

Bullying in Rural Schools among Early Adolescents in Sri Lanka; Prevalence of Bullying Acts and Common Responses to Bullying

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ABSTRACT

Prevalence of bullying among school going adolescents was estimated to be high (approximately 37%) in Sri Lanka according to the Global School based student Health Survey. However, limited number of studies were carried out in Sri Lanka on bullying among adolescents, specifically about early adolescents in rural settings. In this study, we aimed to fill the research gap in local literature. The objectives of this study were a) to describe prevalence of bullying acts and different types of bullying in schools, and b) to describe common responses to bullying among early adolescents in Galenbindunuwewa educational zone in Sri Lanka. A cross sectional study was carried out in three schools in Galenbindunuwewa educational zone. A multi-stage sampling method incorporated simple random sampling and a systematic sampling method was used. Three hundred seventy-two students in grade 7, 8, 9 (12-15 years of age) participated in the study. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed. Bullying acts were reported as prevalent among early adolescents in schools in Galenbindunuwewa educational zone. Calling mean names, pushing, and hitting, disturbing learning processes were the most prevalent bullying acts. The most common response of the victims for bullying were tolerating it and walking away.

Keywords- adolescents, bullying, school, prevalence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is one of the most prevalent behavior of violence observed in schools among adolescents worldwide [1, 2, 3]. It has been identified as the most common form of aggression and victimization during adolescence which affects one- third of school age youth [4]. Bullying has been recognized as a leading adolescent health issue in many countries throughout the world [4,5,6]. World Health organization (WHO) has identified bullying as one of the public health issues which has not still given enough attention to and it emphasize the need for immediate policy actions to mitigate [7].

According to the widely used definition by Olweus, "bullying occurs when a person is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part

of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending him or herself" [8]. Bullying is an intentional act, which is meant to hurt the other person. There is a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Fighting between adolescents with similar strength does not count as a bullying act [9]. Bullying acts are commonly categorized into several types – physical, verbal, social, sexual and cyber bullying [8].

Bullying has serious negative consequences on health of adolescents, not limited to the victim, but also for the bully [10]. Health impacts on a victim sometimes costs not only health but also lives. Commonly reported effects of bullying on victims are poor social adjustment, psychological distress [10], unhappiness [11], low self-esteem [12], development of psychosomatic symptoms [11, 13], depression [13, 14], suicide ideation [14, 15], absence from school and poor performance in education [16], being compelled to drug abuse [17]. Bullying in adolescent age in schools is a proven predictor of delinquency, violence, and anti-social behavior in adulthood [18]. Some of the negative effects on bully is unhappiness, having psychosomatic symptoms [11], increased risk of depression, suicide ideation and suicide attempts [14].

The prevalence of bullying in schools among adolescents varies across different countries in the world [4]. When comparing the prevalence of bullying with global and other countries in Asia, Sri Lanka reported to have higher level of bullying among adolescents [19]. Prevalence of bullying in Sri Lanka was estimated around 37% (37.9 (±4.3)) of among students in 13-15 age group [19], 37.7% among 13- 17 age group [20] according to Global School based student Health survey (GSHS).

Several studies were carried out on bullying among adolescents in schools in Sri Lanka. GSHS survey assessed the prevalence of bullying among adolescents in schools, however, the aim of the survey was not to study bullying among adolescents in depth [20]. Two other studies were conducted in Sri Lanka on bullying among school going children, but not specifically about school going early adolescents in rural schools in Sri Lanka. They were a cross-sectional study conducted in Kandy district including 896 adolescents in grade 9, 10 and 11 [17] and a case control study conducted with age 5-12 children attending mental

health clinics [21]. Socio- economic context and social dynamics are different in rural areas compared to urban and semi urban areas, which is a known factor associated with types of bullying [22]. This current study aims to describe prevalence (of bullying acts) and different types of bullying in schools and common responses of early adolescents in Galenbindunuwewa educational zone in Sri Lanka.

II. METHODS

This was a cross- sectional study carried out as the first phase of a larger research project on bullying comprised of two components – an observational study and an intervention study. In this article, we will focus only about the cross- sectional study (here after, we will refer as ‘the study’).

The study setting was Type 1C Sinhala Medium Schools in Galenbidunuwewa educational zone. Type 1C schools held classes from grade 1 to 13 and typically have 2 classes per a grade. The study population was all the students in grade 7, 8 and 9 in 1C Sinhala medium schools in Galenbidunuwewa educational zone. Students in the selected grades who cannot read and write were excluded from the study. The sample size was calculated using $n = z_i^2 \cdot \frac{p}{d^2} (1-P)$ considering $p=37.9$ (according to WHO statistics) (19) and $d=0.05$ and $z = 1.96$, referring to the ‘Sample size determination in health studies, practical manual’ by Lwanga & Lemeshow. The calculated sample size was 369.

A multi-stage sampling method incorporated simple random sampling and systematic sampling methods was used. Three type 1C schools in Galenbindunuwewa Educational zone were randomly selected out of all 14 Sinhalese 1C schools for the study. The number was limited to three schools due to the feasibility issues and the limited timeframe for the project. Selected schools were NCP/A/GB/KD/Rathmalgahawewa Maha Vidyalaya, NCP/A/GB/KD/Ranpathvila Maha Vidyalaya and NCP/A/GB/MT/Tammannawa Welusumana Maha Vidyalaya. Number of students from each school to participate in the study ($N=369$) was calculated proportionately according to the total number of students in the grades 7, 8 and 9 in each school. To allow for non-response and poor-quality data 10% each were allocated extra from each school, calculated 406 of participants in total for the sample. The number of students selected from each school was further allocated to each grade proportionate to the totals studying in the respective grade of the school. Then students from each grade were selected using simple random sampling technique based on the lists formed by using classroom registers.

A self- administered questionnaire developed by the researcher based on both global and local available literature [8, 17] was used to collect data. The questionnaire was pretested with 8 students in grades 7, 8, 9 in NCP/ A/ GB/ MT/ Mihintale Maha Vidyalaya.

Face and content validity of questionnaires were assured by consensus of two experts in child health. The questionnaire included questions to assess socio economic background of the participants, frequency of bullying according to different types of bullying acts, common responses of students and other associated factors.

Data collection was carried out at schools in time slots allocated for the research data collection by the school administration. The researcher sought out spaces to distribute questionnaires among students to keep students in enough distance to avoid discussions among students while answering the questionnaires. Participants returned the questionnaires to the researcher. The researcher explained about the research and the questionnaire well before students answering questions. Students were encouraged to ask for clarifications. In total 384 students participated with the response rate of 94.6% (384/406). From all the questionnaires collected by the researcher, 10 questionnaires with irrelevant data or incomplete data were removed from the study, drawing 372 participants for the final sample.

Raw data were entered to and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Descriptive statistics was used to present frequencies and Chi square statistics was used to determine the associated factors.

Administrative clearance for the data collection was obtained from the Provincial Director of Education - North Central Province, Zonal Director of Education- Galenbindunuwewa, Principals of Rathmalgahawewa Maha Vidyalaya, Ranpathvila Maha Vidyalaya, Thammannawa Welusumana Maha Vidyalaya. Proxy consent was obtained by either mother or father or guardian of the participants. Assent was obtained from participants before recruitment to the study.

III. RESULTS

1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Among 372 participants, 219 (58.9%) were females and 153 (41.1%) were males. Parents’ occupation was taken as a proxy measure to assess students’ socio-economic background. More than half of the participants’ fathers were farmers (52.4%) and approximately one third of fathers were in Armed forces (120, 32%). Majority of mothers were either housewives (173, 46.3%) or farmers (169, 45.2%). Other occupations of parents mentioned were engagement in a business (father/mother), carpentry (fathers only), mason (fathers only), driving (fathers only), house maid (mothers only), teaching (father/mother).

2. Prevalence and types of bullying

Prevalence of being bullied according to bullying acts under three different types of bullying— verbal, physical, social were assessed to draw a broad picture of bullying among adolescents in schools.

Frequency of verbal bullying acts: Calling mean names, 123 (33.1%) is the most prominent verbal bullying act occurred daily and approximately one third of adolescents are called mean names in day today basis.

The second highest was teasing 47 (12.6%) while calling mean names targeting the way students' behaviors such as the way of walk, way of talk 16 (4.3%) is the lowest (Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency distribution of the study sample by verbal bullying acts

Bullying act		Daily	At least once a week but not daily	At least once a month but not weekly	Once or twice in last 3 months	No such experience within last 3 months	Never being bullied in life	Total
Calling mean names	No (%)	123 (33.1%)	163 (43.8%)	46 (12.4%)	18 (4.8%)	2 (0.5%)	20 (5.4%)	372 (100%)
Teasing in a hurtful way	No (%)	47 (12.6%)	138 (37.1%)	60 (16.1%)	27 (7.3%)	12 (3.2%)	88 (23.6%)	372 (100%)
Passing hints	No (%)	34 (9.1%)	133 (35.7%)	53 (14.2%)	36 (9.7%)	11 (3.0%)	105 (28.2%)	372 (100%)
Calling mean names targeting behaviors	No (%)	16 (4.3%)	46 (12.4%)	48 (12.9%)	35 (9.4%)	36 (9.7%)	191 (51.3%)	372 (100%)
Scolding in harsh language	No (%)	23 (6.2%)	89 (23.9%)	53 (14.2%)	38 (10.2%)	32 (8.6%)	137 (36.8%)	372 (100%)

Frequency of physical bullying acts: Pushing 40 (10.8%), hitting 32 (8.6%), touching body or pinching 27 (7.3%) were the commonest physical bullying acts occurred on daily basis while locking indoors 11 (3.0%) and spitting 12 (3.2%) were the lowest. 276 students

(74.2%) stated that they were never bullied by locking indoors by others. Acts like cutting hair or removing shoes 272 (73.1%), spitting 248 (66.7%), harassing using objects 219 (58.9%) were also reported to be low among students (Table 2).

Table 2: Frequency distribution of the study sample by physical bullying acts

Bullying act		Daily	At least once a week but not daily	At least once a month but not weekly	Once or twice in last 3 months	No such experience within last 3 months	Never being bullied in life	Total
Hitting by someone stronger than the student	No (%)	32 (8.6%)	125 (33.6%)	47 (12.6%)	37 (9.9%)	24 (6.5%)	107 (28.8%)	372 (100%)
Kicking	No (%)	18 (4.8%)	78 (21.0%)	43 (11.6%)	33 (8.9%)	26 (7.0%)	174 (46.8%)	372 (100%)
Pushing to make the student hurt	No (%)	40 (10.8%)	93 (25.0%)	47 (12.6%)	38 (10.2%)	15 (4.0%)	139 (37.4%)	372 (100%)
Locking indoors	No (%)	11 (3.0%)	32 (8.6%)	17 (4.6%)	17 (4.6%)	19 (5.1%)	276 (74.2%)	372 (100%)
Spitting	No (%)	12 (3.2%)	35 (9.4%)	22 (5.9%)	27 (7.3%)	28 (7.5%)	248 (66.7%)	372 (100%)
Harassing physically	No (%)	20 (5.4%)	45 (12.1%)	30 (8.1%)	39 (10.5%)	19 (5.1%)	219 (58.9%)	372 (100%)

using objects								
Touching body/pinching	No (%)	27 (7.3%)	41 (11.1%)	43 (11.6%)	45 (12.1%)	40 (10.8%)	175 (47.2%)	371 (100%)
Cutting hair/altering dress/removing shoes by force	No (%)	14 (3.8%)	22 (6.0%)	17 (4.6%)	30 (8.1%)	17 (4.6%)	272 (73.1%)	372 (100%)
Belongings thrown away	No (%)	16 (4.3%)	69 (18.6%)	45 (12.1%)	42 (11.3%)	20 (5.4%)	180 (48.9%)	372 (100%)

Frequency of social bullying acts: Disturbing learning processes 32 (8.6%) was the most prominent bullying act students were subjected to. On daily basis equal or more than 25% of the sample were subjected to ignoring 30 (8.1%), excluding from play 25 (6.7%),

others lying about the victim 25 (6.7%). Among all social bullying acts, a large proportion (66.1%) of students were never subjected to taking belongings away by force (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency distribution of the study sample by social bullying acts

Bullying act		Daily	At least once a week but not daily	At least once a month but not weekly	Once or twice	No such experience within last 3 months	never bullied	Total
Ignoring	No (%)	30 (8.1%)	77 (20.7%)	48 (12.9%)	38 (10.2%)	26 (7.0%)	152 (40.9%)	371 (100%)
Not considering ideas and suggestions in group work	No (%)	20 (5.4%)	65 (17.5%)	29 (7.8%)	23 (6.2%)	26 (7.0%)	209 (56.2%)	372 (100%)
Excluding in group works	No (%)	14 (3.8%)	53 (14.3%)	34 (9.1%)	14 (3.8%)	25 (6.7%)	232 (62.4%)	372 (100%)
Excluding from play	No (%)	25 (6.7%)	33 (8.9%)	42 (11.3%)	25 (6.7%)	25 (6.7%)	222 (59.7%)	372 (100%)
Hiding something from the student within the group	No (%)	21 (5.6%)	72 (19.4%)	44 (11.8%)	47 (12.6%)	25 (6.7%)	163 (43.8%)	372 (100%)
Lying about the student	No (%)	25 (6.7%)	105 (28.2%)	45 (12.1%)	64 (17.2%)	26 (7.0%)	107 (28.8%)	372 (100%)
Spreading false rumors about the student	No (%)	22 (5.9%)	82 (22.0%)	59 (15.9%)	48 (12.9%)	31 (8.3%)	130 (34.9%)	372 (100%)
Disturbing learning processes	No (%)	32 (8.6%)	85 (22.8%)	44 (11.8%)	28 (7.5%)	23 (6.2%)	160 (43.0%)	372 (100%)
Stealing belongings	No (%)	10 (2.7%)	58 (15.6%)	68 (18.3%)	86 (23.1%)	36 (9.7%)	114 (30.6%)	372 (100%)
Food, money or belongings taken	No (%)	8 (2.2%)	29 (7.8%)	29 (7.8%)	32 (8.6%)	28 (7.5%)	246 (66.1%)	372 (100%)

away by force								
Threatening or forcing to do things	No (%)	8 (2.2%)	42 (11.3%)	29 (7.8%)	25 (6.7%)	26 (7.0%)	242 (65.1%)	372 (100%)
Condemning in front of others	No (%)	23 (6.2%)	41 (11.0%)	29 (7.8%)	49 (13.2%)	43 (11.6%)	187 (50.3%)	372 (100%)
Breaking friendship with the student	No (%)	19 (5.1%)	71 (19.1 %)	65 (17.3%)	58 (15.6%)	33 (8.9%)	126 (33.9%)	372 (100%)
Informing others not to talk with the student	No (%)	17 (4.6%)	53(14.3%)	55 (14.8%)	52 (14.0%)	31 (8.3%)	164 (44.1%)	372 (100%)
Showing as a fool	No (%)	12 (3.2%)	46 (12.4%)	34 (9.1%)	30 (8.1%)	30 (8.1%)	220 (59.1%)	372 (100%)

Among all bullying acts, name calling scored the highest prevalence (89.2%) while hitting (54.8%) and lying (47.0%) about the victim respectively were highest among physical and social types (Table 4).

Except 40 adolescents in the sample (11.9 %) who were never being bullied, all the other students were bullied at least once during the last 3 months of period.

Table 4: Frequency of experiencing bullying acts at least once in the past month

Types	No (N=372)	%
Verbal		
Calling mean names	332	89.2
Teasing in a hurtful way	245	65.9
Passing hints	220	59.1
Calling mean names targeting the way of behaving	29.6	29.6
Scolding in harsh language	165	44.4
Physical		
Hitting by someone stronger than the student	204	54.8
Kicking	139	37.4
Pushing to make the student hurt	180	48.4
Locking indoors	60	16.1
Spitting	69	18.5
Harassing physically using objects	95	25.5
Touching body or pinching or doing such acts making uncomfortable	130	34.9
Cutting hair / altering dress / removing my shoes by force.	53	14.2
Belongings thrown away.	111	29.8
Social		
Ignoring	155	41.7
Not considering ideas and suggestions of the student in group works	114	30.6
Excluding in group works	101	27.2

Excluding from play	100	26.9
Hiding something from the student within the group.	137	36.8
Lying about the student	175	47.0
Spreading false rumors about the student	163	43.8
Disturbing learning processes	161	43.3
Stealing belongings	136	36.6
Food, money or belongings taken away by force	66	17.7
Threatening or forcing to do things	79	21.2
Condemning in front of others	93	25.0
Breaking friendship with the student	155	41.7
Informing others not to talk with the student	125	33.6
Showing as a fool	92	24.7

Places of occurring: As reported by participants, most of the adolescents are being bullied in the classroom in the presence of teachers (253, 68.0%),

in the classroom in the absence of teachers (250, 67.2%), and on the way to school (200, 53.8%) (Table 5).

Table 5: Prevalence of bullying at different places at school

Place of occurrence	No (%) (N= 372)
In the classroom (Teacher present)	253 (68.0%)
In the classroom (Teacher absent)	250 (67.2%)
Playground	132 (35.5%)
School premises	97 (26.1%)
In corridors	40 (10.8%)
Staircases	24 (6.5%)
Canteen	26 (7.0%)
Toilets	81 (21.77%)
On the way to school	200 (53.8%)

Participants' level of acceptance of acting as a bully: It is important to note that among total participants, 167 (44.9%) students accepted that they called mean names to bully others. The second highest act performed was informing others not to talk with the victim (106, 28.5%) following the third highest – ignoring/ excluding the victim in some social situations such as playing in teams (87, 23.4%).

Association of age and sex with bullying: Age and Sex: No significant association was found between

age or sex with type of bullying. However, number of times being bullied has a significant association with sex ($X^2= 9.963$, $df= 1$, $P = 0.002$). No significant association found between number of times being bullied and grade.

3. Responses to bullying

When being bullied by others, the most common response of the victim was tolerating it (250, 67.2%) and walking away (247, 66.4%). 238 (64.0%) students asked bullies to stop bullying and 223 (59.9%) complained to the teachers (Table 6).

Table 6: Frequency distribution of the study sample by response of the victim when being bullied

Responses	No (N=372)	%
I tolerated it	250	67.2
I walked away	247	66.4
I ignore the person who bullies me	202	54.3
I hit him	125	33.6
because he hit me, I hit him back	126	33.9
I asked to stop bullying	238	64.0
I told parents or my family	176	47.3
I told a teacher	223	59.9
I told a friend/ I asked help from a friend	186	50.0

IV. DISCUSSION

Findings of this study show some similarities with the findings of Dissanayake et al [17]. The prevalence of most of the bullying acts have similar patterns. For example, the most prevalent verbal bullying acts were calling mean names and teasing in our study while being scolded in harsh language, subjected to humiliation, use of nicknames and passing hints were of Dissanayake et al. However, there are some differences too. For example, in our study the most prominent social bullying act was disturbing learning processes, which was reported as one of the least prevalent in Dissanayake et al. It is plausible to have differences according to the differences in socio- economic contexts, type of schools and age differences in two samples.

Cyber bullying among adolescents came to public eye recently with some reveal of cyber bullying incidents in Sri Lanka [22,23]. A cross sectional study conducted in Colombo among grade 12 students reported that 18% lifetime prevalence of cyber bullying [24]. In our study we did not include cyber bullying, as it was observed that cyber bullying is not prevalent among early adolescents in respective schools which was confirmed by students and teachers. This is similar to the reveal of not reporting cyber bullying among students in the study of Perera H et al [21].

This study has some strengths as well as limitations. We believe that being able to assess level of bullying-by-bullying acts over time, assessment of perceptions and attitudes of adolescents related to bullying are some strengths of this study. However, we accept that recall bias is present in this study when students were asked about bullying in last 3 months. Another limitation of the study is its' limited generalizability of results to similar settings in Sri Lankan context.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bullying is prevalent among early adolescents in schools in Galenbindunuwewa educational zone. Calling mean names, pushing, and hitting, disturbing learning processes were the most prevent bullying acts. Students are mostly being bullied at classrooms even when teacher is present. Considerable number of students have attitudes favorable to bullying.

We highly recommend taking immediate policy level actions to reduce bullying in schools among adolescents, in order to improve adolescents' wellbeing as well as educational performances in rural schools in Sri Lanka.

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