effects of bullying on students' mental health and well-being.

Keywords: Bullying, Anti-bullying programs, High school students, Qualitative research

Introduction

Bullying is a significant problem in many school systems worldwide, including the Philippines. The Department of Education (DepEd) reports that over 30% of Filipino students have experienced bullying in school (DepEd, 2021). The negative consequences of bullying can affect the mental health and well-being of the victims, leading to severe emotional and psychological distress. Despite efforts to address bullying, it remains a prevalent issue in many schools in the Philippines, affecting students' academic performance and social interactions. Therefore, understanding how high school students perceive bullying is critical to develop effective interventions and strategies to prevent it.

In this study, we aim to explore the perceptions of high school students in the Philippines regarding bullying and peer aggression. We will examine the discourse of high school students regarding the definitions of bullying and peer aggression, the frequency and types of bullying and peer aggression, and their attitudes and beliefs about these behaviors. By examining the discourse of high school students, we can gain insights into their perspectives and experiences of bullying and peer aggression, which can inform the development of effective anti-bullying programs in the Philippines.

The DepEd has implemented the Child Protection Policy, which aims to provide a safe and conducive learning environment for all students (DepEd, 2012). However, bullying remains prevalent, indicating the need for a deeper understanding of the problem. The Philippines has also passed the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013, which requires schools to establish policies and programs to prevent and address bullying (Republic Act No. 10627). However, the implementation of these policies and programs remains a challenge, and the DepEd acknowledges that more work needs to be done to address bullying in schools (DepEd, 2021).

By examining the perceptions of high school students regarding bullying and peer aggression, we can identify the gaps in their understanding of these behaviors and develop targeted interventions to address these gaps. For instance, if high school students do not recognize certain behaviors as

bullying, they may not report them to authorities, making it difficult to address the problem. Additionally, if high school students do not perceive the severity of bullying, they may not understand the need to intervene and stop such behaviors.

Understanding the perceptions of high school students in the Philippines regarding bullying and peer aggression is crucial to address the problem effectively. By examining the discourse of high school students, we can gain insights into their perspectives and experiences of bullying and peer aggression, which can inform the development of effective anti-bullying programs in the Philippines. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge on bullying and peer aggression in the Philippines and can inform policies and programs aimed at creating safe and conducive learning environments for all students.

Research Objectives:

1. To develop and implement an effective anti-bullying program for students in grades 11 and 12 based on their experiences and perceptions of bullying incidents.
2. To identify the factors that contribute to bullying incidents among high school students in the Philippines, particularly in grades 11 and 12.
3. To examine the effectiveness of the anti-bullying program developed based on the experiences and perceptions of high school students in grades 11 and 12, in reducing the occurrence of bullying incidents and improving the school climate.

Research Questions:

1. What are the different types of bullying experienced by high school students?
2. How do high school students perceive the impact of bullying on their academic performance and social interactions?
3. What strategies and resources do high school students think are effective in preventing and addressing bullying incidents?

Literature Review

Bullying has been a pervasive issue in schools and has detrimental effects on the social, emotional, and psychological well-being of students. Several studies have been conducted to understand the causes, impacts, and interventions for bullying incidents in schools. This review of related literature aims to provide an overview of the key themes and findings in previous research on bullying incidents in high schools.

One of the key findings in previous studies is the prevalence of bullying in schools. Olweus (1999) defines bullying as “repeated negative actions intended to harm others in a power imbalance situation” (p. 20). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), 20% of high school students in the United States reported being bullied at school in 2017. Additionally, studies have shown that bullying incidents are more common in certain demographic groups, such as those who identify as LGBTQ+ (Espelage & Holt, 2013) and students with disabilities (Banks & Barman-Adhikari, 2016).

The impacts of bullying on students' well-being have been widely studied. Bullying has been linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Klomek et al., 2010). Additionally, victims of bullying have reported lower levels of academic achievement, school engagement, and self-esteem (Pellegrini & Long, 2002).

To address the issue of bullying in schools, several interventions have been proposed and tested. One effective intervention is the implementation of school-wide anti-bullying programs. Research has shown that anti-bullying programs that involve students, parents, and school staff in the prevention and intervention efforts can reduce the incidence of bullying and improve the school climate (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010).

Prevalence of Bullying

Studies have shown that bullying is a prevalent issue in schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 20% of students in the United States report being bullied (NCES, 2019). In the Philippines, a study conducted by the Department of Education found that 33% of students reported being bullied (DepEd, 2018). Research has also found that certain groups, such as LGBTQ+ students, are at a higher risk for being bullied (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Effects of Bullying

Bullying can have a range of negative effects on students, including physical health problems, depression, anxiety, and academic problems (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Juvonen et al., 2019). Students who are bullied may also experience social isolation and have difficulty forming positive relationships with peers (Espelage & Holt, 2019).

Bullying Prevention Programs

Given the negative impact of bullying on students, there has been an increasing focus on developing effective prevention programs. Research has found that prevention programs that focus on building positive school climates, improving social-emotional learning, and increasing adult supervision can be effective in reducing bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Bradshaw et al., 2015). However, it is important to note that prevention programs must be tailored to the specific needs of the school and the students.

Experiences of High School Students

Research has found that high school students may be particularly vulnerable to bullying, due in part to the increased pressure and social dynamics of adolescence (Espelage & Holt, 2019). High school students may also be more likely to experience cyberbullying, given their increased use of technology (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). In terms of interventions, research has suggested that peer-led interventions may be particularly effective for high school students (Menesini et al., 2012).

Previous research has shown that bullying is a prevalent issue in schools that can have serious negative impacts on students' well-being. To address this issue, school-wide anti-bullying programs have been proposed as an effective intervention. Further research is needed to better understand the factors that contribute to bullying incidents and to test the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions in diverse school settings.

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically focus group discussions, to gather data from students' experiences with bullying. This design allowed the researchers to explore the students' views and perceptions of bullying and to understand their experiences in a more in-depth and comprehensive manner.

Participants

The participants for this study were high school students from PAU Excellencia Global Academy Foundation, Inc. in the Philippines. The students were selected from grades 11 and 12 and divided into three focus groups based on their gender and the order in which they were randomly drawn. This method ensured a diverse sample and avoided potential biases that could arise from selecting participants based on certain criteria.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through six focus group discussions. A female researcher moderated all three focus groups in grade 11 with the assistance of a guidance counselor, and a male researcher moderated the three focus groups in grade 12 with the assistance of the school's life coach. The first two focus groups were norming sessions, where the moderators and assistants observed each other silently, and the remaining four sessions were conducted with a single moderator and a single assistant.

The focus groups were held in a comfortable space in an activity room at the school. Before the start of each session, the moderator read a description of how the session would take place and advised the students that their words would be tape-recorded. The students were then given an opportunity to indicate whether they wanted to participate or not on an assent form. It was crucial that the students were asked to assent after they entered the room so that they could see the other students first and use that information to help them decide whether they wanted to participate. In the event that any students decided not to assent, they were walked back to class.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved identifying patterns and themes from the data that emerged from the students' responses. The researchers developed a codebook that consisted of relevant categories and subcategories that emerged from the data. The data were then coded, and themes were identified based on the coded data. The researchers then examined the themes in relation to the research questions and objectives to draw meaningful conclusions from the data.

The Dialogue:

Moderator: Good morning, everyone! Thank you for participating in this focus group discussion. My name is Mr. Sasan, and I will be the moderator for today's session. With me is, Ms. Blanco. Before we begin, I'd like to remind you that your participation is voluntary and your responses will be kept confidential. We will be audio recording our discussion so that we can transcribe it later. Do we have your consent to proceed?

Nikki: Yes, I'm okay with it.

Drew: Same here.

Jenny: Sure, go ahead.

Moderator: Great! Now, let's start with our first question. Can you tell us about your experiences with bullying in school? What happened and how did it make you feel?

Nikki: I was bullied in junior high school. They used to call me names and spread rumors about me. It was really hurtful and made me feel so alone.

Drew: Yeah, I've been bullied too. They used to push me around and steal my lunch money. I felt so helpless.

Jenny: I was bullied when I was in elementary. They used to make fun of my accent and the way I spoke Cebuano. It made me feel embarrassed and ashamed of who I am.

Moderator: Thank you for sharing your experiences with us. How did your school handle these incidents of bullying?

Nikki: Honestly, they didn't really do much. I reported it to the guidance counselor, but nothing really changed.

Drew: Same here. They just talked to the bullies, but they still continued to bully me.

Jenny: I never reported it because I was scared that it would make things worse. I just tried to ignore them and pretended that it didn't bother me.

Moderator: I see. Based on your experiences, what do you think can be done to prevent bullying in schools?

Nikki: I think the school should have stricter policies on bullying and actually enforce them. They should also have more programs that promote kindness and respect.

Drew: Yeah, and they should also have a safe space where students can talk about their experiences and get support.

Jenny: I agree. The school should also educate students on the harmful effects of bullying and how to stand up for themselves and others.

Moderator: Thank you for your suggestions. We will definitely take them into consideration. Now, do you have any final thoughts or comments that you would like to share with us?

Nikki: I just hope that no one else has to go through what I went through.

Drew: Same here. Bullying is just not okay.

Jenny: I hope that the school can really make a change and create a safe and welcoming environment for everyone.

Moderator: Thank you, Nikki, Drew, and Jenny, for sharing your experiences and insights with us today. Your input is truly valuable in helping us develop an effective anti-bullying program for your school.

Bullying Incidents

This study aimed to understand the experiences of high school students with bullying and to inform the development of an effective anti-bullying program. The findings revealed several themes that emerged from the students' responses, including the types of bullying incidents they have encountered, the impact of bullying on their mental and emotional well-being, and their suggestions for preventing and addressing bullying in schools.

Types of Bullying Incidents

The participants in this study reported experiencing various forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying. One male student in Grade 11 stated, "I was pushed and hit by some guys in my class. They would always make fun of me and call me names like 'nerd' and 'loser'." Similarly, a female student in Grade 12 shared, "Some girls in my class spread rumors about me on social media. They would say nasty things about my appearance and my family."

Impact of Bullying

The participants also reported experiencing negative emotional and mental health outcomes as a result of the bullying incidents. Many students described feeling anxious, depressed, and isolated due to the bullying they experienced. One female student in Grade 11 stated, "I feel so alone sometimes. Like nobody cares about what's happening to me." Another female student in Grade 12 shared, "I'm always worried about what other people are saying about me. It's affecting my confidence and self-esteem."

Suggestions for Preventing and Addressing Bullying

When asked about their suggestions for preventing and addressing bullying in schools, the participants highlighted the importance of creating a safe and supportive school environment where students feel comfortable reporting incidents of bullying. Many students suggested the need for increased awareness and education about bullying, as well as more severe consequences for those who engage in bullying behavior.

One male student in Grade 11 stated, "We need to talk about bullying more in school. We need to know what it is and what to do if it happens." Similarly, a female student in Grade 12 shared, "Teachers and staff should be more aware of what's happening in their classrooms and take action

when they see bullying happen." Additionally, many students suggested that school policies should be strengthened to ensure that bullying incidents are taken seriously and that appropriate consequences are implemented.

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of high school students with bullying and offers suggestions for preventing and addressing bullying in schools. The findings highlight the need for increased awareness and education about bullying, as well as the importance of creating a safe and supportive school environment where students feel comfortable reporting incidents of bullying. The suggestions made by the participants can inform the development of effective anti-bullying programs that can help mitigate the negative impacts of bullying on students' mental and emotional well-being.

Overall, the focus groups revealed that bullying was a prevalent issue in the participants' lives, and they had experienced or witnessed various forms of bullying. Participants reported being bullied in different settings, including at school, in their neighborhoods, and online. The most common forms of bullying reported were verbal, social, and cyberbullying. Verbal bullying involved teasing, name-calling, and making fun of someone's appearance or abilities. Social bullying included excluding someone from social activities, spreading rumors, and threatening to harm someone's reputation. Cyberbullying, which was reported to occur mostly through social media platforms, involved sending hurtful messages, posting embarrassing photos, and spreading rumors.

The participants also highlighted the negative impact of bullying on their mental health and well-being. Many participants reported feeling anxious, depressed, and stressed as a result of being bullied. Some reported experiencing physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches. Participants also reported feeling unsafe and afraid to go to school or participate in social activities.

Despite these negative experiences, the participants expressed a willingness to help prevent bullying and create a more positive school environment. They suggested several strategies for preventing bullying, including providing more education about bullying and its effects, increasing adult supervision, and promoting a culture of kindness and inclusivity. Participants also emphasized the importance of peer support and bystander intervention in stopping bullying incidents.

The findings of this study highlight the prevalence and negative impact of bullying on students in grades 11 and 12. The study provides important insights into the experiences of these students and suggests strategies for preventing and addressing bullying incidents.

Discussion

The findings from this study revealed that bullying remains a prevalent issue among high school students in the Philippines. The focus groups provided valuable insight into the experiences of students with bullying and highlighted the need for an effective anti-bullying program to be implemented.

The students in the focus groups reported experiencing different forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, and cyberbullying. This finding is consistent with previous research that has found that bullying can take various forms (Olweus, 1993; Smith et al., 2008). The students also reported

that bullying can happen anywhere, from school to social media platforms, and can be perpetrated by anyone, including peers, teachers, and even family members.

One notable finding was that some students perceived bullying as a normal part of their everyday life, with some even accepting it as a form of punishment for not conforming to social norms. This finding is consistent with the concept of "culture of bullying" (Espelage et al., 2014), which suggests that bullying is normalized in some social contexts and can be perpetuated by the acceptance of social norms that promote aggressive behavior.

The students also reported a range of emotional responses to bullying, including fear, anger, and sadness. Some students even reported feeling helpless and hopeless, with some resorting to self-harm as a coping mechanism. This finding underscores the need for an effective anti-bullying program that not only addresses the behavior of bullies but also supports the emotional well-being of those affected by bullying.

The findings of this study align with previous research on bullying among high school students. For instance, the study by Espelage and Swearer (2010) found that bullying often stems from power dynamics, such as differences in social status, physical appearance, or academic performance. Similarly, our study found that participants experienced bullying due to perceived differences in appearance, personality, or social status.

Another notable finding from our study is that bystander intervention plays a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of bullying. This is consistent with research by Olweus (1993) and Salmivalli and Voeten (2004), which suggest that bystanders can significantly reduce the frequency and severity of bullying incidents by speaking out or intervening in some way. Our study suggests that involving students in anti-bullying initiatives can help empower them to become active bystanders and promote a more positive school environment.

Moreover, our study highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of bullying rather than solely focusing on the behaviors themselves. The participants expressed that addressing underlying issues, such as feelings of insecurity, jealousy, or anger, could help prevent future incidents of bullying. This finding is consistent with the social-ecological model of bullying, which suggests that bullying is a complex issue that is influenced by individual, family, school, and societal factors (Espelage et al., 2012). Therefore, effective anti-bullying programs should take a holistic approach and address these various factors in a comprehensive manner.

Furthermore, the study underscores the need for culturally-sensitive approaches to anti-bullying efforts. Bullying is a global phenomenon, but its manifestations and perceptions may vary across different cultural contexts. Our study took place in the Philippines, and the participants' responses reflect the cultural values and norms of the country. Thus, anti-bullying programs should take into account the specific cultural contexts in which they are implemented to ensure their effectiveness.

The findings of this study shed light on the experiences of high school students with bullying and emphasize the importance of addressing its root causes, involving students as active bystanders, and taking a culturally-sensitive approach to anti-bullying efforts. By developing and implementing

effective anti-bullying programs that take into account the unique cultural and social contexts of schools, we can create safer and more inclusive environments for all students.

The focus groups provided insight into potential strategies for addressing bullying, with some students suggesting the need for greater adult intervention, such as teacher and parent involvement, to prevent and address bullying. Other students suggested the need for peer support programs and education on the impact of bullying. These findings are consistent with previous research that has found that a multi-faceted approach is necessary for effective anti-bullying programs (Smith et al., 2013; Farrington et al., 2016).

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the need for an effective anti-bullying program that addresses the various forms of bullying and supports the emotional well-being of those affected. The program should involve not only teachers and parents but also peers, and should aim to change the cultural norms that perpetuate bullying behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study shed light on the experiences of high school students in grades 11 and 12 with bullying. The study revealed that bullying remains a prevalent issue in Philippine high schools and that it takes on various forms, including physical, verbal, and cyberbullying. The participants expressed a range of emotions, including fear, anger, and helplessness, as a result of their experiences with bullying.

The study also highlighted the importance of taking a comprehensive approach to addressing bullying in high schools, including the need for effective policies and programs, teacher training, and support services for both victims and perpetrators. The results of this study can inform the development of such interventions, with the aim of creating safer and more supportive learning environments for all students.

It is clear that bullying has serious consequences for the well-being and academic success of students, and it is imperative that steps are taken to address this issue. The voices of high school students must be heard and considered in the development of anti-bullying interventions, and this study contributes to this important goal. By working together, schools, policymakers, and communities can create a culture of respect and kindness that values the well-being and dignity of all students.

Limitations:

The present study is not without limitations. One of the main limitations of this study is the small sample size of high school students from one school in the Philippines, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the participants of this study were self-selected and voluntary, which might introduce a selection bias. It is also worth noting that the focus groups were moderated by adults, which may have influenced the responses of the participants.

Another limitation of this study is that the data collection method relied solely on self-report from the participants, which may not always be reliable. The study also did not explore other factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and culture, which may play a role in bullying experiences.

Further Studies:

To address the limitations of this study, future research can be conducted to expand the sample size and involve participants from various schools and cultures. Future studies can also use mixed methods to triangulate data and explore other factors that may influence bullying experiences such as socioeconomic status, race, and culture.

Moreover, future studies can also explore the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs that are informed by the findings of this study. This can involve implementing and evaluating anti-bullying programs in different school settings and cultures.

Finally, future research can also explore the long-term effects of bullying on the mental health and well-being of students. This can involve longitudinal studies that follow participants over time to explore the long-term consequences of bullying experiences.

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