Children's Perceptions of Bullying

Full Reference

Bosacki, S. L., Marini, Z. A., & Dane, A. V. (2006). Voices from the classroom: Pictorial and narrative representations of children's bullying experiences. *Journal of Moral Education, 35,* 231-245.

Keywords

Bullying, children, qualitative, drawings, narrative representations, school, moral understanding

Main Questions

What explanations do children give for why children bully others? How do children view the impact of bullying on the child being victimized? What do children think would work for intervening in a bullying situation or preventing a bullying situation in the first place?

Background

Researchers define bullying as the repeated use of aggression aimed at intending to harm another individual and gain power over that individual. Recently, researchers have begun to view bullying as a moral issue because it involves the intention to hurt another person. Many researchers also have attempted to understand how children involved in bullying make decisions about social problems they face with other children. These researchers have noticed that aggressive children believe that aggressive responses to social problems are more appropriate and more successful than do non-aggressive children. Aggressive children also underestimate the damage to social relationships and the harm done to the victimized child. As well, aggressive children tend to view aggression as less wrong than their peers. Many past studies involve the examination of decision making in bullying situations, but these studies often fail to provide children with opportunities to discuss their understanding of bullying experiences in their own voices. Bullying is complex (e.g., can take different forms such as physical, verbal, social, and can involve various numbers of individuals in one episode) and changes with time (e.g., physical bullying is more common in childhood and sexual harassment is more common in adolescence). Therefore, it is difficult to capture accurately the true experiences of these peer interactions through the traditional research methods of paper-and-pencil surveys. On the other hand, qualitative research designs provide rich and unique detail that is not captured with traditional surveys. Through qualitative research, children are able to use their own words to articulate unusual or non-intuitive aspects of bullying that typically are not included in traditional theories tested by researchers.

Who Was Involved

Eighty-two children between the ages of 8 and 12 drew a picture depicting a bullying incident. Then we asked each child about their understanding of the bullying experiences they drew. The questions included:
In your picture, how do you think the bully feels?
What is the bully thinking?
Why would s/he want to bully?
How do you think the one being picked on feels?
What is s/he thinking?
Why is s/he being picked on?
What could s/he do so that s/he is not picked on?"

What We Found

Almost all of the pictures involved only the child bullying and child being bullied. A small number (7%; 6 of 82) of the pictures involved a more complex group process. The number of characters in the drawings increased somewhat with older artists. Most children's drawings depicted characters of the same sex as each other and as the artist. Ten percent of the children did include mixed-sex scenarios and all but one of those drawings involved a boy bullying a girl. Generally, the child depicted as bullying another child was either larger (40% of drawings) or the same size (57% of drawings). Predictably, children drew the majority of their bullying characters with smiles on their faces (78%), whereas the victimized characters often (48%) had negative facial expressions, either crying or upset. As well, older children were less likely to use verbal content (speech bubbles) for the victimized character. This suggests that victimized children may speak out less as they get older. The victimized characters had a stronger voice among the younger artists than among the older artists.

Most children described the intentions of the bullying child as instrumental in nature. For example, the child bullying might want money or food from the child being victimized. Some of the reasons a child might bully involved reactive aggression, such as being jealous because the victimized child is prettier. By beating that child up, the one who is bullying will be prettier. Regarding the victimized character, children were consistent in the reasons they gave for why a child gets victimized. Most of the reasons involved physical characteristics, such as being ugly, being small, looking different, and wearing weird clothes. Almost every child stated that the victimized character felt negatively about the victimization (e.g., sad, embarrassed, ashamed). Similarly, most children believe that victimized children think self-focused thoughts when they are victimized. For example, a victimized child might think "I am ugly" rather than "that kid is not being nice".

Many children thought that the victimized character should tell a teacher to make the bullying stop. Psychological coping strategies were also common and included talking it out with the bullying character, walking away from the situation, ignoring the bullying, and confronting the child about the bullying. These psychological strategies demonstrate children's ability to think of active ways to deal with bullying.

Implications

The narratives of these children may have important implications for those who design and implement prevention and intervention programs for bullying. Children identified relatively stable, unchangeable characteristics as reasons for why children are bullied (being ugly or small, weird clothes, different ethnic backgrounds, etc.). The relative permanent nature of these factors seems to suggest that they cannot be easily altered through simple intervention programs. Interestingly, children did not mention skills deficits as reasons for why a child is bullied. Most programs target this particular area and may not correspond with what children view as the main reason behind bullying. Programs that focus only on areas of skill enhancement may be too narrow in scope. It may be beneficial to have programs that include, in addition to skill building, classroom-wide lessons about morally based issues such as creating a positive classroom climate and countering social prejudice.