
BULLYING IN SCHOOLS: A PERSISTENT PROBLEM, AFFECTING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract: *Bullying in schools is an issue that has drawn significant attention in the last 15 years from researchers, educators, and policymakers. Bullying can have different forms, including physical, verbal, or even cyberbullying, each with implications not only for the victims, but also for the bully and the school environment. In spite of different types of measures that have been implemented, the problem is still persistent, affecting students' mental health and furthermore potential mental disorder in adulthood. The article plans to explore the prevalence of the phenomenon, highlights on factors that can be triggers and on proposal of effective intervention strategies in order to better understand the dynamics of the phenomenon. It also talks about the new face of bullying, the cyberbulling, enabled by nowadays constant access of teenagers to technology,*

Keywords: *bullying, school, education, prevalence, types, factors, intervention.*

Theoretical approach

Bullying is characterised by repeated aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. It can have various forms, including physical, verbal, and relational aggression, can take place both in traditional environment, as schools or offices, but also in digital environments, in form of cyberbullying. The definition and perception of bullying can influence how individuals respond to these

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behaviors in daily life, so there is important to understand the meaning of this behaviour and what types of bullying exist, in order to have efficient responses (Aia-Utsal & Kõiv, 2019).

There are several dimensions of the bullying phenomenon: physical bullying - includes but is not limited to repeated behaviors such as: hitting, obstructing; slapping, destruction / dispossession of personal items; verbal bullying - includes but is not limited to repeated behaviors such as: name-calling, insulting, teasing, humiliating, intimidating, sending messages with homophobic or racist content; social bullying, often hidden, difficult to identify / recognize, carried out with the aim of destroying social reputation of a child and to place him in a situation of public humiliation - includes but is not limited to behaviors repeated types: lying and/or spreading rumours, making pranks with the aim of humiliating / creating embarrassing situations, encouraging social exclusion /isolation, gossip. (Grădinaru et al, 2016)

The cyberbullying, a new form of bullying, can be hidden or obvious and refers to any technology-mediated bullying behavior identified in the space of social media (websites, messaging, etc.) includes but is not limited to repetitive behaviours of type: emails, posts, messages, images, films with abusive / insulting / offensive content; deliberate exclusion of a child in the online space; hacking passwords of personal accounts (e-mail, Facebook, etc.) (Grădinaru et al, 2016)

Significant amount of research (Bogart et al., 2014; Dantchev et al., 2019, Juvonen et al., 2003, Aia-Utsal & Kõiv, 2019 and others) indicates that the danger of bullying comes from the fact that it has profound and lasting effects on mental health. Studies based on longitudinal investigation have explained that individuals who experience bullying during childhood are at higher risk for developing mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation in adulthood (Bogart et al., 2014; Dantchev et al., 2019).

Dantchev found that sibling and peer bullying have independent and cumulative effects on mental health outcomes, underscoring the need for awareness among parents and healthcare professionals regarding the long-term consequences of victimization (Dantchev et al., 2019). Juvonen noted that bullying not only affects the direct victims but also has larger implications for standers that assist in front of it and the school environment and can lead to a culture of fear and disengagement in school,

if measures are not taken to combat the phenomenon (Juvonen et al., 2003).

The dynamics of bullying implies also the roles that individuals occupy in it, such as the bully, the victim, the bully-victim relationship. Twemlow (2006) talks about two distinct types of bullies: the sadistic bully, who derives pleasure from inflicting harm, and the bully-victim, who may provoke bullying behavior and then react as a victim (Twemlow et al., 2006). This duality stresses the psychological complexity involved in bullying behaviour and need for intervention that address both the aggressor and the victim. Most of the time, the bully is a person that also faced trauma or different form of mental distress that were not discussed or seen.

Prevalence of verbal bullying has been shown to have particularly severe impacts on adolescent mental health, frequent verbal abuse correlating with declines in mental well-being (Man et al., 2022) and important factors such as gender, disability, and social identity plays a important role in understanding impact of bullying. Cappadocia highlighted that children with autism face unique challenges in bullying situations, often intensified by their social vulnerabilities (Cappadocia et al., 2011).

Other research (Wang & Chen, 2023, Jansen et al., 2012) shows that socio-economic status of the students has a role in the prevalence of bullying behaviors among students. Wang and Chen's study stresses that lower family economic socio-cultural status correlates with higher instances of both overall and physical bullying among adolescents (Wang & Chen, 2023). Jansen also reveals that children from disadvantaged social backgrounds are more susceptible to victimization and aggression. The implications of these findings emphasize the need for interventions that considers the socio-economic environment of the students in order to address bullying. (Jansen et al., 2012).

The psychological impact of bullying extends the victims, affecting the academic performances and psycho-social functioning inside the schools. Experiences of bullying are associated with depressive symptoms and poor functioning in school and social relationships. Also, bullying can lead to long-term psychological distress, that can persist into adulthood (Sattar et al., 2019, Ortega et al., 2012).

The role of school authorities, particularly teachers, is very important in prevention and intervention upon bullying. Hektner and Swenson discuss

that teachers are key instruments of change in anti-bullying programs, but often do not have adequate training and awareness related to the complexity of bullying behaviors (Hektner & Swenson, 2011). This gap in knowledge can limit effective responses to bullying incidents. Bjärehed emphasizes the importance of addressing moral disengagement among colleagues, as witness behavior significantly influences the prevalence of bullying (Bjärehed et al., 2019). Programs that educate students on the importance of adequate social behavior and empower them to intervene can achieve a supportive school cultural environment.

Parental involvement is also very important in combating bullying. Some research (Cortes & Ladd, 2014, Malm et al., 2016) signs that classrooms where teachers actively involve parents in addressing bullying cases report lower levels of victims. This focuses the necessity of a cooperative method that involves families in conversation about bullying, providing them the tools to assist their children. Also, parental responses to bullying incidents can significantly influence the school climate and the efficacy of anti-bullying strategies

The prevalence of bullying is not uniform across different educational settings. Community schools seem to report bullying more often compared to private institutions. This gap suggests that the school environment, including its policies and culture, plays a major role in influencing bullying behaviors, so the context of each school should be measured with its challenges and available resources. (Sah & Sharma, 2022).

Cyberbullying has emerged as a particularly concerning form of bullying, especially among nowadays adolescents. Cyberbullying prevalence have peak during middle and high school years, highlighting the need for targeted interventions in these age groups (Selkie et al., 2016). The anonymity and easy reach of online platforms can exacerbate the effects of bullying, making it necessary for schools to educate students about responsible online behavior and the consequences of cyberbullying upon other colleagues and themselves.

Bullying in educational settings has profound psychological impacts on students, influencing their mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. Victims of bullying are at higher risk of developing psychological problems as anxiety, depression or suicidal ideation. Students who experience bullying often report higher levels of sadness and

hopelessness, that are important predictors of victimization and perpetration in bullying scenarios, also the studies show that there is a strong correlation between bullying experiences and increased suicidal thoughts and behaviors among youth (Xu et al., 2020, Holt et al., 2015).

Bullying in schools in Europe and Romania

Bullying appears to be widespread in the EU, with more than 30% of students that reported to have noticing somebody being bullied in front of them. Recent surveys, such as those conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the European Commission, have highlighted the prevalence of bullying in schools. For example, the FRA's 2020 survey on the rights of children in the EU found that around 18% of children reported being bullied in school at least once in the past couple of months. Also, the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) provides insights into various issues, including bullying among adolescents.

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant worry, especially with the increased use of technology among students. (FRA, 2020). The same report shows that one of the most concerning facts about bullying in schools in Europe is the persistence of both traditional and cyberbullying. With the increasing use of technology among young people, cyberbullying has become more prevalent and can occur 24/7, making it harder for victims to find or require help. Additionally, the impact of bullying on mental health is alarming, in a context that already shows that mental issues are increasing among teenagers.

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in mental health problems among teenagers. Studies indicate that rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues have all risen. Research from various health organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that the prevalence of anxiety and depression among adolescents has increased by approximately 25-30% in many regions since the early 2010s, suicidal thoughts and attempts among teenagers have also risen, with some surveys indicating that up to 20% of high school students have seriously considered suicide in recent years. More, COVID-19 pandemic

exacerbated these issues, through increased isolation, loneliness, lack of routines, higher stress, that affected the mental health of young people.

Estimates of bullying prevalence can vary, but countries like Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania have reported higher levels of school bullying in various surveys and studies. For instance, the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) and reports from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) have indicated these nations often show elevated rates of bullying incidents. It is important to consider that cultural factors, practices regarding reporting, and definitions of bullying can influence these statistics. Some countries might have better reporting mechanisms or more awareness campaigns, leading to higher reported rates, while others may underreport the issue.

For Lithuania, reports from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights show that around 15-20% of students are reported being bullied at school. For Latvia, in a 2021 study, approximately 18% of students reported experiencing bullying, with a notable percentage also indicating they had bullied others, the same survey pointed to high levels of cyberbullying, which have been in rise. For Bulgaria, a 2020 survey revealed that around 20% of students reported being bullied at school, particularly verbal and social bullying has been identified as a major concern in Bulgarian schools.

At the other end, nordic countries reports lowest prevalence of bullying.

Countries in Europe that typically report lower levels of bullying in schools include Finland, known for its comprehensive education system and strong anti-bullying policies, Finland often reports lower instances of bullying. Norway, similar to Finland, emphasizes a supportive school environment and has effective anti-bullying initiatives. Sweden with a focus on inclusion and emotional well-being, often sees lower reported rates of bullying. Denmark, its educational approach includes strong social and emotional learning, contributing to lower bullying rates, Iceland, this country has reported low levels of bullying, aided by small school sizes and community involvement. These countries often implemented proactive measures and adopted a positive school culture, which helped mitigate bullying.

Table no 1. Percentage of Students Reporting Bullying in different European countries

Country	Percentage of Students Reporting Bullying	Year of Survey	Source of data
Finland	5-10%	2020	“National School Health Promotion Study”
Norway	8%	2019	Source of data: “The Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study”
Sweden	10%	2021	“Swedish National Survey of Children and Youth”
Denmark	6-8%	2019	“The Danish National School Survey”
Netherlands	15%	2021	“Monitor Bullying in Schools”
Lithuania	15-20%	2021	“Children’s Rights Monitoring Report”
Latvia	18%	2021	“Bullying in Latvian Schools: A National Survey”
Bulgaria	20%	2020	“National Survey on School Bullying”
Ireland	12%	2020	“National Anti-Bullying Research and Policy”
Germany	13%	2020	“German Health Interview and Examination Survey for Children and Adolescents (KiGGS)”
Romania	28%	2022	Violence of any kind affects children's physical and emotional health, Save the Children (Salvați copiii) Report.

Source of data: mentioned National Reports

Romanian schools have been documented in various studies, indicating that approximately one in three children experienced bullying, despite governmental initiatives pointed at prevention and education (Palade & Pascal, 2023). This alarming statistic stresses the need for effective interventions and a larger understanding of the dynamics of the phenomenon in the Romanian educational context. The nature of bullying in Romania encompasses various forms, including physical, verbal, and cyberbullying.

Data from nonprofit organisation Save the children (Salvati copiii) shows that 28% of the children say that they have witnessed bullying with high frequency (often and very often) in the educational unit they attend, data collected in 2022 (Salvati copiii, 2024). The percentages are higher than those indicated by the Save the Children study from 2016, when only 22.7% of respondents stated that. In this context, Save the Children

Romania developed and in time expended a program for the prevention of bullying in kindergartens and schools, considering that the whole community can support the schools, in order to facilitate the functioning of the anti-bullying action groups. (Salvati copiii, 2024)

Research indicates that verbal bullying is the most common type of aggression reported in Romanian schools, with significant implications for the mental health and academic performance of victims. The detrimental effects of bullying extend beyond immediate emotional distress; victims often experience decreased concentration and increased frustration, which can lead to declines in academic performance. Furthermore, the long-term consequences of bullying can manifest as anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues that persist into adulthood (Muresan & Porkoláb, 2017).

In Romania, the school environment plays a crucial role in either mitigating or exacerbating bullying behaviors. Studies have shown that inadequate teacher involvement and poor student-teacher relationships can perpetuate a culture of bullying within schools. Teachers' responses to bullying incidents significantly influence the school climate, and their passive presence may inadvertently validate bullying behaviors among students. Thus, training teachers to recognize and effectively intervene in bullying situations is essential for fostering a safer school environment.

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant concern in Romania, particularly with the increasing use of digital platforms among adolescents. Studies have shown that Romanian students report higher rates of cyberbullying victimization compared to their peers in other countries (Calmaestra et al., 2020). This trend necessitates a dual focus on both traditional bullying and cyberbullying in prevention strategies, as the two forms of aggression can intersect and exacerbate the overall bullying landscape (Negrilă & Braşov, 2019).

Moreover, the legislative framework surrounding bullying in Romania has evolved to address these issues more effectively. Recent legislative changes emphasize the importance of professional development for teachers regarding bullying prevention and intervention strategies (Diac & Grădinaru, 2022). This shift reflects a growing recognition of the need for systemic changes within the educational framework to combat bullying effectively. Despite these efforts, challenges remain in the implementation

of anti-bullying programs. A study indicated that many existing programs in Romania lack the necessary resources and support to be fully effective (Karmaliani et al., 2020).

In Romania, the prevalence of mental disorders among children and adolescents is alarming, necessitating a holistic approach that addresses both bullying and mental health support (Rahbar et al., 2021). Furthermore, the role of parents in shaping children's attitudes towards bullying is significant. Studies suggest that children raised in environments where bullying is normalized may be more likely to engage in bullying behaviors themselves. Thus, parental involvement in anti-bullying initiatives is crucial for fostering empathy and understanding among children.

Solutions to tackle the problem

The psychological impact of bullying on students is affecting not only those directly involved but also the broader educational environment. The evidence strongly supports the need for comprehensive anti-bullying strategies that include psychological support and intervention to mitigate these adverse effects.

A solution that is proposed by several experts include an anti-bullying action group established in each school/high school, which will include the director of the educational unit, the school counselor teacher, teaching staff trained in the issue of violence, including psychological violence-bullying, representatives of students and parents' representatives. The role of this group is to prevent, identify and resolve bullying situations between students, which can take place through physical, verbal, relational and/or cyber actions.

Reports from organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and various educational institutions (like World Health Organization (WHO), European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), UNICEF, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) From UK) advocate for such comprehensive frameworks as part of effective anti-bullying initiatives.

Save the children Report from 2016 collected data also referring to proposed solutions for stopping bullying. The data reveals that presently

taken measures are declared not being successful in the long term. The present measures seem to be a mix of parents- teachers intervention, the bully being labeled and/or receiving a sanction at school and anti-bullying measures are related to singular events, and mostly to the cases of physical violence or an act of severe humiliation. Adults are generally described, by children from the mentioned study, as tolerant to psychological and emotional forms of bullying. As a result, classic intervention in bullying usually comes very late, when the conflict escalates, and physical violence had already taken place. (This represents a paradox: while children stated that humiliation was one of the most severe forms of violence, they tend to seek and receive help mainly if the violence is physical).

In some cases, even physical violence is overlooked or ignored: children mentioned that there are some teachers who don't want to get involved (“the unwritten rule is that as long as the fight takes place outside the school, it's fine, they told us to keep the fight outside”). Conclusions of the study show that schools do not have a common approach in cases of violence (not only bullying) and that some teachers are more involved in stopping violent behavior, whereas others remain passive (“what matters is whether the teacher cares”). Some kids mentioned that there are situations when some teachers encourage bullying or bullies (constantly humiliating some children themselves).

When asked about the intervention of school counselors, most children stated that they either did not know what to do or that the intervention is only done if the teachers send the children with problems to a counselor. In terms of interventions coming from parents, the interviewed children tended not to provide many comments or examples. In short, they believe that the impact of parental intervention may vary - there are parents who make worse the relationship between children (for example, when parents come to school to “defend” their son/daughter by asking for explanations or “disciplining” the child with whom their son / daughter is in conflict) but also other parents who contribute to reducing violence. (Grădinaru C. et al. 2016)

Conclusions

Addressing bullying in schools requires a multidisciplinary approach that considers the interplay of individual, familial, and societal factors. Effective interventions must be evidence-based, culturally sensitive, and

inclusive of all stakeholders, including students, parents, and educators. By adopting a comprehensive understanding of bullying and its impacts, schools can create safer and more supportive environments favourable to learning and personal development.

The cumulative evidence suggests that addressing bullying is not only a matter of immediate intervention but also a long-term commitment to promoting supportive school conditions that prioritizes mental health.

Empowering students to take an active stance against bullying through initiatives has shown promise in other contexts, suggesting that similar approaches could be helpful in case of Romania (Arënliu et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of such programs may be limited if not supported by adult intervention, highlighting the need for a complete approach that involves both students and teachers (Arënliu et al., 2019).

The impact of socio-cultural factors on bullying behaviors in Romania cannot be overlooked. Research indicates that individualism-collectivism dynamics influence bullying victimization rates, with collectivist cultures potentially offering more strong support systems for victims (Smith & Robinson, 2019). In Romania, where collectivist values are prevalent, the community's response to bullying can significantly affect the experiences of victims and perpetrators alike. Understanding these cultural shades is vital for developing targeted interventions that resonate with the local context.

Additionally, the stigma associated with bullying can deter victims from seeking help, further complicating the issue (Rahbar et al., 2021). Therefore, creating a supportive environment where students feel safe to report bullying incidents is paramount. The intersection of bullying with mental health issues is another critical area of concern. Research has identified a correlation between bullying victimization and various mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression (Rahbar et al., 2021).

Bullying schools is a complex phenomenon that requires a comprehensive approach involving students, teachers, parents, and policymakers. While significant steps have been made in addressing bullying through legislative changes and educational initiatives, the persistent prevalence of bullying indicates that more work is needed. Effective interventions must consider the unique cultural, social, and psychological factors of every country to

create a safer and more supportive educational environment for all students.

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