SCHOOL BULLYING AS A CONTRUBUTOR TO STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

AUTHORS' DATA

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ABSTRACT

The article examines school bullying as a serious socio-psychological problem that is widespread among students all over the world and leads to serious consequences for their mental health and academic motivation. In Armenia, bullying is also a pressing issue, but there is no legislative regulation in this area. The study seeks to identify effective strategies for assisting students experiencing bullying. Bullying is defined as a form of psychological violence that includes constant bullying and humiliation. Research indicates its negative impact on the psycho-emotional state of the victim, leading to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, as well as on the educational process, reducing motivation and academic performance. The article describes specific cases of bullying, emphasizing the need for comprehensive socio-psychological support. The authors offer various methods and psychotherapeutic approaches to assist victims of bullying, including working with self-esteem, developing confident behavior, and strengthening mental resilience.

Keywords: *school bullying, psychological violence, social-emotional learning, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, mental health*.

INTRODUCTION

School bullying is a widespread socio-psychological issue that affects students globally, causing profound emotional distress and long-term psychological consequences. It manifests in various forms, including verbal, physical, and psychological aggression, significantly impacting the mental health, self-esteem, and academic success of victims. Research consistently highlights the detrimental effects of bullying, which can lead to anxiety disorders, depression, and social isolation, as well as a decline in academic motivation and overall school performance.

In Armenia, bullying remains a serious concern, yet there is no specific legislative framework addressing this issue. The absence of structured legal and institutional mechanisms makes it challenging

to effectively identify, prevent, and intervene in bullying cases. While awareness of the problem is growing, there is still a lack of comprehensive strategies to support students experiencing bullying and to foster a safer school environment.

Given the critical nature of this issue, this article aims to explore effective methods and intervention strategies for assisting students who face bullying. It examines the psychological impact of bullying, identifies key risk factors, and provides an overview of socio-psychological support mechanisms that can be implemented in schools. The discussion includes specific cases of bullying, emphasizing the need for preventive programs, teacher training, and psychological interventions to protect and support affected students.

By analyzing existing research and best practices, this study seeks to contribute to the development of practical recommendations that can help mitigate bullying in Armenian schools. The proposed strategies focus on enhancing students' psychological resilience, promoting assertive behavior, and strengthening emotional well-being to empower victims and reduce the prevalence of bullying in educational institutions.

Taking into account the importance of the problem the aim of the current research is to identify the effective ways of social-psychological support for students who are bullied at school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of bullying in Republic of Armenia needs strong juridical regulation and professional support. Therefore, we have not yet comprehensively revealed the scientific bases for assessing bullying as a mental health risk, particularly when considering it as an object of social-psychological support. In particular, there are few studies that focus on combining individual and team efforts to overcome the phenomenon of bullying and its negative consequences.

According to another definition, bullying is conscious, prolonged violence by bullies against the victim (Aver'janov, 2013 p. 3). Regrettably, bullying in Republic of Armenia is pervasive in public educational institutions, targeting students based on their physical appearance, socioeconomic status, and other personal characteristics. There is a noticeable gap between the prevalence of bullying and students' willingness to acknowledge it as a problem. Thus, in the course of our psychological work, we also often meet visitors who are no longer in school but state that they were bullied during their school years and have a traumatic experience and memory. If the traumatic experience remains unresolved, it can lead to insecure social behavior and negatively impact the person's mental health. These effects can persist for a long time and reduce the quality of life of those affected.

Professional literature extensively covers school bullying as a socio-psychological problem.

Research data underscores the ubiquitous nature of school bullying, impacting one in three students globally. Studies show that bullying affects almost 32% of adolescents aged 13–15 in different regions, leading to impaired mental health and reduced motivation to learn (UNESCO, 2017) In 2017, a survey across all regions of the Republic of Armenia and Yerevan revealed that 84% of students expressed a desire for Armenia to enhance its efforts to prevent bullying, with 38% reporting instances of physical bullying at school.

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), Learners who have had a traumatic experience have difficulty adjusting to new social groups, often show high levels of anxiety, and may feel insecure around peers. Bullying disrupts the learner's fundamental need for security and acceptance, manifesting in their behavior and self-expression (Bowlby, 1982). Bullying has a negative impact on the student's psycho-emotional well-being. Bullied students experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, social isolation, and anxiety. These effects can persist for a long time and reduce the quality of life of those affected.

Research shows that bullied students are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to develop anxiety disorders and 2 to 3 times more likely to develop depression (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021; Espelage & Hong, 2020). In the long term, bullying can lead to reduced academic progress. Modern research (Aver'janov, 2013 p. 45-50) proves that the victims of bullying are those students who have academic failures, behavioral disorders, or weight disorders, come from socially disadvantaged families, and need special educational conditions. Students with excellent progress are also not exempt from bullying.

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Bullying can lead to aggressive behavior in both victims and bullies. Children who have been bullied themselves may engage in aggression toward others, which then becomes a cyclical problem that affects their social relationships (Zych, Farrington & Ttofi, 2019).

Bullying has a significant impact on the student's learning process. Many students experience decreased academic motivation, frequent absences from class, and decreased cognitive function due to bullying (Swearer, Wang, Berry & Myers, 2019). In the long term, bullying can lead to reduced academic progress. Thus, in the case of early identification and recognition of bullying, as well as professionally literate and appropriate psychological intervention, we will have a healthier educational environment, where students will feel protected and psychologically harmonious.

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Despite psychologists frequently discussing the manifestations of bullying among students, they have yet to develop a comprehensive methodological strategy to prevent bullying.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method research design, integrating elements of action research and case study analysis to explore the psychological and social impact of school bullying. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, the research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of bullying dynamics, its effects on students, and effective intervention strategies.

To collect data, the study utilizes observational methods, structured psychological interviews, and projective techniques to assess students' emotional and cognitive responses to bullying. The "Color Metaphors Methodology" (Sargsyan, 2007, p. 162) was implemented to reveal subconscious attitudes and emotional associations of bullied students toward their peers and classroom environment. This technique, widely used in psychological diagnostics, enables the assessment of underlying emotions, fears, and perceptions of students experiencing bullying.

Additionally, we applied the "Bullying Risk Questionnaire" (Bochaver et al., 2015) to systematically identify students at risk of experiencing bullying. This validated psychometric tool helps to quantify bullying exposure levels, assess behavioral indicators of victimization, and detect potential patterns of aggression within school settings. The questionnaire was supplemented with student essays, thematic drawings ("My Class" paintings), and projective storytelling techniques ("Unfinished Tale"), which provided further insight into students' emotional well-being, peer relationships, and perceived social inclusion/exclusion.

To better understand the psychological impact and coping mechanisms of bullied students, we conducted case study analyses of individual students (grades 3–9) who sought psychological support. These cases were selected based on common behavioral and emotional symptoms observed in bullying victims, including anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and academic disengagement (Smith & Brain, 2000; Olweus, 1993). The case studies allow for an in-depth examination of bullying manifestations, emphasizing the role of self-perception, peer dynamics, and school climate in shaping students' experiences.

By integrating qualitative observations, psychometric assessments, and individual case analyses, this study provides a holistic perspective on school bullying, emphasizing the need for early detection, psychological intervention, and comprehensive anti-bullying policies within the educational system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case 1.

H.V.'s child is 8 years old, studying in the 3rd grade. The mother turned to my psychological help, complaining that recently there have been significant negative changes in the child's behavior, anger, negativism, and emotional instability. In particular, the child refuses to attend school; the educational motivation has decreased sharply. The child has lost his previous vitality, often has mood swings, and shows insecure behavior. We observe social isolation in the child's interactions, which manifests as a refusal to interact with peers. We carried out psychic and psychotherapeutic work with the child for a duration of 6 weeks. We used observation and psychological interview methods. It became clear from psychological conversations that V. avoids attending physical education classes in particular. The child lacks friends in class and experiences social isolation. Pictorial methods also confirmed the child's deep feeling of insecurity. In order to find out the nature of the child's emotional-behavioral, motivational, and interpersonal relations, we used the following tools: The child depicted himself as small and lonely, a reflection of his low self-esteem and social isolation from his classmates. The child first drew and then erased the boy in the class who bullied him. This indicates that the child perceives danger and instinctively removes the potential threat (Lomakina, 2010). The study results revealed that peers verbally and physically bullied the child, and they excluded him from team games. We carried out fairy-tale therapeutic games and exercises to raise the child's psychological resources and restore the feeling of psychological security (Vardanyan, 2022 p. 21-27). From the results of psychological observation, conversation (Arzoumanyan, Mkrtchyan & Sargsyan, 2002 page 10), and the use of projective methods (Shapar' & Shapar', 2006), we assume that in the classroom the child appears in situations of psychological violence and social isolation from the classroom. The child feels unprotected and lacks social support. The child exhibits a strong sense of insult and resentment, leading us to believe that further psychological work is necessary. Thus, summarizing the results of psychological works we have carried out, we conclude that the child's rejection by the class and regular harassment towards him disrupted the latter's emotional well-being, which is manifested in the child's behavior by social distance, anger, and negativism. In order to make the obtained conclusion complete and complex, we consider it expedient to conduct psychological research work with students studying in the classroom and teachers teaching in the classroom.

Case 2.

The father of a 12-year-old boy, (D.B.), filed an application, expressing his dissatisfaction over the boy's insistence on visiting the school and seeing his classmates, whom he claims regularly annoy him. However, the father decides to turn to a psychologist so that, according to his words, "the child's

self-esteem will increase," "he will be able to manage himself in conflict situations," and "not to take his father to school for every difficult situation." D. B. is upset with his father because, according to his comment, "at least father should solve this issue," because he mentioned that the older brothers of the boys in the class come to school "see" them and no longer bother that teenager, and his father had brought him to a psychologist. The psychological interview revealed that the boy is plagued with anxious thoughts, such as "What if he stays alone in the classroom?" and "What if he gets hit?" She constantly fears losing her "supporters" in the classroom and regularly brings sweets, juice, or food for them, fearing that if they don't communicate with her, she will be left alone. The fear of being alone in the classroom forces the teenager to become a henchman of his peers. We conclude that the teenager frequently experiences indirect bullying. In the "My class" picture, the teenager drew his classmates from behind, a gesture that suggests social and psychological alienation. The "Color Metaphor" methodology yielded a qualitative review of the results (Sargsyan, 2007 p. 162).

Case 3.

(A.E.) When the girl approached me at the age of 17, she revealed that during her middle school years, specifically her teenage years, boys in her class regularly bullied her due to her weight and appearance. He sought psychological assistance due to conflicts he was experiencing with family members, particularly his grandmother. She harbored a desire to transition into a different gender; she faced criticism from everyone for dressing in boy's clothes and donning boy's hats; she struggled to envision herself as a girl, and she even exhibited aggression when referred to as "girl dear." She was no longer overweight, but she harbored a dismissive attitude towards boys who made fun of her, based on the flawed belief that "boys only harass and degrade girls." His father left the family a long time ago, and he lived with his mother and grandmother. This primary trauma was compounded by being bullied by boys his age, which led him to think inadequately. Once he transforms into a boy, he will no longer face ridicule from other boys. She had a basic belief that "all women are weak beings and cannot protect themselves." Thus, the traumatic experiences in the visitor's life are connected with the difficult history of the abusive treatment by the opposite sex, the first object of love, the abandonment of his mother by his father, and leaving him alone. Therefore, we consider denying one's gender identity as a manifestation of the defense mechanism of ostracism. In this case, we established a positive relationship with the system of "self" ideas, cognitive structures, defense mechanisms, as well as self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Specifically, we employed the "self-portrait" methodology, the psychological exercise "Treat yourself like a loved one," the psychotherapeutic technique "Letter from the Future," the exercise of reconstructing inadequate beliefs, and the "Path of Life" drawing technique (Sargsyan, 2007 p. 148). Thus, the girl overcame the cause of bullying—excess weight—but long-lasting psychological trauma

accompanied her. In order to minimize these and similar cases and to prevent the negative consequences of bullying, we consider it necessary to implement a complex social-emotional support program for teenagers in our schools.

Case 4.

S. E. is a 8-year-old boy. The mother complained that the boy is not confident, does not take the initiative, and acts aggressively in a situation of emotional tension. He avoids going to the yard alone, isolates himself in the classroom, avoids contact with other children during breaks, and refers to their classroom as a "beast house." During the initial conversation, it became evident that the mother had transferred this position to the child. The child suffers from a speech tempo and rhythm disorder, which causes him to stutter, thereby increasing his independence. He is often bullied by his classmates due to his lack of self-confidence and anxiety. Avoids presenting the lesson in class. The mother exerts excessive control over the child's behavior, claiming that if she is not present, the child will face bullying and abuse of trust. It is noteworthy that such a parent's behavior can place the child in a dependent relationship, thereby hindering the child's ability to form relationships with his classmates. It is noteworthy that the child, while writing an essay about the class, focused on the classroom walls and lighting, rather than the relationships among his classmates. Thus, the child's essay focused on the social-emotional distance that exists between him and his classmates. He drew his classmates as beasts and himself as a human, pointing out the difference between him and them. We can interpret the picture, where the child presents himself as the only human among the "animals," as a symbolic reflection of his perceptions and social difficulties (Venger, 2003).

According to the theory of symbolic interactionism, children often use symbols and images to express their experiences and interact with the world (Blumer, 1969). Recognition of similar symbols can be effective for early identification, prevention, and overcoming bullying. From research (Barlett, Gentile & Chew, 2021), it is known that family and community social support reduces the risk of developing anxiety and depression in children affected by bullying. The "Color Metaphor" methodology's results reveal a learner's dissatisfaction with their self-image, demonstrating a correlation between the concept of "I" and concepts such as "failure," "displeasure," "present," "my" responsibilities, "my class," "my classmates," and "threat". Especially those associated with the concept of "threat" are seen in this technique as sources of frustration for basic needs. Thus, the results of the conducted research present new challenges to specialists, who must devise innovative socio-psychological strategies to foster interpersonal relationships among students in public schools. Therefore, we emphasize the need for an integrated approach, including psychologists and teachers.

Implementing suitable methodological guidelines for preventive educational work and

psychological intervention in schools is crucial. It is also known from research (Barlett et al., 2021) that family and community social support reduces the risk of developing anxiety and depression in bullied children. Therefore, as we work with individual cases, we find that these children often reappear in unfavorable environments that jeopardize their mental health, leading us to emphasize systemic reforms in this area. We believe that only in the conditions of social-emotional learning among modern students in schools will the prevention of the phenomenon of bullying become realistic. Students with long-term psycho-traumatic exposure often struggle to identify and express negative emotions like fear or hurt, but Social Emotional Learning (SEL) enables them to do so (Wang & Degol, 2020; SAMHSA, 2014). Even after overcoming them, the persistence of objective factors can greatly increase the risk of re-traumatization. Through SEL, students can learn to better understand others and see them as potential friends rather than threats. SEL helps build confidence in children who feel isolated or under pressure, helping them integrate into their social environment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the pervasiveness and severity of school bullying as a critical risk factor for students' mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. Even in cases where individual psychological intervention proves effective, bullying remains a deeply entrenched social and psychological issue, requiring comprehensive, systemic solutions beyond individual counseling. The in-depth psychological analysis of the presented cases further reveals that bullying is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a symptom of broader socio-psychological dynamics within the school environment. These findings align with previous research indicating that bullying thrives in settings where aggression is normalized, interpersonal relationships lack emotional support, and school culture does not actively promote inclusion and empathy (Smith & Brain, 2000; Olweus, 1993).

The widespread nature of the objective factors that contribute to bullying indicates that preventative and intervention strategies must be holistic, multidisciplinary, and institutionally supported. This means that tackling school bullying requires a shift from reactive approaches (focused on individual victim support) to proactive and systemic measures that address the root causes of aggression and exclusion in school settings. Educators, psychologists, and policymakers must work collaboratively to develop and implement anti-bullying policies that emphasize social-emotional learning, empathy-building programs, and conflict resolution strategies.

A key target for these interventions should be the creation of a supportive school environment that fosters positive interpersonal relationships among students, teachers, and parents. Research has consistently shown that schools with strong emotional support networks, inclusive classroom practices,

and peer mentorship programs report lower rates of bullying and higher levels of student psychological well-being (Rigby, 2020; Espelage & Swearer, 2004). However, such an environment cannot be cultivated without ensuring the active and meaningful participation of all stakeholders, including students, teachers, school administrators, and parents.

To combat bullying effectively, schools must integrate comprehensive socio-psychological and educational measures, including early detection mechanisms, structured peer support systems, teacher training on identifying and addressing bullying behaviors, and parental involvement in bullying prevention strategies. Beyond individual interventions, schools must prioritize structural and cultural changes that promote respect, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility among students.

Ultimately, bullying prevention should not be viewed as a one-time intervention but as a continuous, evolving process embedded in the broader educational framework. Schools must not only respond to bullying incidents but also actively cultivate an environment where respect, empathy, and emotional well-being are prioritized. Addressing bullying requires a paradigm shift in school culture, where intervention is no longer seen as an external response to a problem but rather as an integral part of the educational system's commitment to fostering healthy and resilient individuals. Only through a cohesive, multi-level approach can we create safer, more inclusive school environments that empower students to thrive emotionally, socially, and academically.

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