

Examining Peer Bullying on the Basis of Different Variables Through the Perceptions of the Sports and Physical Education Teachers

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to investigate the Sports and Physical Education teachers' perceptions of student bullying in the city of Trabzon, Turkey. The study also attempted to investigate the role of "school atmosphere", "gender" and "role model" factors on student bullying in school environments. The study was carried out in the first semester of the 2007-2008 academic year with the participation of ten Sports and PE teachers working in various high schools in Trabzon. The study employed a qualitative approach and case study method. A semi-structured interview was administered as the data collection instrument. In data analysis, "constant comparison method" was used. The study found that there was no agreement among teachers on the role of school atmosphere and on their role models in bullying, and that their perceptions of bullying were problematic. Another finding was that the teachers believed male students were more involved in peer bullying.

Key Words: Peer bullying, perceptions of PE teachers

Introduction

It is claimed that peer bullying forms the most common type of aggressive behaviors in class and school atmosphere. Bullying affects not only emotional, social, and psychological development of students' school and class environment but also their learning activities (Ayas, 2008; Bauman and Del Rio, 2005; Kartal and Bilgin, 2008; Woods et al., 2007). Bullying includes physical, verbal, and psychological attacks, exercising unbalanced power over other students, especially weak ones, which cause victims to fear (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying is not limited to the use of physical power. Getting others' feelings hurt, verbal or physical humiliation, and destroying their self-esteem by getting them exposed to social discrimination can also be included in bullying behaviors (Hazler, 1996).

Research shows that bully students have lower academic achievement, have difficulty in establishing social relationships and are not easily accepted by other members of the society (Hazler, Hoover and Oliver, 1992). It has also been observed that bully students carry their inability to develop empathy, social interactions to their adult age and they still get difficulty in develop and sustain positive relationships even when they are grown up people. Research also reveals that bully students, continuing their negative behaviors, may have some legal problems in their adulthood (Bridge, 2003; Farrington, 1993; Huesman and Malamuyh, 1986).

According to a research, 60 percent of the 6th and 9th grader bully students commit at least one crime and the rest 35-40 percent of the rest are taken to the court three times as suspects of illegal crimes until the age of 24 (Pişkin, 2002). In secondary schools, 60 percent of bully students are involved in at least a crime until they are at the age of 23. 35-40 percent of these students are sentenced because of three or four crimes. An eight-year-old bully person is more likely to be punished at the age of thirty because of bullying (Bridge, 2003). Huesman and Malamuyh (1986) have concluded that students performing bullying behaviours at the age of 8 are more likely commit crimes, disobey traffic rules, drive when drunken and exercise verbal and physical attacks over their wives when they are at their thirties than other normal people.

Research on victims of bullying behaviors have shown that they suffer from such problems as being upset, sorrowful, restless, coward, unsuccessful, lack of confidence, unable to establish social relationships. These students may develop depressive and psychological symptoms (Fekkes, Pijpers and Verlove-Vonherick, 2005), they tend to have psychological disorders (Kumpulainen, Rasanen and Puura, 2001), they may suffer from post-traumatic disorders (Mynard, Josepf and Alexandera, 2000). Moreover, it is revealed that they may suffer from such physical problems as getting dizzy, heart disorders, vomiting, stomachache, sight problems, discriminations by their peers and inability to develop social interactions (Rigby, 2003).

In a research conducted in Australia on 353 secondary school students at the average age of 10, it is found that students subjected to peer bullying are more likely to have clinic depression when compared to others (Dake, 2003). It is also shown in a research conducted in Finland and Australia that students subjected to bullying have suicidal attitudes more than normal students (Rigby, 2003). Just as bully students behave problems

in their adulthood, their victims may have problems in their adult caused by the bullying behaviors they are subjected at earlier ages. That is to say, victims of bullying cannot get on well with other people and they do not have self-confidence when they reach adulthood (Olweus, 2003).

According to studies conducted on the effects of bully behaviors, all parties including the bully and the victims show psychological, physical, social and academic failures. These negative effects of bullying can be observed both in short period and in the long one (Ayas, 2008; Şahin, 2007). These negative effects can cause many problems in social and individual life.

When dealing with bullying in school environments, we cannot leave teachers out. Attitudes of teachers, their interactions with students, their model behaviors, being aware of bully behaviors and their reaction towards their behaviors are crucial in terms of decreasing the number of bullying. Especially, the position of Sports and PE teachers, due to their positions in school environments, may play a significant role in decreasing and preventing bullying since they have the opportunity to deal with students in groups or individually. Furthermore, physical education courses and sports activities are important in developing students self-esteem and self-confidence (Gün and Koç, 2006).

The aim of this study is to analyze Sports and PE teachers' perceptions of bullying in school environments and to make them aware of the fact that they can play a crucial role in decreasing preventing and bullying due to their positions.

Method of the Study

This study is designed in qualitative research approach in which case study method has been chosen. The main reason why this method has been chosen is that the views and perceptions of the participants have been tried to be explored in detail. In other ways, research questions of the study attempt to reveal teachers' views and perceptions and investigate the research topic in-depth. When in-depth investigations of inner views of people are needed, it is recommended that qualitative approaches are most suitable to employ (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Cohen and Manion, 1994). As Maykut and Morehouse (1994) argue, qualitative researchers are interested in investigating and responding to exploratory and descriptive questions and such is the case in this study. Moreover, this study does not attempt to generalize the results but aims to obtain deeper understanding of experience from the perspectives of the teachers.

Sampling

10 Sports and PE teachers working at ten different high schools in the city of Trabzon were selected as the participants of the study with a random selection. The teaching experiences of teachers differed from 5 to 20 years. Five of the participant teachers were female and the others were male, but their genders were not considered as a variable in this study.

Data Analysis Processes

The data have been gathered through a "semi-structured interview form". Teacher interviews were recorded into a tape recorder then recorded conversations were transcribed on to papers. "Constant comparative method" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) has been used in the process of data analysis. For this, instead of analyzing the data according to previously organized categories, the data have been divided into categories after the data have been collected. In this process, similar data have been classified and categories have been formed by making continuous comparisons in the context of grounded theory approach. These categories have been presented in tables so that the findings could be understood more easily and the data in the tables have been supported with the direct quotations from the teacher conversations.

Findings and Discussion

School as Encouraging Environment for Bullying

In this part of the study, questions concerning whether psycho-social conditions of schools stimulate students to get involved in bullying have been asked to participants. Findings illustrate that teachers have two different views: Half of the teachers think that school stimulates bullying of students whereas, the other half claims that it does not.

Some of the views of teachers who think that the psycho-social environment of school is connected to bullying are as follows:

“Such things are not permitted but wrong attitudes of teachers or managers can set an example for them” (T2)

T3 has indicated the connection between school management and bullying as follows:

“I think that the problem gets more serious especially when such behaviors are tolerated and the management and teachers do not act consciously enough about this issue. But the main responsibility lies with the management of school. This is all about the students’ ambitions of applying pressure on each other and their opinions of being privileged in the eyes of the management. Everything stems from it, otherwise I can say that: When the management of school acts reasonably, the problems that I have been talking about do not exist. Students cannot do it.”(T3)

T10 indicated that the negative attitudes of teachers at school can cause bullying:

“The conditions that support bullying at school do not exist at our school but sometimes they may. What supports bullying? For example, teachers’ use of physical violence is a cause of bullying, I think.” (T7)

Some views of teachers that think that conditions do not support bullying are as follows:

“No. I do not believe it. I have never witnessed such a thing. There are often necessary controls and checks at our school. I think the main causes of bullying are the visual media and the internet.”(T8)

“I have not witnessed it at our school. I believe that conditions are fine at most schools. However, I think that socio-economic factors have greater impact on students’ bullying.” (T6)

Teachers who claim that the environment of school stimulates bullying and those who do not have focused on the attitudes and behaviors of managers and their colleagues concerning this issue. It has been seen that participant teachers do not mention whether general purposes, physical and social conditions, cultural activities of the school, and students’ expectations, needs and values could be connected to bullying or not. This may stem from the fact that the insufficiency of economic conditions, indifference and pressures of central and local administrators could make them feel apathetic towards psycho-social issues. The fact that teachers’ salaries are not high enough to meet their basic needs negatively motivate them to make researches and develop themselves personally and professionally. Besides, the pressures of both central and local administrators on teachers to gain cognitive success are one of the most important elements that make teachers apathetic towards psycho-social environments and problems. Hence, the teachers’ views regarding this issue have provided limited amount of data. The reason for this might be that they may get scared of telling the truth or being responsible for bullying. It is always easy to ignore the problem and put the blame on other things.

Being a Role Model

In this part of the research, teachers have been asked whether they could be role models that are good enough for their students. According to the data obtained, teachers have similar views with regard to being a model for students. Out of the group that comprises 10 people, half of them has indicated that “they try to be good role models” whereas the other half has said that “they could be both good and bad models”.

For example, T1: *When students see that bullying is not allowed and when they understand that intolerance to bullying is for humanity, they can take us as idols. Students can take their teachers as models. People do not have to like each other. But they need to show respect.”*

Participant T5 has mentioned that teachers are generally good models as in the following: “80 percent of the teachers are good. Yet, we have two teachers who are about to retire and we also have problems with a new teacher. The others are very good.”

Similarly, T7 has mentioned they try to be good models as “We try to be good models. We make the students get along with each other. We make them think.”

On the other hand, T9 has made a different but detailed explanation as to the fact that teachers could be both good and bad models: *“Now, to be honest, I need to take all teachers into consideration to answer your question. There are teachers who can be taken as models and those who cannot. Not all people are the same. I can give a certain answer on my behalf but when I take other teachers into account, I guess that the amount is 40 percent. The child can copy negative qualities as well. If you shout and beat the child, s/he will take it as an model. The teacher is a more important model than the parent when it comes to copying negative behaviors. They could not take their parents seriously as they are always near them but they imitate the teachers that they regard as ideal. When teachers are dominant in anything, the students imitate them right away. Students consider them important”*

It is seen that both the teachers that say they try to be good models and those who say they can be good and bad models refer to the attitudes and behaviors of other teachers instead of their own attitudes. That is, they do not evaluate their own behaviors with regard to being good and bad models and they emphasize and comment on teachers who have just started the profession, those who have worked as a teacher for long years and who apply physical violence. Instead of mentioning their own behaviors to be good models, they talk about ideal behaviors that have to be conducted. Thus, there can be difference between the teachers' views concerning being good models and their behaviors and attitudes at school.

Gender issue in bullying

Most of the teachers in the group (7 teachers) have indicated that boys bully others more than girls do. Only three teachers in the group have said that the gender of the students is not a factor of bullying.

About this issue T2 has said: *"In past years, it was seen that boys were involved in bullying more than girls were. But recently girls bully others, too. We are not used to girls bullying. Boys are involved in fights but girls have almost the same problems as well."*

T3: *Girls did not use to bully other students before but now it is very common. A few weeks ago, a girl broke the finger of another student. They fight so harshly. The environment is a very bad example especially for girls. The press and media also have an impact. They teach what you can do if you are exposed to violence and students learn it. "*

T7: *Boys are the leading actors in every kind of event at school. They are always involved in brawls in the school garden, corridors, classrooms. They are very irresponsible and inattentive. They harm each other very much. Sometimes even the parents are involved in violence and terrible events happen."*

T9: *Boys try to imitate mafia members so much. They act in groups and gangs. The most influential model they have is the actor "Memati" in the TV series "The Valley of Wolves". Actually, this is very serious. Boys at our school play a game of mafia."*

When we look at the teachers' perceptions of the relation between bullying and gender of the students, we see that they mention physical attacks since they view bullying mostly as physical bullying or they do not distinguish between bullying and violence. Hence, they notice physical fights and brawls in the behaviors of both girls and boys. From this aspect, it is seen that boys bully others more than girls do. The reason is that teachers do not take verbal, sexual, indirect bullying and harming the possessions of others into account when they evaluate the case of bullying.

There is a similarity between the teachers' perceptions of sexuality and bullying and their perceptions of bullying which is the first finding of the research. Nine teachers out of the group have defined bullying as "brute force and demanding one's rights through violence". Therefore, it is a natural outcome that teachers think boys bully others more than girls do.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study, a clear result is not reached on whether there is a link between school settings and bullying. While half of teachers participated in the study think that school setting is a factor that causes bullying, the other half expressed that there is no such kind of relation. When looking at the literature about the relation between school settings and bullying, it is seen that some features of schools physical settings causes bullying at different levels. Stephenson and Smith found in their studies in English schools in 1987 and 1989 that bullying actions took place more in some schools than others. Roland and Munthe (1989) found in their study that there are differences in between private schools and public schools in terms of bullying. Pişkin and Ayas (2006) concluded in their study that bullying actions take more place in male-only vocational schools than female-only vocational schools. In another study carried out by Pişkin and Ayas (2008), it was found that rate of bullying in Anatolian high schools are lower than other high schools in Turkey. Therefore, on the basis of these studies we can say that there is a link between school settings and bullying.

While five of the ten teachers studied think that the behaviors and attitudes of teachers in class and school environment do not make models and may cause bullying, the others argue that teachers' attitudes and behaviors have no relations with bullying. Research studying the relationship between the attitudes and behaviors of teachers and bullying has revealed that teachers' interactions with students in school environment, their authoritative attitudes, their indifference towards courses and students' problems, their narcissism personalities contribute to bullying either directly or indirectly. Olweus (1993; 1995) asserts that the attitudes and behaviors of teachers in school environments play a significant role in dealing with bullying behaviors and their victims. He also puts it

that teachers' negative attitudes and behaviors can, in some cases, make a role model for bullying. Sullivan et al. (2004) claim that teachers may contribute to bullying in school environment. He especially places rude and authoritative teachers into this category. In Cullingford's study (2002) a female subject student said one of her teachers behaved her badly and insulted her in front of the class. It can clearly be concluded that that teachers cannot be left out of the bullying problem and even that some of the responsibility for the emergence of this problem can be put on teachers.

In this study it was found that according to teachers' views male students perform bullying much more than the female students. Due to teachers' comprehension of bullying as physical attack and violence, they may also perceive that male students have more tendencies towards violence than female students. When literature on bullying is investigated in terms of gender variable, in most of the studies it is concluded that male students perform physical bullying actions more than female students and female students perform bullying indirectly in most cases. (Delfabro, et al, 2006; Pateraki and Houndoumadi, 2001; Espelage, Bosworth and Simon, 2000; Olweus, 1994a; Olweus,1995; Eslea and Smith, 1994; Roland and Munthe,1989; Archer, Pearson and Westeman,1988; Elliot,1992). From this perspective, it can be said that teachers' views in this study about gender and bullying support previous study findings reviewed above. It is seen that the teachers are not very aware of indirect bullying so therefore they might not focus on girly bullying which can be equally disturbing even more. Besides, TV series you have been talking about are generally about men. Gender roles in the society can also be influential here.

It seems to be impossible to consider teachers out of the bullying problem when school bullying is in question. Hence, teachers and prospective teachers should be informed of peer-bullying. This study suggests that especially Sports and PE teachers, who are in a position to develop one to one interactions with their students both in natural and non-natural settings and to contribute a lot their students' social, personal and psychological developments, should be informed of and trained on their roles in decreasing and preventing bullying among students. These teachers should be encouraged to take part in projects that aim to decrease and prevent bullying. Researchers should share their findings with Sports and PE teachers and other related parties (school headmasters and other teachers).

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