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BULLYING AND VICTIM BEHAVIOR IN RURAL SECONDARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS: INCIDENCE, MANIFESTATIONS,
INTERRELATIONS

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Abstract

The phenomenon of bullying is the subject of close interest to researchers who study the well-being of children in school. Although the problem of school bullying is studied in many countries, the data on its prevalence and interrelations with victim behavior in rural school students are insufficient and contradictory. The purpose of the study is to identify the specificity of bullying prevalence and its interrelations with propensity for victim behavior in rural school students. To study characteristics of school bullying, the Russian version of the Smob questionnaire is used. Propensity for victim behavior is identified by means of "Methods of studying the propensity for victim behavior." The study is based at one of rural schools and involves 101 girls and boys aged 10-17. Over half of the students are exposed to systematic and prolonged bullying. Bullying in different spheres occurs with various frequency. Out of the ten most frequent manifestations of bullying, six manifestations are aimed at violating a student's possibility to communicate, two – at diminishing their social status and one – at breaking social ties. Three out of the ten bullying manifestations are associated with the teachers' traumatic actions. Susceptibility to bullying is closely related to intensity and type of a student's propensity for victim behavior. Bullying on the part of teachers correlates with a student's low self-criticism. To prevent bullying, we propose uniting efforts at the level of the child's personality, other students and teachers by means of involving the family, the community and social organizations in this process.

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Keywords: Bullying, victim behaviour, rural school students.



1. Introduction

So far, the psychological phenomenon of bullying (mobbing) is the subject of intense interest to researchers studying the well-being of children in modern schools in a wide variety of countries (Krivtsova et al., 2016; Banzon-Librojo et al., 2017; Murshid, 2017; Oliveira et al. al., 2017; Garmy et al., 2018). The reasons for this lie not only in the fact that bullying negatively affects children's and adolescents' learning performance (Oliveira et al., 2017) and may indicate defects in the formation of tolerant behavior in students (Islamov et al., 2017). It is also connected with decline in the child's self-esteem (Zequinão et al., 2017), and growing anxiety (Petrova et al., 2017). These are very often accompanied by a significant deterioration of mental health and can even result in the development of depressive disorders (Murshid, 2017).

School bullying may have origins in the disharmonious conditions of family education (Nikolaev et al., 2016). It is also often studied in its interrelation with victim behavior of children and adolescents (Salmon et al., 2018), the expressive manifestations of which significantly increase the risk of turning the child into the victim of a peer or another person in school. However, the data on these issues available in modern literature are rather contradictory. Thus, Canadian researchers report about the interrelation of bullying and victim behavior with an adolescent's gender and the school grade they study in (Salmon et al., 2018). American scientists give no evidence of such connections and concentrate their attention on a positive role of the school climate (Mucherah et al., 2018). Researchers in Brazil focus on social emotional skills of children and adolescents that help them cope with various manifestations of bullying (Oliveira et al., 2017). In addition, the role of the contribution of sociocultural factors to the formation and manifestation of bullying has not been sufficiently studied (Maunder et al., 2018). While the data by Icelandic scholars make us ponder on whether it is really common to see a higher incidence of bullying in younger schoolchildren living in rural areas, who do not speak their mother language (Garmy et al., 2018). The issues of ethno-cultural identity are also relevant in modern Russian society (Shaigerova & Zinchenko, 2016).

2. Problem Statement

Although the problem of school bullying is studied widely in many countries of the world, the data on its prevalence and interrelations with victim behavior in rural school students are insufficient and contradictory.

3. Research Questions

- 3.1.** What is the prevalence of bullying among students of a small rural secondary school?
- 3.2.** What is the age-related dynamics of bullying incidence with regard to rural school graders?
- 3.3.** What are the interrelations between rural school students' susceptibility to bullying and the types of victim behavior?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to identify the specificity of bullying prevalence and its interrelations with the propensity for victim behavior in rural school students in a region with an ethnically heterogeneous population.

5. Research Methods

Methods. To study the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of school bullying, the Russian version (Krivtsova et al., 2016) of the German Smob questionnaire (Schueler Mobbing) (Kasper & Heinzelmann-Arnold, 2010) was used. The propensity of the interviewed children for specific forms of victim behavior and its level were identified with the help of the "Methods of investigating propensity for victim behavior" (Andronnikova, 2014). The obtained results were processed by means of such methods as descriptive statistics, significance estimation of the variations of mean values of evenly distributed samples by Student's T-criterion and the Pearson's correlation analysis.

Sample. The study at one of small rural secondary schools of Chuvashia involved all the 101 students of the school aged from 10 to 17 years old, including 47 girls (46.5%) and 54 boys (53.5 %).

Procedure. We conducted the study after classes by interviewing all the children with their parents' written permission. The children filled in the questionnaires, specifying their gender and age and no names. The survey was conducted by a psychologist who was not on the school staff and familiar to the children. The children were also informed that after the interview they could turn to the psychologist for confidential counseling.

6. Findings

According to the results obtained by means of the Smob's method (Table 1), over half of the school students (59 people or 58.4%) are exposed to systematic and prolonged bullying. This problem is especially acute among the 12-15-year-old 7th – 9th graders. The lowest level of bullying – 30.0%, is seen in the school's most junior grade – the 5th one, in which the children begin their study in this school. The bullying incidence also drops off, up to the level of 50.0%, in the most senior grades – the 10th and 11th.

Table 01. Representation of bullying in school by grades (n=101)

Grade	Students' age range	Number of students in the class	Susceptibility to bullying	
			n	%
Grade 5	10-11	10	3	30.0
Grade 6	11-12	19	8	42.1
Grade 7	12-13	21	15	71.4
Grade 8	13-14	19	14	73.7
Grade 9	14-15	22	14	63.6
Grade 10-11	15-17	10	5	50.0

School bullying takes a wide variety of forms, including social isolation (limiting the possibility to speak out, boycotting, rejection), emotional repression (criticism, demonstration of rejection, spreading rumors, jeering at appearance and family, calling offensive names), physical violence (threats or real acts of violent punishment) an economic pressure (extortion and damage of personal belongings).

In the process of the study, we found that average incidence of bullying is different in various spheres: infringement on social bonds (19.2%), infringement on the possibility to communicate (16.2%),

infringement on the quality of studying / living conditions (14.7%), infringement on the social status (13.6%) and acts of violence and/or threats (10.3%).

In Table 2, we present the characteristics of the most common bullying manifestations seen in every 3rd–5th student who is exposed to bullying. In particular, out of the ten most frequent manifestations of bullying, six, or over half, are aimed at violating a student's natural possibilities to communicate (2, 4, 6, 7, 13, 16 points of the questionnaire), two – are aimed at diminishing a student's social status (31 and 39 points) and one is aimed at breaking social ties (24 points).

It is necessary to single out the manifestation of psychological violence on the part of the teachers. Three out of the ten manifestations of school bullying are related to the traumatic actions of non-peers, that is, teachers: "The teacher does not listen to me or does not let me speak" (19 people), "The teacher yells at me" (16 people), "The teacher exposes me to jeers of the others" (12 people). Most of the interviewed students are ready to turn for help primarily to friends and parents; two students admitted they are in need of help, but they do not know whom they can trust.

Table 02. Characteristics of the most common manifestations of bullying in the students exposed to it (n = 59)

Focus of the bullying	Specific manifestations of bullying	Incidence	
		n	%
Possibility to communicate	Constantly interrupting when a person wants to say something	21	35.6
Social ties	Excluding from communication by other means	21	35.6
Possibility to communicate	Teachers not listening or not giving an opportunity to express an opinion	19	32.2
Social status	Spreading rumours and lies	17	28.8
Possibility to communicate	Teachers yelling at the child	16	27.1
Possibility to communicate	Constantly criticizing everything that the child says or does	16	27.1
Possibility to communicate	Making hints, but not saying anything directly	15	25.4
Social status	Calling abusive and hurtful names	15	25.4
Possibility to communicate	Preventing communication by other means	12	20.3
Social status	Teachers exposing to jeers	12	20.3

At the next stage, we reveal the level of propensity for victim behavior in the children, taking into account their susceptibility to bullying. The analysis of the results shows that the average level of propensity for victim behavior in the interviewed students does not exceed standard indicators. At the same time, students susceptible to bullying differ significantly from the students who do not fall into this group by a number of manifestations (Table 3). These differences are more pronounced in terms of the realized victim behavior ($p = 0.0001$) indicating that children susceptible to bullying are more likely to get into unpleasant and life-threatening situations, which may be connected with their somewhat impulsive and hostile attitude. This characteristic is also confirmed by higher rates of aggressive victim behavior in children suffering from school bullying ($p = 0.00019$), which is often due to their own impatience, disposition to provoking conflicts, violating social standards and rules. On the other hand, more often, children exposed to bullying reveal passive victim behavior ($p = 0.002$) with manifestations of helplessness, dependence, low self-esteem

and excessive compliance. The share of such children makes up 10.2% of all the children exposed to bullying.

The results of the correlation analysis has shown the presence of a significant positive interrelation ($p = 0.05$) between a student's exposure to bullying and their propensity for aggressive victim behavior ($r = 0.31$) and a propensity for dependent and helpless behavior ($r = 0.37$). We have also discovered that the tendency for a hyper-social behavior of a student is interrelated with such forms of bullying as "isolation" ($r = 0.26$), "humiliation" ($r = 0.24$), "rejection" ($r = 0.34$) and "threat of physical violence" ($r = 0.28$). In its turn, psychological harassment on the part of the teachers correlates with a tendency for noncritical behavior of a student ($r = 0.31$).

Table 03. Mean values of victim behavior in the interviewed students ($n = 101$)

Type of victim behavior	Susceptible to bullying (n=59)	Not susceptible to bullying (n=42)	t	p
Aggressive victim behavior	5.15±1.74	4.10±1.45	3.200	0.0019
Active victim behavior	5.66±2.37	4.83±2.30	1.756	0.0822
Initiative victim behavior	5.73±2.22	5.17±2.27	1.238	0.2187
Passive victim behavior	4.54±2.52	2.79±1.69	3.915	0.0002
Noncritical victim behavior	3.90±1.79	3.21±1.79	1.909	0.0591
Realized victim behavior	3.12±1.86	1.64±1.01	4.684	0.0001

We did not reveal any significant gender differences in the studied parameters of school bullying and propensity for victim behavior in the interviewed students.

7. Conclusion

The indicators of the prevalence of school bullying in rural schools obtained during this research turn out to be much higher than those obtained by means of the Smob method in Russia and other countries. Thus, according to S. Krivtsova et al. (2016), the incidence of bullying among 13-year-old teenagers is under 13% in schools of Moscow and the Moscow region. According to the data by German researchers, bullying in the same age group occurs in 21% of cases (Kasper & Heinzelmann-Arnold, 2010). These differences may be connected with the small size of the school the interviewed children attend and a consequent need for constraint and close communication among students of different ages. It is also obvious that the teachers working in this school do not play a positive role in counteracting bullying among children and adolescents, as described in literature (Banzon-Librojo et al., 2017, Mucherah et al., 2018). Another reason for the obtained data to be different can lie in insufficiently studied sociocultural aspects of bullying, which researchers begin to write about increasingly (Garmy et al., 2018, Maunder & Crafter, 2018).

The study shows a high prevalence of school bullying among students of a small rural school, which does not reveal any gender-specific characteristics. Most evident in 7th – 8th graders, it drops off in incidence towards the senior grades. Susceptibility to bullying is closely interrelated to the intensity and type of the child's propensity for victim behavior, which can be both passive and aggressive. Bullying on the part of teachers is interrelated with a low self-criticism of a student's.

The obtained results are not final. They need a more thorough verification based on the empirical material of similar schools in other regions. In further studies and with the view of preventing bullying, it is necessary to take into account a school grade, type of propensity for the child's victim behavior and role of a teacher. It is possible to integrate the experience of other preventive programs (Parfilova & Velieva, 2016). Bullying interventions should not be based on whole-school approaches with outside involvement (Cowie, 2011).

Really promising may be preventive programs that join efforts at the level of the child's personality, all peers of his/her class, school students and teachers, with mandatory involvement of the family, community and public organizations in the preventive process.

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