

Primary School Teachers and Parents Perception of Peer Bullying Among Children in Iran: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Objectives: The present study aimed to recognize bullying behavior in the students in Iran and analyze the perception of school teachers and parents in this regard.

Materials and Methods: Several semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted with four teachers and eight parents of children involved in bully/victim problems and the analysis was interpreted through established comparative evaluation methods.

Results: Iranian teachers and the parents perceived bullying mainly as physical and verbal attacks with little understanding of the psychological factors. They emphasized that the underlying influence of religious beliefs should also be considered in the context of bullying among Iranian society due to the strict conformance applied by parents upon their child.

Conclusions: Based on the outcomes of the study, it is recommended that the teachers participate in anti-bullying programs orientated to prevent bullying behaviors and develop strong supportive relationship with parents to reduce this behavior through personal contacts and interactive workshops.

Keywords: Bullying Behavior, Intervention and Prevention of Bullying, Parents' Perception, Teachers' Perception

1. Background

Over the past two decades, a remarkable change has occurred in a way that educators observed interpersonal relationships between peers in schools, whereby many children were tested, harassed and bullied, which was first conducted by Olweus (1). He defined bullying as intimidation through physical, verbal and psychological committed by a more powerful adversary or a group of people against another person perceived as weaker. Olweus refined the definition to include repetitive attacks against people who were unable to defend themselves. According to "Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders", fifth edition, generally bullying involves repeated physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and/or electronic media acts that may threaten, insult, dehumanize and/or intimidate another individual who cannot properly defend himself or herself (2). In general, physical symptoms of bullying include hitting, pushing or kicking (3). Moreover, bullying is categorized according to the kind of psychological or emotional bullying inflicted, resulting in the victim

as psychological and emotional problems, such as anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, depression and lack of self-confidence (4). Hence, the importance of early intervention is to reduce the effects of bullying (5) to overcome educational disruption and due to safety concerns (6, 7).

Some psychologists believe that bullying among children at school is quite an intolerant social problem with effects on children's well-being (8), having dangerous impacts and become one of the human difficulties (9). Since teachers interact mainly with students during the course of the day at school, the main focus of systematic programs regarding anti-bullying efforts assess the ways in which they manage and respond to bullying behaviors in the classroom. For example, such a study was conducted on preschool teachers' opinion about peer bullying in Turkey that showed physical violence and disobedience were prevalent in comparison with verbal and psychological aspects of bullying (9). Other studies showed that teachers differ in the way they view in bullying types, as well as what they apply for intervention and/or prevention of managing bullying within the classroom (10) whereas

some related studies revealed that verbal and physical bullying are the most common kinds of bullying (11, 12).

Bullying issue and aggressive behavior are not observed only at school, but also at home and in playgrounds. Parents' behavior and moods influence children's behavior. The main causes of bullying are related to family background, their upbringing, financial and social circumstances and family environment that somehow spill over to their children during early child-rearing (13). If parents use autorotation parenting style, particularly through harshness, and consequently bully their children, this might have influence on children negatively to bully others (14). On the other hand, if parents use authority with clear boundaries by showing acceptable behavior to their children, this would normally have a positive impact on the children (15).

It appears that bullying among Iranian students is similar to other parts of the world, which has an influence on the students' acceptability both at school and home, and increases their fear of being bullied within the school environment (16). Mazaheri stated that the rate of aggressive children who bully others in Iran increased from 3% to 5% among those who are under 11 years old, leading to anxiety and depression among them, and in excess of 50% of Iranian parents failed in nurturing their children because of the lack of information and knowledge about bullying behavior and its psychological consequences (17). Studies regarding bullying in Iran are focused mostly on intervention of students involved in bully/victim problems (18, 19), physical victimization was observed more than verbal victimization among students (20), and coercive style of parenting results in aggression and bullying among their children (21).

In summary, there are hardly any studies regarding bullying by primary school children and their behavioral reactions towards it, as well as how teachers and parents can prevent it in Iran. Therefore, it may be important to explore bullying by type, why, how and when bullying occurs, and identify the teachers' and parents' level of knowledge and awareness about bullying.

The current study explored and analyzed primary school children with bullying behavior and teachers' and parents' perception on bullying. In addition, this paper focused on the physical and verbal bullying of seven-year-old elementary school children in terms of teachers' and parents' perceptions in Iran. It is based on a qualitative research, not requiring a big sample size (22), but provides a good correlation with the theory and comparison to other related works set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers' perceptions and understanding about bullying?

2. What kinds of strategies or interventions do teachers apply when they face bullying by students in the classroom?

3. What methods or techniques do teachers suggest to prevent bullying?

4. What are the parents' understanding and definition of bullying in their own words?

5. What are the parents' suggestions about the role of schools and teachers in alleviating bullying?

6. What parenting styles do parents of bullies, and victims use to interact and behave with their children, especially to discipline the bullies?

2. Materials and Methods

The research design was based on a qualitative method (23) to explore in-depth the insights, views and perceptions of the participants accordingly to answer the research questions. A purposive sampling method (24) was selected to analyze the subjects under observation to provide maximum qualitative insight and understanding. Keeping with ethics, written consent was received from school authorities to interview teachers and each parent to observe their children.

The study was performed on four primary school teachers and seven boys of seven-year-old since in Iran boys and girls attend separate schools according to the educational laws, which forbid mingling. All the participants with affordable average income were selected among the volunteers from the same school in Tehran. Seven boys were observed in the playground and in classroom to correlate with the teachers' perception of bullying. Four parents with different levels of education aged 31 - 46 years bracket of bullies and four parents of victims were interviewed. The teachers had 5 - 28 years of teaching experiences.

A mixture of semi-structured interview and observation was used for qualitative analysis (25). With the proviso that interviews assist understanding the participants' perception in-depth, which otherwise is not accessible by other approaches (26).

Data were collected on audio tape recorder for semi-structured interviews with each teacher or parent lasting approximately 30 minutes. Standard observation technique was used to observe the bullying behavior of the children in the classroom and playground identified by the four teachers. According to the teachers' reports, these children were observed for three days: 20 minutes in the playground and 20 minutes in the classroom, totally 120 minutes. The observation was performed in three-minute periods. The bullying behaviors of the children were recorded as descriptive notes. Transcription technique was applied to convert the audiotape recordings for

analysis together with the interviews and observations. Constant comparative technique (27) was employed during the data analysis phase where similar data were classified and categorized to identify each participant's view related to the research questions. These categories are presented in tabulated form and hence the findings are interpreted more easily. The validity of the findings was warranted through teachers and parents' verification of reports on the interviews and observations. The reliability of the findings was also assured through systematic resemblance of teachers and parents' answers to the questions.

3. Results

Seven parts present the research findings, representing the six research questions plus observations of bullying behaviors.

3.1. Teachers' Perception and Understanding About Bullying in their Own Words

Teachers' opinions categories as responses about bullying contain physical attacks and verbal hurts to feelings as shown in Table 1.

Teachers emphasized the use of force, verbally and physically, as the main factors of bullying. Teachers made specific remarks/comments about physical bullying as the first level of perception. T4 emphasized violence and brutal force as bullying, whereas T1 and T2 perceived bullying in both categories of verbal hurt and physical attacks.

3.2. Teachers' Interventions Strategies About Bullies in the Classroom

The different kinds of intervention strategies employed by teachers were discipline, punishment, reporting the matter to the affected families and separating students from the peer groups, respectively (Table 1).

Discipline and punishment tactics were used by the teachers when they faced students who bullied other classmates. Separating students from the group was a common strategy used by all teachers, and they also reported the matter to the parents. T1 said: "From my point of view, children in the elementary school are too young to understand the consequences of bullying; they require guidance. Thus, it is necessary to report the matter to their parents and involve them to control children's wrong behaviors."

3.3. Teachers' Suggestion of Methods or Techniques in to Prevent Bullying

Teachers preferred establishing communication with students and parents through a teacher-parent meeting to address methods to prevent bullying to guide parents to

help both bullies and victims (Table 1). Teachers also indicated using mutual sharing of responsibilities by students to prevent bullying in teamwork activities in the classroom.

One of the strongest suggestions proposed by most of the teachers to prevent bullying was improving interpersonal communication among the students. T2 emphasized on promoting communication among students to create harmony and overcome bigots.

3.4. Parents' Understanding and Definition of Bullying in their Own Words

All eight parents, whose children were either bullies or victims, perceived bullying as peer rejection by the bullied child either swearing or resorting to physical attacking (Table 2).

Parents who suspect that their children are bullied at school looked out for signs on their bodies or clothes as confirmed by M4, who described the physical attack experienced by her son after two days of bullying.

Swearing was highlighted by parents whose children complained of unpleasant verbal hurts from abusive swearing by bullies.

3.5. Parents' Suggestions About the Role of Schools and Teachers in Handling Bullying

Table 3 presents three concepts of parents' suggestions on the role of schools and teachers based on the interviews. This contains empathy with parents of victims, effective discipline practices and providing advice for parents.

Parents suggested using discipline as a primary method in bullying cases. F2 suggested that the immediate action should be taken by the teacher to help the bully and the victim to reconcile or avoid future attacks, which was also supported by M6 and M7. Parents further emphasized that they expect school staff to provide a safe environment for their children.

3.6. Authoritative Parenting Styles by Parents of Children Involved in Bully/Victims Problems

Table 4 provides three principles that parents advocated making their children behave properly. It includes using punishment, warning the child and informing parents about their children's inappropriate behavior.

During the interview session, some of the parents stated that they used verbal or corporal punishment to discipline their children. M3 indicated that using punishment helps to stop inappropriate bullying behavior. F2 mentioned "first warning should be given before resorting to more harsh punishment. Although this might leave the child off the hook initially, it would create a guilt

Table 1. Concepts and Categories of Responses by Teachers About Bullying

Teacher Code	Verbal Hurts	Physical Attacks	
Concepts and categories of responses by teachers about bullying			
T1	Name-calling	Fighting	
T2	Teasing	Fighting with peers	
T3		Using brutal force	
T4	Making peer feel worthless	Using violence	
	Use discipline and punishment	Reporting to families	Separate students from peer group
Response by teachers concerning strategies for intervention			
T1	Taking away privileges in case of bullying others	Calling parents for involving them to help	Asking bully student to sit down separate from others
T2	Punishing student		Ask bully student to leave class
T3			Isolating bully students
T4		Contacting parents	
	Teacher-parent meeting	Useful communication(one-to-one interaction)	Responsibility in teamwork activities
Teachers' suggestion to prevent bullying			
T1	Communicate with parent to improve child's behavior	Communication between peers	Give students responsibilities
T2	Meeting parents	Promoting communication among students	
T3	Inviting school counselor	Asking children to talk about their problems with peers	Pay attention to children
T4	Meeting parents		

Table 2. Parents' Understanding and Definition of Bullying

Parents Code	Peer Rejection by Bully Child	Swearing	Physical Attack
M1			Physical hurt to the child
F2	Rejection by bully child for playing	Using swearing to stop the child joining the game	Fighting the child by bully child
M3		Swearing in the classroom by bully child, threatening them	Physical hurt
M4		Using name calling and swearing the child by bully child	Using physical attack by bully child
F5		Using name calling	Physical hurt to a child
M6			
M7		Swearing	Fighting
M8	Rejection of other children	Using swearing to stop the child	

Abbreviations: M, mother; F, father.

feeling to improve. If this does not work, the corporal punishment should be applied.”

Some parents stated a second method that would inform the child that his behavior is inappropriate and inconsistent with the norms of society that require improv-

ing oneself as a good citizen.

The third way that parents used is explaining in a claim and collective way to their children about the consequences of their inappropriate, abusive behavior by illustrating the weakness of their character. M7 said: “I think

Table 3. Parents' Suggestions Concerning the Role of Schools and Teachers in Handling Bullying

Parents Code	Empathy with Parents of Victim	Effective Discipline Practices	Provide Advice for Parents
M1		Maintaining some discipline by the school	
F2		Urgent action in facing bullying for both bully and victims	Help by counselor
M3	More attention to bullied child, support parents	Discipline in class	Providing advice for parents
M4		Some privileges or inhibition	
F5		Maintaining strict discipline in the class	Helping parents With effective communication
M6			Guidance by experts
M7		Providing some punishment for bully child	Assistance by counselor
M8		Maintaining some discipline	

Abbreviations: M, mother; F, father.

Table 4. Parenting Styles for the Parents with Children Involved in Bully/Victim Problems to Behave with their Children

Parents Code	Using Verbal and Corporal Punishment	Warning the Child	Only Telling Them About Their Inappropriate Behavior
M1		Only warning the child	
F2	Punishing immediately for wrong behavior, not doing guilt by annoying child	Give a stern warning to the child	
M3	Using punishment, mentioning about guilt	First using noticing, if it does not work using punishment	
M4	Punishing if they do not understand		Telling children about inappropriate behavior
F5		Taking notice	Telling child if she/he did something wrong
M6	Using strict discipline		
M7		Explaining to the child about bad behavior	Telling the child
M8		Give a stern warning to the child	The child needs to know about behavior

Abbreviations: M, mother; F, father.

my child only needs to be told that his behavior is bad and disgraceful to him and the family, which makes him feel ashamed, thus resulting in the change of behavior”.

3.7. Observation of Bullying Behaviors

At the beginning of the study, teachers confirmed that they already had children with bullying behaviors in their classrooms. Based on the observation of the seven boys, it was found that two children did not have bullying behaviors according to the symptoms of bullying, but disturbed personal behavioral problems. Physical attacks, verbal and emotional hurts were observed among the other five students.

4. Discussion

4.1. Research Questions Discussion

Regarding “What are the teachers’ perceptions and understanding about bullying?”, the results highlighted that the reason for teachers using common phrases to explain bullying was that they were not able of distinguish the precise meaning of bullying although they conceptually understood the difference between physical and verbal bullying. The teachers’ knowledge and understanding about categorizing bullying was found to be limited, mostly focusing on witnessing violent physical attacks (28), correlating the finding of this study with previous published findings.

Regarding “What kind of interventions teachers apply to intervene in bullying cases?” the results intimated that applying punishment works more quickly to stop bullies.

However, the negative impact of this approach is that other forms of bullying behavior may not show up, which would not reduce bullying.

Concerning “What methods or techniques do teachers suggest to prevent bullying?”, teachers at the teacher-parent’s meeting stated that effective communication and giving children responsibility in teamwork activities are appropriate means to prevent bullying. Although improving interpersonal communication is a useful prevention strategy to help them stay out of trouble and interact with each other as good friends, teachers also need to know how they should monitor children’s activities to ensure that this strategy works. Parent-teacher meeting as a prevention strategy also gives confidence that the significant role of the parents regarding the safety of their children plays as deterrent (29).

Regarding “What are the parents’ understanding and definition of bullying in their own words?”, parents and teachers’ ideas and perceptions of physical attacks and verbal hurts were similar. Some children engaged in bullying behavior hurt victims emotionally by rejecting them from their peer group. The bullied children suffered and used passive coping by blaming them-selves or worrying that other kids do not like them when they are still learning how to cope with life and negotiate with their friends on equal terms. Another point that came through in the interview was that the mothers proposed clearer all-encompassing definition of bullying to understand since they spend more time with the children, while they recognized the significance of the roles both mothers and fathers play to support and train children. A research on bullying issues found a growing awareness of verbal bullying in which 25% of children depicted bullying by drawing someone being verbally bullied (30).

Considering “What are the parents’ suggestions about the role of schools and teachers in alleviating this problem?”, the study found that establishing some disciplinary rules were important to manage the school environment. While empathy with parents of victims helps to connect both bullied children and their parents to overcome depressed feeling of being bullied, it is a helpful method to prevent and control one-sided bullying behavior; the bully side should be maintained by disciplinary actions (31).

Schools and teachers have important responsibilities to prevent bullying. It is noticeable that contributing to peace and calmness in a school is a major focus which students, teachers, parents and society need to emphasize on. Problem-solving strategies in the school environment have a considerable impact on the honesty of the school. Practicing problem-solving skills trainings, as a counseling technique, can be applied to educate both children involved in bully/victim problems how to behave appropri-

ately at school (32).

Concerning “What parenting styles parents of bullies/victims use to interact and behave with their children, especially disciplining the bullies?”, it was found that when parents use force in the family environment, children learn aggressive behavior, which they consequently use in bullying other children (33). These studies indicated that overprotective parents mention their child about inappropriate behavior without any discipline results in more bullying behavior. Mazaheri confirmed that Iranian parents did not have enough useful information to bring up their children. This study also discussed that culture of Iranian families, behavioral characteristics of parents, the income of the family and even the weather affect parenting style (17), which has a major influence on changing physical and emotional intelligence of children that should be considered in children’s behavior.

It was observed that bullies demonstrated physically forcing and threatening other children who were timid/weaker to do what the bullies commanded them to do. Bullies used hurtful nicknames or bad names and teased victims sarcastically during playtime. They also encouraged their friends to do the same to the bullied child. The bullies isolated their weaker peers by rejecting them to play in the group. Thus, they hurt their peers emotionally if they did not respect the commands (34).

4.2. Theories Related to Findings of the Study

The social learning theory explains the relationship between aggressiveness of parents and bullying behavior of children. The child’s personal characteristics are formed in the family environment (35). Physical punishment at home may lead to develop the attack before receiving any aggression by peers.

Patterson’s “coercive cycle” hypothesis proposes that parents inadvertently behave in ways that promote oppositional behaviors more akin to confrontation styles (36). Through using force by parents, children learn to use force in their interpersonal situation and become aggressive, and eventually bullies.

The most prominent child development model theories regard the child at the center of attention who influences and gets influenced in an environment, which she/he spends time. The experiences that the child encounters in early care, and educational program, extended family and health care settings play a significant role in the child’s development (7).

4.3. Prevention of Bullying

Based on the suggestions of teachers and parents to handle and prevent bullying, the schools and teachers

should enact essential awareness, training and appropriate counseling methods. This can take the form of (i) understanding the various forms of bullying and victimization and their consequences and (ii) training to handle these circumstances of bullying and victimization both actively and passively; in a disciplined manner with the full knowledge and use of effective counseling. These should include the following items: (i) the enforcement of classroom rules against bullying, (ii) providing counseling to the victims, (iii) teaching both bully and victims how to behave and (iv) raising awareness in parents to change their parenting style to have a positive effect (36). The strategies that could be useful for parents are to make clear rules with short and simple sentences by parents for children; praise children after following the rules, and being patient and calm with children to teach effective ways of dealing with difficulties (15).

The current study was the first kind of the qualitative study of the perception of bullying about prevention and intervention among teachers and parents in Iran. In conclusion, this study showed a perception of teachers and parents toward peer bullying and the findings provided an overview of the importance of their perceptions about bullying. However, physical bullying, psychological factors of bullying and emotional hurts should be carefully considered by teachers through encouraging parents to attend anti-bullying programs. In addition, the essential role of the family was highlighted to identify effective approaches to control and help the children. Furthermore, parents need to be in touch with counselors and teachers to modify their parenting style and know how to use religious beliefs in an appropriate way to monitor and help their children who are either bully or victims. Considering the importance of the role of parents and teachers, their involvement in future programs helps to reduce both bullies and victims. In addition, due to the absence or little regard of psychological factors of bullying due to the lack of counselors, the impact of bullying seems to be more important, since, in this situation, physical and verbal bullying are more hurtful for victims.

Furthermore, Iranian counselors need to have more information about religious beliefs of parents. Although it is not recommended to interfere in their ideas, it is suggested that through appropriate communication with parents, teach them how to conduct their beliefs to have a better parenting style. Therefore, counselors can ask parents to use simple sentences about the consequences of inappropriate behavior to them. The research sample size of the current study was quite small, and no attempt was made to generalize it through extrapolation or any other statistical means. However, it is necessary to replicate this study in different types of primary and secondary schools

with larger sample sizes of participants and focus on the physical and psychological effects of bullying.

4.4. Conclusion

It is recommended that the teachers participate in anti-bullying programs orientated to prevent bullying behaviors and develop strong, supportive relationship with parents to reduce bullying through personal contacts and interactive workshops. The research findings were limited to observations of male students and interviews with parents of children who were being bullied. Further research can involve both boys and girls simultaneously and consider parents of bullied children in different gender combinations.

Footnotes

Authors' Contribution: Study design and drafting, So-maieh Salehi and Ahmed Patel; data collection through interviews and observations, Minoo Pooravari; evaluating the accuracy and interpreting the qualitative data, Mona Taghavi. All authors accompanied in revising the manuscript, read, and approved the final manuscript.

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