Abstract

Although the toxic effects of peer bullying among middle school students are widely recognized, bullying by teachers has received little attention. This study compared the prevalence and distress of students bullied by teachers versus peers. The sample consisted of 56,508 students in grades 7 and 8 who completed a statewide school climate survey.

Students were classified into four groups: (1) not bullied (87.2%), (2) bullied only by peers (9.3%), (3) bullied only by teachers (1.2%), and (4) bullied by peers and teachers (1.5%). In comparison to students who reported no bullying, students bullied by teachers were significantly more likely to report lower school engagement and grade point average, and more negative perceptions of school climate. Students bullied only by peers reported more distress symptoms than those bullied by teachers. These findings call for more attention to the problem of teacher bullying.

Rationale

Typically, research on bullying has focused narrowly on bullying between students and ignored teacher bullying. Teachers have legitimate power over students, and they can be expected to criticize and discipline them in appropriate situations. Twemlow and colleagues (2006) defined teacher bullying as actions “to punish, manipulate or disparage a student beyond what would be a reasonable disciplinary procedure.”

Study Questions

1. How does the prevalence of bullying by teachers compare to the prevalence of bullying by students in middle school?

2. How does the school adjustment of students bullied by peers compare to that of students bullied by teachers?

Method

The analytic sample included 56,508 7th and 8th grade boys (52%) and girls from 415 Virginia public schools. Racial/ethnic breakdown was 49.4% White, 18.1% Black, 6.8% Asian, 2.2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 22.5% multiracial. The school climate survey was administered online, anonymously, and statewide in all public middle schools (98% school participation rate) in 2015. See full report for details.

Bullying by Teachers versus Peers in Middle School

Pooja Datta1, Dewey Cornell1, and Francis Huang2

University of Virginia1 and University of Missouri2

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