

Influence of School Climate on Bullying Prevalence: Russian and International Research Experience

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Abstract. The phenomenon of school bullying is considered from the perspective of its relation to various school climate components. The main characteristics of school bullying are given,

specifically its prevalence, age, gender and socioeconomic correlates, as well as effectiveness of most common antibullying programs. Social relationships, both between students and teachers and among peers, are discussed as a significant factor of victimization. In particular, we provide data on teachers' perceptions of bullying, their preferred coping strategies, and the influence of teacher-student relationships on student involvement in bullying. The paper is designed analytically and based mostly on the findings presented in the past 10 years' Russian and foreign studies.

Keywords: bullying, victimization, teachers' perceptions of bullying, teachers' behavior strategies, effectiveness of antibullying programs.

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School Bullying: Types, Age Peculiarities, and Prevention Effectiveness

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This article aims at identifying school climate characteristics affecting the prevalence of aggressive behaviors, bullying in the first place. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines bullying as any unwanted aggressive behavior that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance, is repeated multiple times, and may inflict harm or distress on the victim including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm [Gladden et al. 2014]. Bullying always occurs in a specific social context that supports and encourages behaviors of this type, thus making them more likely to be repeated in the future. Bullying might take place

in different settings and collectives; this article zeroes in on school bullying.

Three types of bullying have been traditionally identified: physical, verbal, and social. Bullying can also be direct or indirect depending on whether the victim is able to identify the bully (indirect bullying is more typical of girls, given the social taboo against female aggression [Underwood 2003]). Researchers and practitioners also recognize cyberbullying, which is when bullies use the anonymity and outreach opportunities of the Internet for harassment purposes [Bochaver, Khlomov 2014]. In a bullying situation, youths may act as victims, bullies, or bystanders; behavioral choices of the latter include bully followers (assistants), outsiders, and defenders of victims [Olweus 2013].

According to a cross-country meta-analysis of 80 studies, on average 35% of school students are involved in some form of bullying [Zych et al. 2017]. Prevalence of bullying is assessed in the PISA Well-being Report. According to the 2015 results, Russia's victimization rate is significantly higher than the OECD average: 27% of Russian school students report being bullied on a regular basis, and 9.5% are bullied or witness bullying acts frequently (as compared to the OECD averages of 18.7 and 8.9%, respectively).

Most studies find that bullying prevalence is decreasing with age [Whitney, Smith 1993; Konishi et al. 2017]. It was shown on a sample of Russian school students that 15.7% of children were victims of bullying in Grade 6, 12.3% in Grades 7–8, and 6% in Grades 9–10 [Safonova 2014]. However, another study found no significant decrease in peer victimization between Grades 6 and 9 [Alexandrov et al. 2018]. The highest rate of bullying is observed among boys and girls aged 13–14, decreasing with age for girls and remaining high for boys until the age of 16 [Vishnevskaya, Butovskaya 2010]. By far the majority of elementary school children (aged 8–10) know about the means of bullying, even though 40% hardly ever use them. At the same time, 13% of elementary school students employ bullying tactics actively [Butovskaya, Lutsenko, Tkachuk 2012].

Types of bullying differ between rural and urban schools in Russia. Verbal abuse is the most common form overall, with insults being the most popular means. However, insults are observed 1.5 times more often in urban areas than in rural ones. Physical aggression is more typical of megalopolises, just as direct bullying, whereas rural students are more likely to be involved in indirect forms of perpetration [Butovskaya, Rusakova 2016]. According to Daniil Alexandrov and his co-authors, the risk of being bullied is not affected by the type of school (secondary school, middle school, gymnasium)¹. Yet, there is

¹ Even though Prof. Alexandrov and his co-authors use the wording “experience of being bullied and cyberbullied” in their survey scale titles, we believe that it would be more proper to talk about peer aggression, since the items offered to children do not make allowance for the specific character-

a difference in how often a child will witness peer aggression towards other peers and teachers: the lowest bystanding rates are observed in middle schools, while those in secondary schools and gymnasiums are pretty much the same [Alexandrov et al. 2018].

A number of foreign researchers [Del Rey, Ortega 2008, Lister 2015] have found that social stratification factors (parental education and family income) affect adolescents' social wellbeing at school, which has been confirmed on a Russian sample. Children whose parents did not attend college are significantly more likely to be bullied physically and psychologically than children with college-educated parents. Students from well-off families report having no school bullying experience of any type in nearly half of the cases, while the proportion is 15% lower among low-income students [Sobkin, Smyslova 2012]. In Finland, however, socioeconomic status and ethnicity are not significant predictors of bullying, unlike social hierarchy and group norms in classroom and school as well as teacher-student relationships [Saarento, Salmivalli 2015].

Involvement in school bullying has immediate and long-term consequences, affecting victims, perpetrators, and bystanders [Zych et al. 2017]. Students who are bullied show less academic improvement, tend to skip school more often, and engage less in classroom activities [Buhs 2005; Nakamoto, Schwartz 2010]. Some recent studies have shown that bullying can lead to clinical depression [Ford et al. 2017] and suicidal thoughts [Lardier et al. 2016].

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), the first of its kind, was put into life as part of the Bergen Project in 1982–1985. The program includes a set of strategies to be implemented at different levels: school level, classroom level, and individual level. The program is focused primarily on increasing school community awareness, ensuring strong disapproval of bullying behaviors by adults, and providing measures to support and protect victims [Olweus 2013]. The KiVa (short for *kiusaamista vastaan* which means “against bullying”; *kiva* also means “nice” or “friendly” in Finnish) is another popular antibullying project [Salmivalli et al. 2013].

The question naturally arises, to what extent bullying prevention programs are effective. A meta-analysis of studies [Farrington, Ttofi 2009] shows that victimization rates are approximately 20% lower in the countries where antibullying initiatives are used most actively (United States, Great Britain, and Scandinavia) than in the countries with no bullying prevention policies. However, a meta-analysis of publications assessing the effectiveness of twelve U.S. antibullying programs, backed by statistics on highly visible tragedies in high schools, reveals a sharp drop in efficacy of such programs in the 8th grade and

istics of bullying, namely power imbalance, repetition, hostile intent, and difficulty for the victim to defend oneself.

beyond; moreover, antibullying interventions sometimes even have a negative effect in older adolescents [Yeager et al. 2015].

Parents believe that schools are not too successful in preventing bullying behaviors. The overwhelming majority of U.S. parents experience ongoing resistance when they report bullying to school officials and have to choose between removing their youth from the school or let the victimization continue [Brown, Aalsma, Ott 2013]. In a recent survey of 160 Australian parents, 80 respondents reported that their child had been bullied at school, and 36% of them reported that the school did nothing about it [Rigby 2017].

Therefore, the bullying problem is far from being solved even in the countries with antibullying legislation (United States, Australia, Germany, and others). Traditionally, the risk factors for bullying include family characteristics, individual student characteristics, and school characteristics, such as socioeconomic background of the student body, human resources, location, and financial sustainability (a similar set of indicators makes the so-called School Social Wellbeing Index [Pinskaya, Kosaretskiy, Froumin 2011]).

This study seeks to identify the key characteristics of school climate — first of all, teacher-student relationships, teachers' perceptions of bullying, and their most effective response strategies — that may act as risk or protective factors of bullying victimization. Analysis involves the results of Russian and foreign studies mostly produced in the past decade; the criteria for selecting empirical articles included sample size, sample representativeness, and the use of quantitative data analysis methods.

**School
Climate as
a Factor of
Bullying**

Most researchers identify the following components of school climate: (i) peer relationships, (ii) physical environment (school and classroom design characteristics), (iii) student-specific factors (sense of belonging, discipline), and (iv) organizational culture (expectations, rules, and norms) [Chirkina, Khavenson 2017]. The existing “concept of school climate lies at the intersection of school structure and school culture.” [Fedunina 2014, p.:117]

School climate became an independent subject of research in the second half of the 20th century. Between the mid-1960s and the 1990s, it was mostly explored in the context of studying the factors of academic achievement. In recent decades, researchers have come to examine school climate at the level of teacher-student interactions, in terms of its influence on student motivation, socialization, behavior, and prevalence of school violence. Building a safe learning environment has been recognized as part of the school's fundamental mission [Fedunina, Sugizaki 2012], with more and more researchers treating school climate as a construct that allows predicting bullying prevalence and at the same time provides leverage to prevent it.

The school climate components related directly or indirectly to bullying prevalence include school safety (norms and rules, physical and perceived safety), school connectedness and the sense of belonging (in students as well as in parents), and social relationships (between teachers and students, and among peers). For instance, clear and unambiguous rules, perceived by students as “fair” and “unbreakable”, have been found to positively reduce bullying [Ma 2002; Aldridge, McChesney, Afari 2018]. It is critical that violation of rules, which includes bullying and other aggressive behaviors, should entail certain consequences for any student or teacher, and that students should be engaged in the development of school rules and regulations [Guerra, Williams, Sadek 2011]. A recent study by a Swedish research team shows that schools differ strongly by the proportion of students who are aware of the rules at school (from 52 to 100% across the sample) as well by perceived student involvement in decision making (from 0 to 92.5% across the sample) [Laftman, Östberg, Modin 2017].

Relationships with teachers are a crucial factor of bullying prevalence [Mucherah et al. 2018; Alexandrov et al. 2018]. Students must be assured that they can easily seek help from adults in a conflict situation [Eliot et al. 2010]. In schools where teachers and other students tend to intervene against bullying, fewer students report having been bullied [Laftman, Östberg, Modin 2017]. However, victims do not always ask for help. Duration and frequency of victimization do not predict help seeking from the teacher [Hunter, Boyle 2004], and the proportion of children who are bullied for a long period of time but do not tell anyone is significantly higher than the proportion of those who report bullying and break the vicious circle. Richard S. Newman’s theory of adaptive and non-adaptive help seeking [Newman 2008] states that victims of bullying decide whether or not to seek help from the teacher by assessing possible negative outcomes of such help seeking. So, what are the negative expectations that make adolescents refuse from asking for help even if they know that the teacher will definitely stop the bullying? In a study on British school students, Michael J. Boulton and his colleagues identified three most common perceived barriers preventing students from disclosing bullying to teachers even if they knew that it could help: peer disapproval (75.5%), feeling weak/undermined in case of disclosure (64.2%), and desire for autonomy, i. e. desire to solve the problem by themselves (58.8%) [Boulton et al. 2017]. The rates of help seeking for bullying are lower in high school (8th-11th grades) than in middle school, in boys than in girls, and in persistently bullied students than in first-time victims. Therefore, even the conviction that teacher’s help could be effective is often not enough for bullied children to seek help, as help seeking is associated with losing social status (however low it already may be) and self-respect.

A series of interviews with bullied youth conducted by Swedish researchers shows that deciding whether or not to continue dis-

closing victimization is even harder for bullied children than deciding whether or not to actually tell adults about bullying [Bjereld, Daneback, Petzold 2017]. Continuing to disclose victimization was closely associated with adults' reactions after finding out about the bullying. Victims who felt they had not been listened to or taken seriously did not continue to disclose bullying. This is probably why children who have poor quality relationships with teachers and parents are more likely to be victimized [Ibid.]. Of nearly 7,000 11-, 13-, and 15-year-old Swedish school students included in the study, 5.5% reported frequent victimization. Frequent victims were significantly more likely to report not feeling confidence in teachers, finding it difficult to talk to their parents, and experiencing that their family did not listen to what they had to say.

Teacher-child relationships are an independent factor affecting children's levels of victimization regardless of their friendships [Serdiouk, Berry, Gest 2016]. However many or few friends a child might have, positive and supportive relationships with a teacher are a significant predictor of lower levels of victimization. In a longitudinal study, 1st-, 3rd-, and 5th-grade students were followed across the school year. Children with a greater number of friends tended to be victimized less in the 3rd and 5th grades, but not in the 1st grade—which indicates that perceived importance of peer opinions grows with age. The importance of positive teacher-child relationships did not vary over time. Similar results were obtained in another study, where peer support was found to be a significant predictor of lower bullying rates in high-risk secondary students (Grades 7–12), and adult support in school was associated with lower bullying prevalence in high-risk elementary students (Grades 3–5) [Gage, Prykanowsky, Larson 2014].

Bullying is always closely related to social context and never occurs outside of it. This has led to the hypothesis that influence of student-teacher relationships on bullying-related behaviors differs as a function of students' social statuses [Longobardi et al. 2018]. Using sociometric data, the researchers divided 435 middle school students (Grades 6–8) into four groups: popular, rejected, neglected, and controversial. It was found that bullying was most often initiated by rejected students who had conflictual relationships with teachers. The same relation, yet much weaker, was observed for popular and controversial students. In neglected students, close student-teacher relationships were positively associated with pro-bully behaviors. It can be assumed that rejected students perceive active behaviors such as having conflicts with teachers and peers as a means to gain social status; they do not fear conflicts as they have little to lose. As for neglected students, they have no conflictual relations with peers. Even though they feel that they are not preferred by other students, they also feel that their position in the social hierarchy does not give them the necessary power to become bullies. On the other hand,

neglected students who have established close relationships with teachers try to act as pro-bullies whenever possible, as a means to become less neglected as they take part in activities together with their peers and may gain support from other students over time.

Teachers' Perceptions of School Bullying and Preferred Coping Strategies

Teachers' understanding of bullying determines how they respond to problematic situations [Swearer, Hymel 2015]. How teachers understand and respond to incidents is influenced by whether they view an incident as serious or consider the victimized child responsible, whether the child matches their assumptions about victim characteristics and behaviors, and whether they feel empathy for the child [Mishna et al. 2005]. Teachers' implicit perceptions of bullying are related to student gender and age and affect their choice of coping strategy [Kochenderfer-Ladd, Pelletier 2008]. Bullying among boys is more likely to be treated as an inevitable evil, i. e. to be perceived as normative behavior. The reason for this must be the tendency of boys to exhibit aggressive behavior more often than girls, which is always manifest. Teachers tend to intervene less often in bullying incidents involving boys, as boys are expected to be able to stand up for themselves. Teachers rarely give advice like "Take the bullies down a peg" to boys, probably trying to avoid causing even more aggression. This assumption has been proved empirically: classes where teachers urge children to "whack the bully back" show increased victimization levels in boys and highly aggressive girls [Troop-Gordon, Ladd 2015]. Meanwhile, victimization is lower for boys in classes where teachers simply encourage students to be able to stand up for themselves. In this case, boys probably start trying to defend themselves in non-aggressive ways.

Most Kenyan high school students report that teachers stop peer perpetration when they see it; the percentages were 85% in all-girls schools and 95% in all-boys schools² [Mucherah et al. 2018]. The authors did not find any difference in the prevalence of bullying as a function of student gender or age, but they found a relation between bullying and the type of school. The odds of becoming a perpetrator or a victim was found significantly higher in all-girls schools than in all-boys schools. This study does not provide sufficient information to judge whether bullying rates among boys are lower because teachers in all-boys schools intervene in bullying incidents more often, or recognize them better, or address them proactively, falling under the stereotype about boys being more aggressive than girls.

Russian teachers have rather accurate perceptions of bullying types and manifestations, which are in line with the existing scientific findings [Bochaver, Zhilinskaya, KhloMOV 2015]. As teachers de-

² In Kenya's education system, the most prestigious national high schools are predominantly single sex boarding schools.

scribe bullying incidents, they mention both direct (verbal abuse, physical aggression, mockery, humiliation) and indirect (rejection, neglect) forms of bullying. When explaining the phenomenon of bullying, teachers largely maintain that bullying occurs along one of the two major patterns, “xenophobia (peers)—otherness (victim)” or “need for power and authority (perpetrator)—fear of neglect (onlookers)”. The respondents were well-informed of the broad array of possible negative outcomes of bullying “affecting not only the victim and the perpetrator but also the bystanders and the teachers, which indicates that they are probably motivated to prevent bullying.” [ibid.:113] When teachers describe their bullying responses, the tremendous gap between what they know and how they behave becomes obvious. Theoretical knowledge almost never translates into daily practices, and most of the time teachers respond to bullying spontaneously, relying on their previous experience and intuition.

Three major teacher strategies to deal with bullying were identified based on a large survey of U.S. school teachers and their students [Troop-Gordon, Ladd 2015]. Teachers convinced that victims should be able to stand up to aggressors often give advice of this kind to their bullied students. They also contact parents a lot, probably to encourage them to help their children learn to defend themselves against bullies. Perceiving the teacher as actively contacting parents may be linked to higher victimization levels among boys, but not among girls. In high school, parental assistance is perceived by bullies as indication that the victim is weak and helpless on his/her own. Teachers who regard bullying as normative behavior are less likely to intervene when they see or learn about an incident; they never help the victim unless they feel personal sympathy for the child. The third category includes teachers who believe that the best way to safeguard victimized children is to enable them to avoid aggressive peers. Such teachers help victims find ways to walk away from perpetrators and try to separate aggressors and victims in the classroom to reduce interactions between them. They also help victimized children find other peers to play and communicate with. This strategy is vitally important and deeply justified psychologically. The need for affiliation and belonging is a fundamental human need. With bullying, it is not enough to isolate the victim from the bully or group of bullies; the victimized child should be included in a group that will make them feel safe and connected. Isolation alone, without inclusion, will only trigger chronic stress in the victim.

German scholars asked 625 teachers, of whom about 75% were women, to assess a hypothetical bullying episode in terms of which intervention strategy they would prefer [Burger et al. 2015]. The options included working with victims, working with bullies, involving other adults, ignoring the incident, and authority-based interventions. The great majority of the teachers (82%) preferred punitive authority-based interventions. The second most popular strategy was work-

ing with bullies, followed by involvement of other adults. Working with victims was the second least popular option, and none of the respondents was willing to ignore the incident. Similar structures of teachers' antibullying strategies, with authority-based interventions and punitive measures prevailing, have also been observed in Great Britain, Finland, and the United States. The danger of this approach is that teachers do not attempt to teach bullies feel empathy for victims, or understand the harm they have caused and the victim's feelings. Punitive measures usually have short-term outcomes, so aggressors try to switch to covert forms of bullying that are less identifiable.

A number of foreign studies have proved harsh discipline and punitive interventions in bullying to be ineffective. A team of Philippine researchers conducted a survey of high school students (M age = 14.3 years, N = 401) to examine how the experience of harsh teacher discipline, verbal (being rude) and physical (slapping, etc.), is related to students' experience of bullying victimization and perceived teacher support [Banzon-Librojo, Garabiles, Alampay 2017]. The findings were described using a structural model which shows that experiences of harsh teacher discipline predicted higher bullying victimization and students' negative perception of teacher support. Unlike in studies based on European samples, negative perception of teacher support is not related to bullying prevalence in the Philippine sample. This could possibly be explained by the Philippine school culture, which regards teacher as a distant and rather authoritarian figure who is not wired to support students or care about their psychological wellbeing.

Harsh disciplines (whether verbal pressure and rudeness or physical abuse, such as hitting with a ruler on the knuckles) legitimize violence towards others, making students replicate violent behaviors in interpersonal communication; this is a cross-cultural pattern, by and large. Estonian scholars have found empirical evidence for the impact of teachers' controlling behavior on students' feelings and bullying behavior (M age = 12.9 years, N = 600) [Hein, Koka, Hagger 2015]. In their study, school children were asked to assess the behavior of their physical education teachers. The structural equation model created by the authors discriminates among four teachers' controlling strategies: controlling use of praise and extrinsic rewards, negative conditional regard (e. g. "you have really let me down"), intimidation, and excessive controlling behavior (interference in aspects of students' lives that are not directly associated with their schooling). Two of these controlling strategies—negative conditional regard and intimidation—were found to predict students' perceived thwarting of basic psychological needs (for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—according to Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory that the authors drew upon), which made them feel anger and turn to aggressive behavior. In other words, if the student's sense of autonomy has been diminished as a result of teachers' controlling behavior, it may lead to the use of direct and hostile strategies to control his or her peers; if the

student's need for competence is thwarted, he or she may have a desire to demonstrate physical superiority; finally, if a student feels isolated from others, he or she may turn to aggressive behavior.

Conclusion Publications on school bullying keep rising in number, originating from nearly all over the world. The reasons for this include high prevalence of this destructive behavior in children and adolescents as well as the harmful consequences of bullying on their psychological, physical, and social wellbeing.

Bullying only occurs in specific social contexts where students experience strong negative feelings (anger, fear, frustration), which they fuel into aggression towards weaker peers to maintain or increase their status in a group.

School climate—or, rather, its components such as feeling safe at school, the sense of belonging in school, and, most of all, social interactions (teacher-student and peer relationships)—is a significant factor predicting bullying behavior.

The overview of studies allows us to identify which school climate characteristics can be the factors that reduce the prevalence of bullying. These include, first of all, positive teacher-student relationships, which play a significant role in any grade, as compared to peer friendships which only come to the fore as a factor of bullying prevention in middle and high school. Conflictual relationships with teachers are associated with higher risk of victimization, especially for students who do not enjoy popularity among their peers.

Perceived teacher support and inescapable and equal consequences for anyone involved in inappropriate behavior (no teachers' "pets") are very strong predictors of bullying prevention.

Authority-based interventions and punitive responses are teachers' most preferred coping strategies today. Available research findings demonstrate ineffectiveness of such measures against bullying, as they only legitimize social violence and make perpetrators turn to less identifiable and more sophisticated ways of bullying. Strategies that suggest involvement of other adults including parents and individual work with bullies and victims have been found to be the most efficient ones. Bullies should be taught to understand how harmful their behavior is, what the victim feels, and how they can fix it. Victimized children, in their turn, should be given help in finding a safe environment and a friendly social circle.

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