Bully versus Bullied: A Qualitative Study of Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Settings

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Abstract

This qualitative study observed bullying patterns and trends of students with and without disabilities in inclusive settings. The participants were fourth grade students eligible for receiving special education services in inclusive , resource and self-contained settings. Qualitative data were collected while students were in class and during specials and non-academic times. The data suggests that students with disabilities are bullied and are themselves bullies at times. There appeared to be a relationship between personal characteristics and the incidence of bullying. Further, adult intervention was reported to be lax during incidences f bullying. Educational implications for schools, teachers and teacher educators are presented.

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INTRODUCTION

The incidence of bullying, in its various forms, in public schools continues to be not only a problem for local school districts but also at the national level. A review of the research literature yields 74 peer-reviewed publications 54 in journals, 11 books and 9 reports in the period between 1992-2011. A review of the research literature yields multiple definitions. To be sure, each state, local school district endorses its own specific definition of bullying in the context of schools. Oleweus has brought the issue of bullying to the forefront through his seminal works. He proffers that "Every individual should have the right to be spared oppression and repeated intentional humiliation, in school as in society at large" (1993,) p.427). As a result Olweus (1993) states, "A person is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and overtime, to negative actions on the part of one or more persons (Olweus, 1993. P.413). His definition has been accepted and supplemented by many researchers. (Bernstein & Watson, 1997; Cantu & Heumann, 2000). A more recent variation has been suggested by Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, and Scheidt (2001) as a: "specific type of aggression in which (1) the behavior is intended to harm or disturb, (2) the behavior occurs repeatedly over time, and (3) there is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one" (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2085). Funneling the definition to specific targets Hoover & Stenhjem (2003) suggests, "bullying consists of a series

of repeated, intentional, cruel incidents between the same children who are in the

same bully and victim roles" (p.2).

This study will employ the Hoover and Stenhjem definition and qualitatively

observe the patterns of bullying among elementary school students in general

education and receiving special education.

The notion of humiliation, taunting, stealing, spreading rumors, hitting,

kicking, poking and most recently electronic harassment have been added to the mix.

Arizona has recently added "Bullying" as any written, verbal or physical act or any

electronic communication that is intended to harm a student. DeVoe, Bauer &Hill

(2010) issued a report entitled Student Victimization in U.S. Schools: Results From

the 2007 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey. The

study found that in the school year 2006–07, about 4.3 percent of students ages 12

through 18 reported that they were victims of any crime at school. Three percent

reported being victims of theft, 1.6 percent of students reported a violent victimization,

and 0.4 percent of students reported a serious violent victimization. Thirty-eight percent

of student victims of any crime reported the presence of gangs at school compared to 22.6

percent of students who were no victims. About 42.8 percent of students who reported

violent crime victimization reported having been in a physical fight at school, compared

to 5.9 percent of students who were nonvictims. Higher percentages of students who

reported any criminal victimization at school reported they were the targets of traditional

(62.2 percent) and electronic (11.6 percent) bullying than were nonvictims (30.4 percent

and 3.3 percent, respectively).(Hoover & Oliver 1996). Many researchers state that in

their investigations, 75% to 90% of students looking back over their school careers

report that they suffered harassment at the hands of fellow students. As many as 15% of 4th -8th grades may have been severely distressed by bullying (Hazler, Hoover & Oliver, 1991; Hoover, Oliver & Hazler, 1992; Hoover, Oliver & Thomson, 1993). These figures increase exponentially as the incidences of bullying are unreported by students that occur beyond the schools. Cyber Bullying underscores both the increase in reported and mostly unreported incidences of bullying. Willard (2007) describes cyber bullying as "being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies"(p. 1). She listed eight different forms of cyber bullying:

1. Flaming: Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.

2. Harassment: Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages.

3. Denigration: "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.

4. Impersonation: Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person's reputation or friendships.

5. Outing: Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.

6. Trickery: Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information or images online.

7. Exclusion: Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.

8. Cyber stalking: Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear. (p. 1–2).

A study by Shafer, Korn, Smith, Hunter, Mora-Merchan, Singer, & Van der Meulen (2004), investigated the stability of victimization from primary to secondary

school, found that those students who were continuously bullied had lower self-esteem than the control group or those only bullied in primary or secondary school. This demonstrates that experiencing bullying for several years reasonably introduces the possibility that this long duration could result in harmful effects. Hoover & Oliver (1996) reported that both males and females students who were bullied perceived the reason as not "fitting in" This was true of both genders at 4-8th grades and 8-12 grades. The second most common reason for being bullied was reported to be a result of their friendships. Further, victims reported being anxious, insecure and having reported self-esteem. Putting these findings in the context of the inclusion movement to educate students with disabilities in the general education class creates another layer of potential bullying. In fact the very reasons given by the victims of bullying-not fitting in and association with friends parallels the notion of students in special education an their respective peers. In fact, Roberts & Smith (1999) found that children generally have a negative attitude towards their peers with disabilities.

The research related to disabilities and bullying is emerging. Kaukianinen, Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Tamminen, Make, & Poskiparta (2002) ; Torrence (1997), Whitney, Nabuzoka & Smith 1992 have reported Prevalence). Bowman (2001) suggested that students with disabilities have a greater likelihood of being victimized by bullying. Regardless of disability Bullying has been reported at a higher rate than with non0disabled students. Intellectual disabilities (Reiter& Lapidot-Lefler 2007;McGrath, Jones, & Hastings 2010); Emotional and behavior disorders (Frances & Potter 2010),); Aspergers's Syndrome (Biggs, Simpson & Gauss

(2010). Whitney (1994) suggested that bullying was related to disabilities and that bullying occurs regardless of disability (Mishap 2003, Yule, Goodman and McConachie 1998; Martlew, & Hodson 1991; Dixon 2006; Biggs, Simpson & Gaus 2010). Sweeting & West (2001) suggested that less attractive, overweight, disabled and poor school performers were more likely to be bullied. Those students with visible disabilities have been targeted (Dawkins, 1996) as well as students with attention deficit disorders (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Marini, Fairbairn & Zuber 2001) reported that "children with disabilities are at least twice as likely to be bullied than their nondisabled peers" (p.175). Gil & Costa (2010) similarly stated that children with disabilities more likely to encounter violence and victimization-further suggesting that inclusion may exacerbate this bullying. Luciano & Savage (2007) found that students with learning disabilities self-reported significantly more incidents of being bullied than their non-disabled peers. Taylor (2012) suggested that all students are susceptible to bullying but that student with disabilities are more susceptible due to "characteristic that place them on either side of the bullying issue, be it as a bully or victim of bullying" (p. 1). Estell, Farmer, Irvin, Crowther, Akos, Boudah (2009) found that teachers rated students with moderate disabilities as bullied significantly more than peers. Martlew and Hodson (1991) corroborated this study by reporting that students with learning disabilities were had fewer friends and were teased significantly more than non-learning disabled peers. Other studies of students with learning disabilities, regardless of placement have shown higher incidence of bullying than their non-disabled peers, (Nabuzoka & Smith 1993; Sabornie 1994;Morrison, Furlong & Smith 1994 Whitney,

Nabuzoka & Smith 1992; McNamara, Vervaeke & Willoughby, 2008). Cross

categorical disabilities are also targets of bullying,(Cummings, Pepler, Mishna &

Craig 2006). In fact, Mishna (2003) suggested that, "along with the effects of low

social status and poor peer relationships, rejection by peers leaves students with

learning disabilities unprotected and susceptible to further victimization"

(p.337).Carlson, Flannery & Kral (2005) concurred that students in special

education reported more incidents of bullying than general education attending

peers. Further, if students with disabilities had friends in general education and

were liked then this was associated with less bullying. These types of bullying are

direct (physical and verbal) and indirect (spreading rumors).

A comparative analysis of bullying among students in special education and

general education was conducted by Rose, Espelage & Monda-Amaya (2009). They

found that students in special education classes reported greater incidences of

bullying than reported by students in general education classes. Specifically

students receiving education in self-contained classes reported more incidences of

bullying than those students in inclusive classes. In general it was reported that over

18% of students with disabilities in inclusive classes reported being bullied. This

same number also reported assuming the role of bully. The theme of "fitting in" and

core of friends that student associated with seems to merge again as a factor in

targeted bullying. Additionally Egan & Perry (1998) suggested that their peers do

typically not accept students that are bullied. Others have suggested that bullied

students tend to lack friends in school (Olweus 1994). Conversely, students with

disabilities have also been identified as bulling others. Whitney (1993) found that

students with learning disabilities were as likely to bully as being bullied. Olweus (2001) reported that anywhere between 10%-20% of those that are bullied are bullies themselves.

The United Stated Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2010) issued an open letter stating that "A school is responsible for addressing harassment incidents about which it know or reasonable should have known". (p.2) The involvement of the OCR's involvement focused on the issue that some forms of bullying, in addition to violating school anti-bullying policies may also come under the jurisdiction of OCR, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act 1973, Title II of The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Further, the open letter underscored bullying as a subset of disability harassment by using terms as "stupid", "idiot" and "retard" in addition to physical abuse directed at students with disabilities. In addition to bullying in class bullying has been reported to occur on the playground, bathrooms, and hallways during transition to classes regardless of the level of teacher presence. (Whitney & Smith 1993). In fact little if any intervention occurs when bullying is witnessed. If there is intervention it is most likely peer-intervention rather than adult. The purpose of this inquiry is to determine the existence of bullying targeted at and by students with disabilities and the type of bullying.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study of bullying of students with special needs in select

public schools. Eight, 4th grade students, two female and 6 male, ranging in age from 9 years old to 10 years old were observed on the playground, cafeteria, resource room, general education classroom during transitions and during specials. Observations were conducted in a variety of settings where students with disabilities would interact with typical peers. The primary handicapping condition for most students was learning disabilities. Other eligibility categories included autism, hearing impairment, and moderate mental retardation and health impairments. Observational data was collected over 3 weeks through verbatim scripting, descriptive field notes, and journaling. The students were eligible for special educations services for learning disabilities, autism, moderate mental retardation and health impairment. The operational definition for the study was adopted from Hoover & Stenhjem's (2003) as "consisting of a series of repeated, intentional, cruel incidents between the same children who are in the same bully and victim roles". Observers piloted observations and completed reliability checks (.89 reliability).

Qualitative data including field notes and journal entries will be analyzed to determine emerging themes using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). In this procedure, open and axial coding will be used to initially identify concepts and then develop subsequent categories that represent phenomena related to the data. After a theme is identified, quotes from the field notes or journal entries will be used to substantiate and support the theme. These qualitative data will be used to augment and support the quantitative data. To ensure trustworthiness of these procedures, member checks were also employed.

In this study, data analysis occurred after data was collected. Open coding occurred by developing preliminary concepts from initial analysis of meaning units and then forming these concepts into themes by the researcher. Open coding involved reading through the transcripts line-by-line and highlighting information that indicated common themes, patterns and verbatim exemplars.. During this process, numerous readings of the text were done in order to acquire a sense of the content of the transcripts. The highlighted information became initial themes that were labeled with the terms *Antecedent Rituals, Attention Seeking, and Retaliation*.

The second stage of examination, axial coding, involved making connections between themes and more precise categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 97). Weiss and Lloyd (2002, p. 63) state when performing axial coding, "The researcher identifies the causal conditions (events or incidents that lead to the occurrence of a phenomenon), contexts (specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon), intervening conditions (broad and general conditions that influence the strategies taken), and consequences of actions involved in each category". (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002 p. 63). The goal is to discover and connect categories in terms of the theory being established (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this stage the researcher looked beyond the themes and developed smaller units of analysis called sub-themes. Sub-themes were more precise descriptions that presented themselves throughout the transcript. Finally, once themes and categories were defined selective coding occurred with the intent of integrating all of the data by placing each category developed during axial coding into a theme. The intent with this stage was to discover and relate categories in terms of the theory being developed by the themes already previously identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

RESULTS

This qualitative inquiry employed a constant comparative method utilizing and open and co-axial coding of the qualitative data- specifically the descriptive field notes, verbatim scripts and observer journals. Several common themes emerged through the analyses. Observations of the student with disabilities that experienced bullying. These prominent themes were ritual bullying; attention seeking; isolation; verbal antecedents, superiority and retaliation.

Antecedent Rituals emerged as a qualitative theme. Students who exhibited a ritualistic behavior, had idiosyncratic behaviors, which were performed habitually, were more likely to be bullied. These typical antecedent behaviors included, "She must be first in line when transitioning to all activities", "she must me in charge of the tetherball each day"," He must play 4-squares at lunch and recess", "he throws food at other students while on the playground everyday"." students was not able to complete assignment", "the students was interrupted by a neighbor student', "the students became annoyed at another students" were antecedents to the student being targeted for bullying. These triggers were present in all cases prior to the initiation of bullying. Bullying in these cases took the form of mocking the student and disability. In most cases where bullying took place, there was a verbal antecedent. The qualitative analysis revealed that that "some change of words or an outburst has occurred", "the outburst was followed by push", "shove", "and threat of contact ". Other exemplars were noted as "he argues with other because he refuses to leave after being put out of 4-square","the boys are playing in the sand, he

approaches, says something to them, them they leap up and chase him" These were recorded as antecedents that resulting in bullying.

Students also engaged in behaviors that revolved around the theme of Attention Seeking. These behaviors, when exhibitive, were also targeted to be bullying. Field notes captured behaviors as "utterances while raising hand", "tattling", "calling out", disrupting the flow of the teaching/learning process"., "he talks baby talk to the girls", "he dares the boys to chase him", "he interrupts other field games to annoy the other students", "she yells at the other students to stop running around". The attention was rarely positive and resulted in antagonizing peers and annoying adults.

A corresponding theme that also emerged was Retaliation. The students that were the target of bullies seemed to counter by involving the bully in behaviors that would draw the attention of the teacher for possible negative consequences. Data suggested that students with disabilities "deliberately lied or exaggerated in effort to cause trouble for other students:. Further examples involved "creating circumstances where injury occurred in the immediate vicinity of adult supervision". Interestingly, observation notes suggested that "teachers were not as receptive to tattling about bullying as they were about other infractions". Additional exemplars were noted as" he flips off the boys that were mean to him", "the 4th grader and his friend targeted the 5th grader who previously pick on them, calling him a "retard" and "after failed attempts to positively interact with peers, he chases them with his wheelchair".

Isolation emerged as a theme as students appeared to seek isolation from

peers and at the same time was then marginalized by their peers. Both students with and without disabilities exhibited this marginalization, which is also a form of bullying, towards student with disabilities. The qualitative data is inconclusive as to whether the self-imposed isolation occurred first followed by the marginalization of vise-versa. It appears that the students" were ignored or belittled by peers" when attempting to interact or play", "some students with disabilities sought to play by themselves"," he plays alone at the water fountain" "in the computer class, the teacher must make a student be his partner" Students will not sit by her at lunch", "She waits in line with no interaction with peers", "no cluster of integrated students (disabled and typical) were involved with each other". In most cases it was reported that the students with disabilities who were isolated lacked a peer support group. An interesting theme that emerged from the analyses of field notes was that of superiority or importance. The students with disabilities felt that they were better than the typical students in ways other than physical strength or popularity. Notes indicate that " when the student had the teaches attention or were receiving some treatment that could be interrupted as preferential-the students check to see if typical peers were noticing". At times there seemed to be "bragging" about the attention. "he roams the playground while other are on the wall for misbehavior" and stating repeatedly "actually I already knew how to do that". Although these behavior contributed to a sense of importance-that in turn elicited resentment that led to bullying by the typical peers.

There was one student who was an outlier. There were no recorded incidences of bullying displayed by or towards this students. He was well liked and "interacted

successfully with his typical and disabled peers., "his disability was visible and impaired his ability to communicate". He also seemed more tolerant as students bumped r pushed him, accidentally, he did not respond nor react in any manner. He seemed to "have a good sense of humor and was not overly sensitive about good natured teasing" which other students viewed as bullying and reacted. In turn. Additionally the notion of acceptance by other students was present. He participated in activities and games and "interacted with non-disabled peers during recess". Further, he did not seem to "display any behaviors to attract negative attention "he took turns, waited patiently, won without gloating and lost without crying". It appeared that his positive personality and likeable manner precluded him from crating or inviting bullying. An interesting aside was that teachers referred to him as a "student leader" which behaviors that other students tended to model.

DISCUSSION

General observations revealed that the students had physical characteristics that set then apart from their typical peers. They were either larger or smaller in stature, had glasses or hearing aids, used a wheelchairs and /or had mannerisms that called attention to their "differentness". In fact, one male student with a physical handicap that results in the use of a wheelchair would mention his accident and resulting injuries to avoid negative consequences for a previous behavior. This student was a bully and victim. He "frequently used physical and verbal aggression towards his peers. It was noted that the student "used his wheelchair as a weapon". Several students had communication issues, which may have increased the

likelihood of being targeted. The data found that a student disability was "so significant and his responses to verbal provocation so visible that he was targeted frequently. This student's poor verbal skills and "inability to appropriately interact", "his response to provocation drew negative attention from his peers". This negative attention resulted in isolation and marginalization. In terms of isolation the victims may not understand that the isolation is due to their behavior. The provocative victim then continues to annoy and provoke peers so they are shunned even more. However, they do not understand what they are doing is a direct result of the behaviors advance towards them. In each observed event the students were being ignored, belittled, threatened or experiencing physical contact in the presence of an adult supervisors.   The adult supervisor ignored and imposed no consequence to the student offender or the target of bullying. The lack of intervention by the teachers and supervising adults when bullying behavior was observed gave tacit permission to continue. Hence, the victim did not complain and the bully did nit feel that the behavior was wrong. To be sure, there were two students with disabilities who assumed the roles as bullies and victims. The first was the student who was using his wheelchair as a weapon as, previously mentioned . The other was student who was a past victim assumed the role of bully then his tormentor moved to another school. It seems the "bully void" is filled as soon as it is created. Olweus theorized that these students are both aggressively reactive and anxious. In essence they are concurrently retaliatory and impulsive. (Olweus, 1993).

There were discreet and unique characteristics among the individual students that were not represented the m themes that emerged. Some students were

reported to be immature when compared to other student in the resource room. There were students that "occasionally spoke like a baby and could not control outburst of excitement". The presence of a disability did not necessarily predict victimization or the engagement in bullying. Although each student had a disability that may have caused him or her to be preyed upon, it was not that weakness that drew the negative attention. It was, their "social" disability that targeted or caused bullying. It is the bully/victim that represents the greatest threat to increase their aggressive acting out whenever they feel victimized. Their personality characteristics begin as victims and through a process that may take years they find a way to retaliate against real or imagined bullying. Because they struggle with social cues, it is likely they will misinterpret an incident or comments and respond disproportionately.

Students that fail to thrive within their social environments may be more prone to bully and/or be bullied. Their behaviors are often edgy and they are frequently described as irritating and annoying by their peers. This is consistent with the characteristics described as Olweus as provocative victims. (Olweus, 1993).

LIMITATIONS

This qualitative study was focused on 8 students with special needs over a three-week period. A greater population, over a longer period of time would facilitate appropriate generalization. A longer period of observational training for the researchers would add the reliability of behavioral documentations. This will most assuredly lead to other emergent themes. A focused study of the victim/bully may

lead to greater insight into the transitions from one persona to another. Studies

examining the integration of knowledge into curricular units would also provide

information regarding the efficacy of curricular modifications to address bullying.

Implementation of an RTI model for modification would be interesting to pursing to

provide a viable framework for intervention that is commonly used.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

It is imperative that public schools adopt effective school-wide, if not district

wide, intervention plans that seriously publicize and enforce a "zero tolerance"

stance for bullying in any form. The policy must also outline the specific

responsibilities of administrators, classroom teachers and supervising adults for

reporting and intervening when bullying is observed. Further, there must be

accountability when supervising adults do not take appropriate steps to prevent or

report bullying behavior. In order to break the cycle of "benign neglect" or "kids will

be kids", educators must disabuse themselves of the belief that bullying is a normal

part f school life, a right of passage or the victim somehow deserved the attack.

Educators are critical to breaking the cycle of bullying. Teachers are often unaware

of the long-range effects of bullying and victimization. Further, they often do not

intervene when bullying is occurring. Professional development emphasizing what

constitutes bullying, appropriate intervention plans and classroom discussion

embedded in lesson should be conducted with appropriate follow-up in the

classroom. Hoover & Oliver (1996) suggested behavioral contracting, self

monitoring, rehearsal and imagery techniques, assertiveness and social skills

training Cooperative learning strategies, which creates on diverse cohorts can also approach appropriate relationship building.

With all efforts there needs to be a collaborative partnership with parents to make school resources available and provide for communication. It is imperative that generalized bullying behavior from school to home is corrected and management consistently for maximum effectiveness for correction. Additionally, university professional teacher education program ,for both general and special education, should include knowledge and skills in identifying bullying and it long-term effects. Effective behavior management strategies to address bullying could be incorporated into classes. Additionally, self-concept enhancement activities implemented in the class can also address positive student interactions.

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