

Effects of Child Characteristics and Parental Aggression on Bullying in Schools

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Abstract

Bullying is associated with many factors including school environment, social factors and family background and child characteristics. Children who chronically act as bullies or fall victims of bullying have some common characteristics, some of which are acquired, innate or emanate from the way they are treated by their parents. This article examines the role played by child characteristics and parental aggression in taking positions as bullies, victims or observers. While various child characteristics, such as age, class level and gender were found to have influence on bullying, bullying was associated to the methods of discipline adopted by parents. However, reactions of those who witnessed incidences of bullying emerged as catalyst or deterrent to prevalence of bullying. The study recommended a shift in school management to improve the school environment; open channels of communication to encourage observers and victims of bullying to report and stakeholders' forums to talk about bullying openly.

Keywords: Bullying, Child characteristics, Parental aggression, Schools and Students

1. Introduction

School violence has been shown to discourage children's attendance, whether because of their parent's decision or their own. Further, children who study in a violent environment achieve lower academic results than those who do not (Pereznieta, Harper, Clench & Coarasa, 2010). Bullying is viewed as an aggressive behavior or intentional "harm doing" which is carried out "repeatedly and over time", in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power. Bullying is a complex phenomenon with its forms ranging from sarcasm to relentless attacks with variety of technics (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008). Recently bullying has been defined as an intentional repeated negative, harmful or unpleasant behavior by one or more persons directed to a person who has difficulty defending him or herself (Olweus, & Susan, 2010). According to National Centre for injury Prevention and Control bullying involves inflicting injury or discomfort upon another person repeatedly and overtime for the purpose of intimidating or control. It can be physical, verbal or otherwise. Seepersad (2014) defines bullying as repeated victimization behavior usually perpetrated by a stronger party on a weaker victim. Bullying is also viewed as comprising of verbal, physical and relational aggression.

The school management has the responsibility of acting on behalf of the parents by guiding and directing pupils towards acceptable social and individual behaviour. Thus in addition to promoting academic achievement the administrator has a duty to foster discipline among pupils'. However, with regard to bullying the behaviour exhibited by students shows lapses on the side of discipline. Regoli, John & Matt (2008), contends that loss of teacher authority and lower academic standards makes it easier for students to get away with behaviors such as violence. Bullying in schools is on the whole a covert activity occurring without adult witness; teachers only hear about it second-hand, if they are aware of it at all, and parents are often the last to know. The bully, victim and any observer remain silent, because there is still a stigma in our society against telling tales (Itegi, (2003). It would appear that the problem has been underestimated by adults. In addition research has shown that bullying can continue undetected by adults for a number of years because the effects, distressing and pervasive though they are, may be missed or misinterpreted by unsuspecting adults (Seepersad, 2014). School violence is a key challenge confronting numerous educators in educational institutions and is obstructing the process of teaching and learning (Sittichai, & Smith, 2015). In Kenya, bullying and drug abuse are among the challenges facing many school administrators. A lot of children suffer in silence as bullying has been down plaid as a sign of a weaker character among victims (Byrne, 1992). This study therefore sought to investigate the influence of child characteristics such as age, gender and family background on bullying in an effort, to establish how the problem of bullying in schools can be dealt with.

Social learning theory partly explains the relationship between bullying behavior among children and aggressiveness of parents. In this view personal characteristics of children are formed in the

family environment (Bandura, 1986). Further, where parents use force on their children they learn confrontational styles which they exercise in their interpersonal relations and eventually become bullies. Studies have associated bullying to family background and child characteristics among other causes. Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson & Sarvela, (2002), established that family background, upbringing, financial, social circumstances and family environments during early child rearing influenced children involvement in bullying. Authoritarian parenting associated with harshness was found to have a negative influence on children who consequently become bullies. The US Department of Health Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health established that adolescents who were physically punished by their parents were more likely to be bullies compared to others. Break up of families, poor living conditions (insufficient food and clothing) tends to influence bullying significantly (Tiliouine, 2015).

In view of social systems Murray-Harvey, Slee & Taki, 2010), conceptualized bullying as a social problem emanating from the experiences and observations children make in their encounter with adults. Bullying is associated with serious consequences on the life of those involved. More so, according to emerging theory of bully-sexual violence pathway bullying perpetration is thought to be predictive of sexual violence over time.

Age of children is also a predictor of involvement in bullying either as bullies or victims. Junior students who are threatened with death if they refuse to join drug abuse clubs, later become drug addicts and even start sneaking out of school; when they have no money to buy drugs they engage in petty trade. This further advance to truancy leading to dropping out of school in some cases (Olweus, 1992). Furthermore, younger and weaker students were most exposed and there was a clear trend towards less use of physical means (physical violence) in the higher grades. Besides, older students carry out a considerable amount of bullying (Dlungwane, 2017). More than 50 per cent of bullied children were in the lowest grades (2 and 3) corresponding to ages of (8 and 9) who reported that they were being bullied by older students. Olweus (1992) further argued that a certain proportion of the students may become less vulnerable with increasing age and accordingly will report being less bullied.

Gender analysis confirms that girls were more exposed to indirect and more subtle forms of bullying than to bullying with more open attacks. Girls often used indirect methods such as slander, spreading rumors and manipulation of friendship relationships. However, harassment by non-physical means like threats was most common also among boys. Dlungwane (2017) established that boys may perhaps be more biologically prepared to learn dominance, competitiveness and aggression, whereas girls may be more receptive to training Olweus (1980). Boys subscribe to certain hegemonic notions of masculinity demanding respect and exercising power over girls.

Olweus (1980), in an earlier study found that bullies are boys who are confident, strong and have positive attitudes towards violence. They get considerable attention because their violent behaviour gives pleasure and they recruit other boys to participate. It is widely believed that adolescence is a period in which young people slavishly “follow the crowd” without self-examination. Kuthemba, Hauya, & Tizifa (1986), found that girls and young children were the main victims of violence. They attributed this to the fact that girls “have no endurance to resist males and boys in physical confrontations”. Bullying and snatching of objects (books and bags) were the most frequently occurring forms of violence, followed by physical violence (hitting and kicking). Attempts of rape at school were frequent among senior high school (20 per cent) of the total violence counted. Bullying has also been found to be a power game where stronger students can exert power on weaker ones. In Zambia it was noted that prefects bullied others by soliciting gifts, including food and in some instances meted out corporal punishment to other students (Mwitwa, 2018). This is also exhibited in Kenyan school where members of student council are given special treatments by school administration and teachers. In some cases they beat and extort their fellow students in the name of maintaining discipline.

Kuthemba, Hauya & Tizifa (1986), revealed a range of frequently occurring violent behaviour such as physical violence, use of rude language, sexual abuse and rioting, where boys’ schools witnessed the widest category of discipline problems including bullying and violence while private girls’ schools did not have a single case of vandalism.

Highly aggressive children appear not only to seek out conflict situations, but to choose those situations where they can be observed by their peers. Smolowe & Bailey (2010) contends that bullies sometimes think they are funny or cool especially if they receive positive reaction from peers or adults. They have self-image of power, they see themselves as tough, successful and capable, they have no focused dissatisfaction, they rate themselves more intelligent than their class work show, and they are out going and easy going. Coloroso (2011) recommends training of students to take roles of resister, defender and witness so as to solve the problem since most bullying incidences are not reported. This would give them the moral strength and courage to stop its prevalence.

Some personal attributes are associated to bullying behavior in schools. Menesini & Christina (2017) found that some children are ineffectual for whatever reason in face of attack. Such children avoid aggression and confrontation and lack confidence or skills to elicit support from their peers. These children are described as being fearful, physically weaker than peers, cautious, withdrawn, and often find it difficult to make friends. Further teasing and bullying pick out features such as a large nose, protruding ears, obesity, glasses or extremes of stature. Undisciplined students are mainly influenced negatively by other students who for one reason best known to them have realized that they are failing and would want the whole lot to sink with

them (Velarie, 1991). In addition, bullying occurrence was likely to depend on the psychological makeup of the potential bully, the possible support or convenience of others in the group, the response of potential victim and the institutional framework which make the bully/victim incidents more likely to happen.

Academic performance is closely associated with bullying. Bullies and victims are most often children of average ability, but the stress engendered by the bullying could result in many victims especially those with long-term problems of underachieving (Pereznieto, Harper, Clench & Coarasa, 2010). The traditional bully is a lonely child socially or academically inadequate, a child bullied by others but who attacks weaker victims to compensate Rigby, (1993). Mabuzoka & Smith (1993) examined social relationships in two schools and established that bullies were seen as being more disruptive and starting fights. Victims were seen as being shy and needing help. More so, children with special needs were less popular and more rejected and became victims of bullying than peers who had no special needs.

Girls result to physical aggression less often than boys instead preferring social exclusion or malicious rumor (Gray, Miller & Noakes, 1996). Many girls both perpetrator and victim, do not consider this to be bullying even if it causes considerable distress. The less frequent physical attacks by girls do attract disproportionate attention compared to boys, as does any violent crime in the society, presumably as it contravenes current social expectations that girls should not be violent.

Family is the first social unit where personality is developed and being a victim of violence during childhood significantly increases the likelihood that a child will use violence (Regoli, John & Matt, 2008). Moller found that social class did not seem to be an important factor, although children of parents with professional and management jobs were less likely to be bullied while those whose parents had skilled manual jobs were more likely to be victims [28]. Children from ethnic minorities said that racism was a major cause of bullying. There were also suggestions that those who successfully avoided bullies could become victims at certain times, for instance when changing schools or during a marriage break up. Gray & Noakes (1992) found that separation of parents or divorce leading to absence of natural father had association to bullying behavior.

Bullying has been found to have some long term effects on victims. Fosse observed that among 160 young adults who had sought psychiatry treatment for the first time 50% had been bullied during their school years, and the more greater the psychiatry symptoms as adults (Cross, Therese, Melanie, Helen, Julian & Lydia). In US the Center for Injury Prevention and Control found that bullies may turn to sexual violence as opposite sex attractions develop

especially in circumstances where masculine or feminine behaviours are considered acceptable. Evidently, in middle schools traditional bullying was found to transform into more gendered harassment and aggressive behaviour.

Recent studies have found bullying to have advanced with technological development as 2010 statistics showed that bullying is taking a different approach with social networks providing a new platform. In US approximately 160,000 children miss school every day out of fear of being bullied. In 2009 bullying statistics in US showed a relationship between bullying and other types of violence including fighting, carrying weapons and suicide (Regoli, John and Matt, 2008). Further several indicators of violence including students carrying weapons raises concern that violence epidemic of the 1990s is not yet over. Mobile bullying in South Africa is becoming popular with females being victimized more than males in most schools especially in chatrooms and social networks (Otopa, 2016).

Bullying has continued to contribute to pupil absenteeism, disruption, underachievement and general levels of malaise in schools. In Kenya bullying has continued to be perpetrated on innocent children especially those joining secondary schools every year. Recently worst cases have been reported in one top performing school sending jitters as to what could be its magnitude in poor performing schools. Effective teaching depends upon students respecting and not interfering with each other's learning opportunities. Good behaviour is not merely a necessary condition for teaching and learning to take place; it is an outcome of an effective education. This study sought to establish the influence of child characteristics and parental aggression on bullying.

2. Methodology

This paper reports on an ex-post facto study that was meant to investigate independent variables such as age, gender, class level and parental aggression on students in retrospect for the possible relationships with dependent variable that is bullying in schools. A sample of 300 students was selected using stratified random sampling technique and snow ball for bullies and victims. The schools were first categorized into mixed, girls and boys schools. Olweus questionnaire was adapted for students and an interview schedule for self-identified bullies and victims with a simple definition of the term bullying. Validity of instruments was enhanced by use of split half method. The Pearson Product – Moment Correlation coefficient obtained was 0.9. The quantitative data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were processed into explanations to give meaning to figures.

3. Discussion of findings

The study sought information on personal characteristics of students and family background and how these influenced their participation in bullying. In relation to bullying and age majority of bullies belonged to age (18-19) 6.1% and very few (0.9%) in age 14-15 among boys. Among girls age 14-15 did not have bullies. In contrast majority of victims came from age 14-15 (19.1%) and a mere (1.7%) from age 18-19 among boys. Among girls majority of victims were in middle age (15-16). Evidently younger students were the targets (victims) while those advanced in age were mainly bullies. In Australia Cross, Therese, Melanie, Helen, Julian and Lydia, established that 8% of young people aged 12 -14 reported being cyber bullied and 6% reported cyber bullying others every few weeks (UNICEF, 1984).

The study further sought information on the classes of students who bullied others as presented in Figure1.

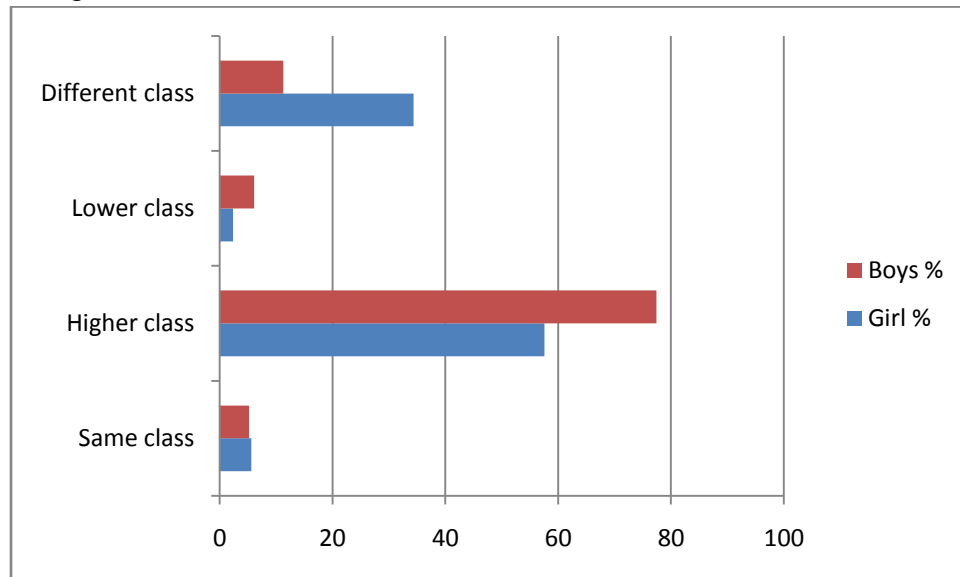


Figure 1: Class Level of bullies

Bullying was reported to have been carried out by students in “higher class” (57.6%) among girls and 77.4% among boys. A considerable number (34.4%) of girls also admitted having been bullied by students in “different classes” while boys more frequently reported being bullied by older boys (“higher class”). In Ghana Otapa, established that senior boys bullied younger ones and this was likely to lead to dropping out of school. Further, this was found to have long-term effects on self-image of the victims. Conversely in Australia cyber bullying manifested a different trend where grade 8 reported less cases of compared to grade 9 (Otopa, (2016).

Gender emerged as a key determinant of children participation in bullying. Some 20.0% of boys participated as bullies compared to 7.2% of the girls. With regard to victims 43.5% of boys compared to 48% of the girls in the sample identified themselves as victims. However, it was noted that some girls fell victims of bullying from both boys and girls and this contributed to 48% victims, which is higher than that of the boys (43.5%) especially in the mixed schools. The findings support observations of Olweus that larger percentage of boys was exposed to direct bullying (Olweus, 1992). Boys carried out a larger part of the bullying to which girls were subjected; more than 60 per cent of bullied girls (in grade 5-7) reported being bullied by boys. An additional 15-20 per cent said they were bullied by both boys and girls compared to 80 per cent of boys who were directly bullied by boys. Thus a large percentage of boys than girls had participated in bullying. Seepersad (2014), found that majority of males punched each other (71%) compared to (47%) females. Girls were involved more in making each other cry (62%) compared to (50%) boys.

Parental aggression was linked to children bullying behaviour. Data on punishments used on bullies at home was sought as presented in Figure 2.

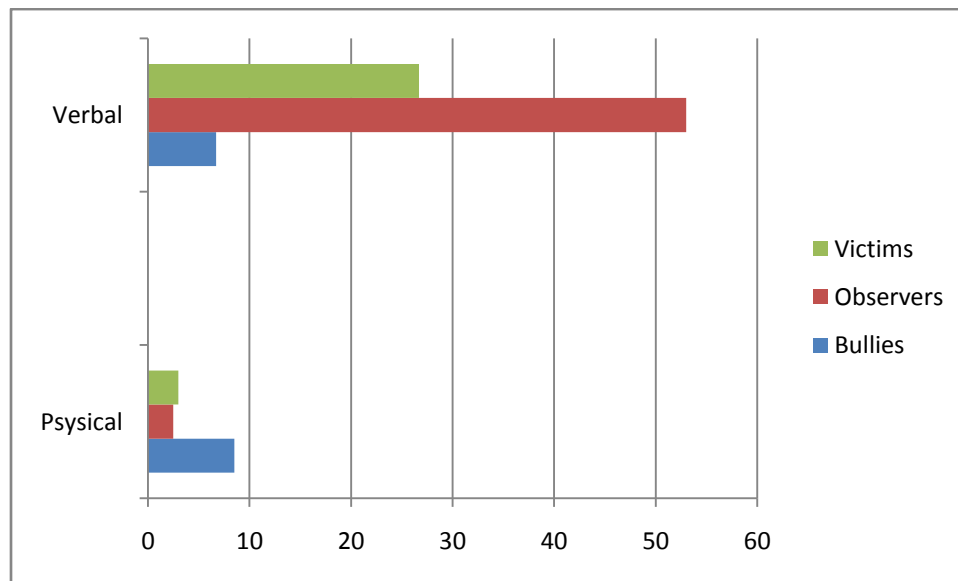


Figure 2: Forms of punishment at home

It was evident that majority (8.3%) of bullies reported being punished by physical means at home, while 6.7% of the bullies reported being punished by verbal warning at home. A large number (53%) of self-identified observers reported being punished through verbal warnings compared to a mere 2.5% who admitted being punished by physical means. Among the victims majority (26.7%) reported being punished through verbal warning by their parents in relation to 3.0% who reported being punished through physical means. This implies that most bullies' come

from home environment where there was violence as opposed to victims. Dlungwane (2017) established that bullies came from troubled family situation and have parents who use erratic and harsh discipline methods. Moreover, violence (fighting, hitting and kicking) was often encouraged by parents. Rigby (1993) contends that most bullies came from dysfunctional families in which there is relatively little sense of love, support or belonging. According to UNICEF (1984), a child brought up by a house help, or a co-wife is deprived of a mother's care and protection in an atmosphere, that is psychologically devastating. Reid (1986) described families that may put children to risk as those using excessive physical punishment, families which grossly lack in disciplining techniques or over protection, or setting too high standards. Musa associated abuse of drugs in school to be common with students from rich families who at the end of the day introduce others into the vice (Murray-Harvey, Slee, & Taki, 2010).

Mollerin Scottish schools found that two groups were more likely to be victims of all types of bullying that were measured; those living with their father only, and those living with someone other than their parents (Moller, 1990). Only children in the family and children with two siblings were least likely to be victims. Children from large families were more likely to feel rejected by others. Thus family environment determines participation of students in bullying as either victims or bullies.

Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson & Sarvela, (2002), found that when parents use force in family environment children learn aggressive behavior which they consequently use to bully other. Kyobe, Oosterwyk, & Kabiawu, (2016) linked bullying to parenting characteristics such as low levels of warmth, cohesion and trust coupled with high levels of parent child conflicts, physical punishment and lack of monitoring children. According to US Department of Health and Human Services children living with one biological parent were at risk of involvement in bullying or victimization. In Iran in about 50% of parents failed in nurturing their children due to inadequate information and knowledge about bullying and its psychological consequences (Murray-Harvey, Slee, & Taki, 2010). Moreover, Mthiyane (2013) observed that learners who come from background where abuse is the norm transfer such behavior into social situations in the school.

The study established that performance in school influenced children participation in bullying. Figure 3 shows the percentage performance of Bully, Victim and observer.

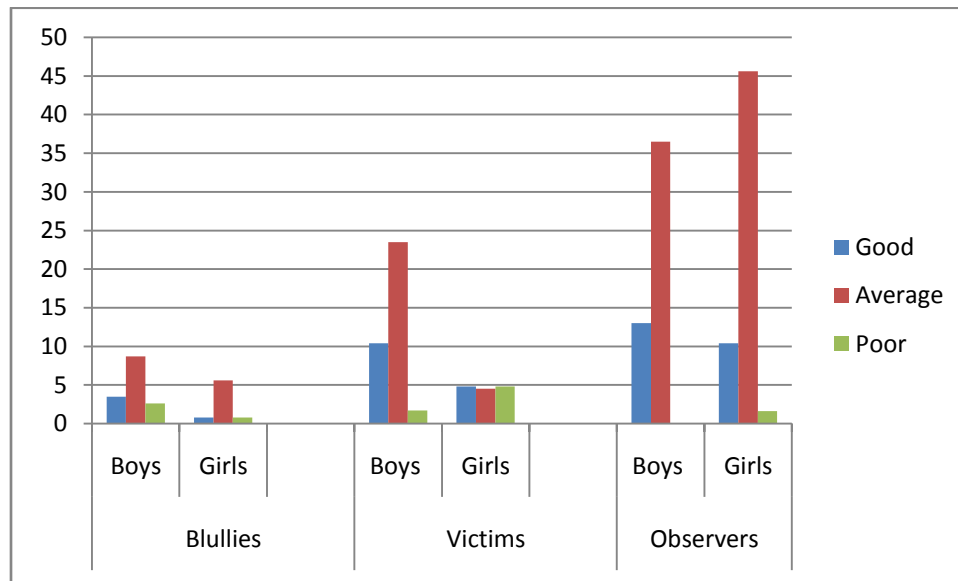


Figure 3: Percentage performance of Bullies, Victims and observers

Performance of students and participation in bullying was determined. Majority of bullies were “average” in the previous term examination (8.7%) for boys and 5.6% for girls. Some 3.4% of bullies claimed to have “good” performance in the previous term among boys and 0.8% for the girls. In addition 2.6% of the bullies admitted having “poor” performance in the previous term among boys and 0.8% for girls. In relation to victims and previous term performance, 10.4% for boys and 4.8% for girls indicated that their performance was good. A majority of the victims 23.5% and 25.6% claimed to be average for boys and girls respectively. Some 1.7% among boys and 4.8% among girls admitted having performed poorly in the previous term.

Among the observers 13.1% for boys and 10.4% for girls, claimed to have good performance in the previous term, while a majority (36.5% for boys and 45.6% for girls) indicated their performance was average in the previous term and a minority of the observers (nil for boys and 1.6% for girls) admitted having performed poorly in the previous term.

This confirms the study by Olweus (1978) that bullies and victims were most often children of average ability. Bullies were described as academically inadequate and that had tendencies of attacking victims to compensate (Rigby, 1993). Bullies had the highest completion compared to victims and that more bullies were receiving remedial education of one form or another (Byrne, 1993). On the contrary, bullies performed poorly hence the need to compensate by seeking other means of recognition by their peers (Seepersad, 2014). The study recommended that schools could present such children with other opportunities to nurture their talents.

This study found evidence to suggest that a significant number participated in promoting bullying as they identified themselves as observers; some 35.6% of boys compared to 44.8% of girls fell in this category. This group provided an environment for bullying to thrive as spectators as they did nothing to stop it. The results further indicates that girls are generally less often found among bullies as depicted by meager 7.2% compared to 20.9% of boys.

Gender was perhaps characteristics that had direct link with attitude to bullying. Report on attitude to students who bully others is presented in Figure 4.

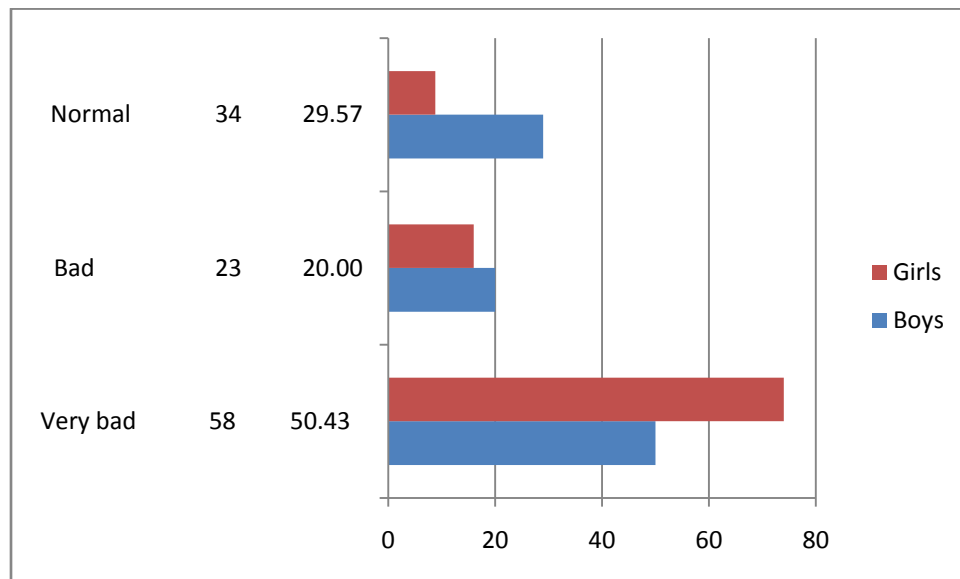


Figure 4: Attitude of Students to Bullies

Majority (54.4%) of boys and (74.4%) of girls has a negative attitude towards students who bully others. Some 20% of the boys and 21% of the girls reported their attitude to bullies as “bad” while in contrast 29.6% and 8.8% of the boys and girls respectively reported their views as ‘normal’. The result indicates that attitude to bullies differ with the sex of the students as majority of girls (74.4%) view it as ‘very bad’ while a considerable portion (29.6%) of boys regard it as normal. Boys exhibit a greater willingness to join in bullying (57.4% compared to 28.7% of girls) or a higher level of understanding for fellow students who pester others (27.0% compared to 8.1% for girls), (Schäfer, Stefan & Felix, 2005). However the students who viewed the bullies as very bad were victims while very few bullies viewed bullying as a problem. A sizeable number of staff and parents were a challenge in implementing bullying prevention programs because they believed bullying was not a concern because they perceived it as a rite of passage or a positive learning experience for children (Olweus, & Susan, 2010).

Information on whether there was use of weapon involved in bullying is given in Figure5:

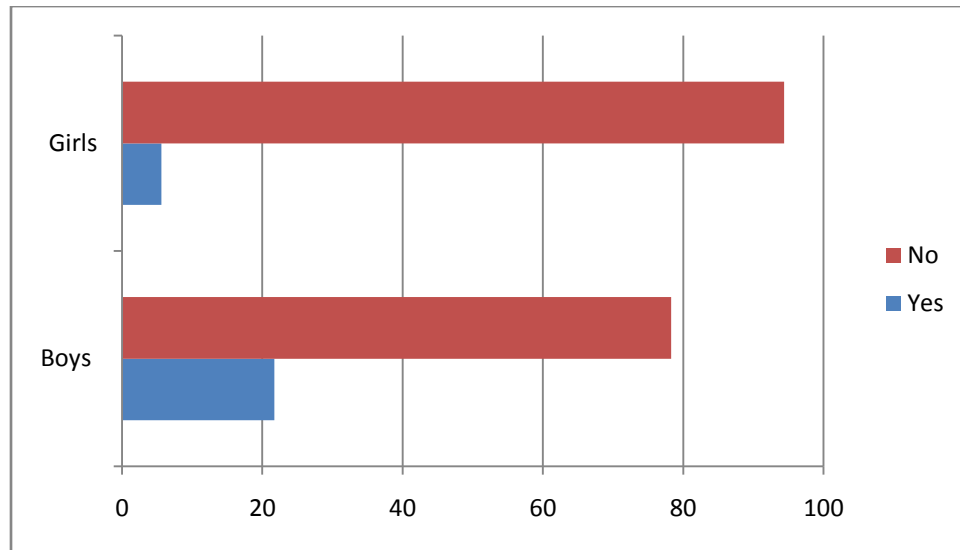


Figure 5: Bullying by Use of Weapons

Evidently, majority of bullying incidents (78.3% for boys and 94.4% for girls) respectively, did not involve use of weapons. In contrast 21.7% of boys reported use of weapon in relation to a mere 5.6% of girls. This indicates some amount of planned violence especially among boys, which involved use of weapons. Olweus (1978) observed that boys have positive attitude towards violence. In secondary schools bullies did not like school, they were troublesome in class often carried some sort of weapon-often a knife or stick and used soft drugs (Itegi, 2003). Boys use stick fighting to reinforce dominance over other boys, as metaphors that bolster their position among peers (Olweus, 1980). Verbal bullying was most common especially in cyber bullying involving threats but it had the ability to inflict pain anonymously (Cross, Therese, Melanie, Helen, Julian & Lydia).

Other characteristics that were found to trigger bullying in unique situations were physical appearance as bullies often picked on children with some unique features like obesity, very tall, unique dressing like headscarves and glasses.

4. Conclusion

The violence that manifests itself in schools is caused by variety of factors some outside the control of the school. The study established that bullying was associated to personal attributes of children like age, gender, academic ability and parental aggression. However, reaction of those who witness incidents of bullying played a major role as it could either promote the practice or hinder its prevalence. This study recommends concrete action by school management through sensitizing learners on their roles, to enhance reporting and intervening which boosts their involvement, involving teachers, and support staff so that the problem is taken seriously and the

schools environment is positively affected. This makes student realize that bullying is not tolerated; besides improved channels of communication may encourage victims of bullying to report and talk over about it with parents, teachers and the school management. Parents are called upon to engage in discussions with their children and avoid confrontational approach to discipline; to understand their children's issues of concern and help them navigate through the challenges of intellectual, physical and emotional development.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

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