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Bullying in Australian schools: the perceptions of victims and other students
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Corresponding Author:	Kenneth Rigby, PhD University of South Australia Adelaide, SA AUSTRALIA
Corresponding Author Secondary Information:	
Corresponding Author's Institution:	University of South Australia
Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:	
First Author:	Rigby Ken, PhD
First Author Secondary Information:	
Order of Authors:	Rigby Ken, PhD
Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
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Title: Bullying in schools: perceptions of victims and others

Contact: Adjunct Professor Ken Rigby

8 Hurtle Street, Underdale, S.A.5032, AUSTRALIA

Ph +61 8 83021371

Mob 0410035500

Bullying in Australian schools: the perceptions of victims and other students

Ken Rigby

Abstract

Students' perceptions of the nature and prevalence of bullying and how the problem was being addressed were investigated in a convenience sample of 1,688 students in Years 5–10 attending Australian government schools. Comparisons were made between students who reported that they had been bullied during the previous 12 months and others. Rankings of the frequencies of the kinds of bullying perceived as occurring at the school were highly similar for the two groups. However, bullied students estimated significantly higher frequency of bullying. Further, bullied students were more inclined to view the social environment as less safe, bystanders to be less helpful, informing students after being bullied less frequent, classroom activities to address bullying less common and less helpful, and teachers less committed to help. In general, students perceived more students being bullied at their school than was indicated in reports of their experiences. The implications of these findings for addressing bullying in schools are discussed.

Key words: Bullying, Australian schools, social perception, victims

Bullying in Australian schools: the perceptions of victims and other students

Introduction

In recent years a great deal of attention has been directed towards the issue of bullying in schools. Following a view of bullying proposed by Olweus (1993), bullying in schools is commonly defined as negative behaviour deliberately and repeatedly targeting a less powerful person. Numerous studies in many countries have undertaken to identify aspects of school bullying drawing upon the self-reports of students in schools. These have included studies of the nature and prevalence of bullying experienced by students (Smith 2014), its consequences for student well-being (Rigby 2003) and the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs and strategies employed by schools (Ttofi and Farrington 2011; Thompson and Smith 2011).

Information derived from such studies is important in understanding the nature and dimensions of the problem of school bullying and also in evaluating the impact of actions taken by schools to reduce bullying. However, it is also important to examine how students perceive bullying in schools and what is being done about it.

In this article the term 'perception' is being used to describe the process by means of which a phenomenon is recognised, for instance, that a student is being bullied or that bullying is taking place with bystanders present. As such, it involves an interpretation and categorization of certain events. When bullying behaviour is perceived as directed towards oneself it gives rise to the experience of being bullied. The question addressed in this study is whether the experience of being bullied may affect the perception of bullying occurring in the school environment more generally and, if so, how.

According to Ortega et al.(2012) students who report being bullied generally report feelings of anger and/or being upset There is persuasive evidence that emotions affect social perceptions. In reviewing the effects of emotion on social perception, Keltner, Ellsworth and Edwards (1993) concluded that negative emotions motivate the individual to attend to circumstances that are most related to their emotional state. Brosch et al (2013, p.1) further note that 'emotion can change our perceptions, attention and memory, focussing them on an important part of the environment.' Hence one would expect the effects of negative emotions

induced by being bullied to increase student sensitivity to circumstances and events related to such experiences. In short, they would see things differently from others.

It was hypothesised that such students would provide higher estimates of the frequency of bullying than non-bullied students. In addition, they would be expected to view a range of factors relating to bullying in a more negative way. An examination of the research literature on school bullying suggested that, compared with other students, those who had been bullied would view (i) their environment as generally unsafe, (ii) bystanders as unhelpful, and (iii) teachers' actions as less effective in countering bullying.

It was of interest also to discover whether students' perceptions of the prevalence of bullying differed in any way from estimates based on the reports of students on their personal experiences of being bullied. In particular, do students see more bullying or less bullying than can be estimated from student self-reports of being bullied?

Data for the present study were obtained from an inquiry into bullying in Australian government schools supported by the Australian Department of Education and Training in 2014 and 2015 (Rigby and Johnson 2015).

Ethics

In order to undertake this study ethics approval was obtained from the University of South Australia and the educational jurisdictions responsible for the schools in which the study was conducted. Parental consent for students to take part was required by the schools. This involved an 'opting in' procedure.

Sample

This was a convenience sample of students in Years 5–10 attending mainstream coeducational government schools in Australia. There were 1,688 students who participated in the study, of whom 775 were boys and 913 girls. They were drawn from 36 schools in 6 state/territory educational jurisdictions. Twenty-five schools were primary, 7 secondary and 4 combined, that is, attended by students of all ages. Ages ranged from 8 to 16 years. The mean age was 12.25 years with an SD of 1.66.

Procedure

Students were invited to complete an anonymous online questionnaire at their school. To prepare students to answer questions about bullying the following user-friendly definition was provided and illustrated with drawings showing different kinds of bullying behaviour. This definition was modelled on one employed in an earlier study of bullying in Australian schools by Cross et al. (2009). An audio recording was embedded in the online questionnaire accompanied by cartoon figures illustrating kinds of bullying. Respondents were enabled to listen to or read the following:

> You will all have noticed that people sometimes do unpleasant things to each other, such as name calling or hitting them. When they keep on doing so and the other person can't stop them and it is unfair we call it 'bullying'.

> Bullying can take different forms, as illustrated in the following pictures.

There followed a series of cartoon figures illustrating being ignored; being hit, kicked or pushed around; lies or nasty stories told about them to make other kids not like them; being made afraid of getting hurt; and being made fun of and teased in a mean way.

Students were asked to indicate how prevalent in their judgement were 9 different forms of bullying. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate for the same 9 forms how often they personally had been bullied during the current year.

Further questions were asked relating to (i) perceived safety from bullying at school, in cyberspace and on the way to and from school, (ii) how safe it was at school for students who found it hard to defend themselves, (iii) the presence and actions of bystanders witnessing bullying, (iv) whether bullied students tell somebody to get help, (v) outcomes when students tell a teacher they are being bullied, (vi) what teachers do in class to counter bullying and how helpful it is, (vii) how effective teachers were in dealing with cases of bullying and how attentive and motivated teachers were in addressing the problem. Further details of the questions and relevant response categories are provided in the following section.

Results

Reported prevalence of peer victimisation at school

Table 1 shows the percentages of students who reported being bullied and who perceived bullying happening at their school in 9 different ways 'often' or 'very often' during the year. These figures are provided separately for students who reported that they had been bullied and for students who reported that they had not been bullied during the last 12 months, and also for all students combined. For comparison, corresponding percentages are given for students who had personally experienced being bullied.

Table 1: Percentages of students (i) reporting having perceived 9 kinds of bullying occurring 'often' according to whether they had been bullied, and (ii) reporting having experienced being bullied 'often'

Kinds of bullying (abbreviated)	Perceived			Experienced being bullied
	All students	Bullied	Not bullied	All students
Lies told about me	29.5 (1)	41.9 (1)	21.0 (1)	13.5 (1)
Teased in a mean way	25.0 (2)	36.0 (2)	17.4 (2)	12.3 (2)
Ignored, left out	18.4 (3)	25.4 (3)	13.5 (3)	9.8 (3)
Made afraid	10.7 (4)	14.7 (6)	7.8 (6)	7.3 (4)
Hit/kicked	13.9 (5)	19.6 (4)	10.0 (4)	6.5 (5)
Cruelty online	12.1 (6)	17.1 (5)	8.7 (5)	4.8 (6)
Harassing text	8.5 (8)	12.0 (8)	6.0 (8)	4.3 (7)
Racial harassment	9.8 (7)	14.0 (7)	7.0 (7)	4.2 (8)
Sexual harassment	3.0 (9)	5.5 (9)	1.3 (9)	3.7 (9)

The relative prevalence of kinds of bullying as perceived and as experienced were similar. The rankings of the prevalence of bullying were identical for those reporting having been bullied and those reporting otherwise. By Spearman rho: $rs = 1.0$, $p < 001$. Rankings for the prevalence figures based on the perceptions of all students correlated significantly with the prevalence figures based on students' reported experiences: $rs = .98$, $p < .001$. Thus, whichever way the prevalence of bullying was assessed, the order remained much the same: covert and verbal forms of bullying were most common, followed by physical bullying, then cyberbullying, and finally racial and sexual harassment.

As hypothesised, for every kind of bullying a larger proportion of bullied students compared with non-bullied students perceived that students are bullied 'often.' For each comparison by chi square, $p < .001$.

For nearly all comparisons, the perceptions of bullying by those bullied and by those not bullied indicated a larger percentage of victims than was indicated by reported experiences of actually being bullied. The exception was for sexual harassment, which occurred rarely. Students who were not bullied were slightly less likely than others to perceive this as happening than indicated by reported experiences.

Perceptions of safety

Students were asked to say how often they felt safe from bullying in three locations. Table 2 shows the percentages of those who reported feeling unsafe half the time or more often.

Table 2: Perceived levels of safety from being bullied half the time or more often, in three locations: percentages reporting

	All students	Bullied	Not bullied
At school	22.2	39.7	9.5
To and from school	11.9	20.4	5.3
Cyberspace	14.3	24.2	6.5

Note: Based on Ns for all students = 1483–1492; bullied = 651–653; not bullied = 832–836

The results indicate that students thought that they were least safe from bullying at school, followed by cyberspace, then going to and from school. The proportions of bullied students who felt unsafe in each of these locations were approximately four times greater than those who were not bullied.

A further question asked how safe were 'students who were unable to defend themselves'. 32.4% of bullied students (N = 657) estimated that they were only safe about half the time or less, compared to 18.8% of non-bullied students (N = 837).

Roles played by student bystanders

Students were asked to say whether others were present when bullying took place. Among those bullied (N = 652) and those not bullied (N = 836) a substantial majority indicated that bystanders were present at least half the time. The percentage making this judgement was higher for bullied students (86.6%) than for the non-bullied (64.7%). Further, among non-bullied students 38.7% indicated that bystanders usually or always did something to stop it; among bullied students the corresponding figure was 27.1%.

Respondents were asked to say what difference it made (if any) if someone spoke out to stop the bullying (see Table 3).

Table 3: Perceived effects of bystanders speaking out to stop the bullying: percentages reporting

	All students	Not bullied	Bullied
It makes no difference	22.7	18.6	27.9
Sometimes stops the bullying	36.2	34.7	38.2
About half the time stops bullying	22.1	23.7	19.9
It usually stops the bullying	16.5	19.2	12.9
It always stops the bullying	2.6	3.8	1.1
Ns	1501	844	657

The differences between the responses for bullied and non-bullied students were significant: chi square = 36.92, df = 4, p < .001. A larger percentage of bullied students (66.2%) compared with non-bullied students (53.5%) believed that bystanders speaking out against the bullying made little or no difference.

Students were also asked whether bystanders who saw the bullying encouraged the bullying. A minority of respondents indicated that they 'usually' or 'always' did. Among those who were bullied 24.0% thought this, compared with 14.0% of non-bullied students.

Informing others when bullied

Some 69.4% of non-bullied students opined that students usually or always tell someone, compared with 54.9% of bullied students. The perceived outcomes specifically after telling a teacher are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Perceived outcomes after telling a teacher: percentages reporting

	All students	Not bullied	Bullied
Bullying always stops	11.5	13.7	8.6
Bullying usually stops	42.4	48.5	34.5
Stops about half the time	25.8	23.9	28.3
Never stops	12.7	9.1	17.4
Usually gets worse	3.8	2.4	5.7
Always gets worse	1.0	0.3	2.0
Ns	1412	798	614

The perceived outcomes for bullied and non-bullied students differed significantly: chi square = 67.2, df = 6, p < .001. Students who had not been bullied were much more inclined to believe that that the bullying always or usually stopped (62.2%) compared with those who had been bullied (43.1%).

What teachers did in class and how helpful it was

Students were asked to indicate how often 11 different teacher actions took place in class and how helpful each was. Table 5 shows the percentages of students who (i) saw the actions occurring often and (ii) thought they were helpful in stopping the bullying.

Table 5: Percentages of students reporting actions being taken by teachers in class 'often', and percentages reporting that the action was helpful in stopping bullying

Actions (abbreviated[a])	All students		Non-bullied		Bullied	
	Often	Helpful	Often	Helpful	Often	Helpful
Encourage respect	83.3	42.4	87.1	49.4	78.6	32.4
Inclusiveness	71.1	46.1	73.5	52.7	68.0	37.8
Helping those in need	46.1	53.9	50.7	59.8	38.6	46.2
Good cyber behaviour	40.1	48.4	43.0	53.8	39.9	41.5
Work with others	46.1	49.6	59.7	55.8	40.3	41.3
Safe online	47.3	53.3	58.8	58.7	41.2	46.2
How people feel	44.4	54.2	61.1	59.4	38.9	47.2
Helping those bullied	49.2	56.9	61.3	60.3	38.7	52.2
Group discussions	23.0	53.3	24.4	56.8	21.1	49.0
Settling arguments	36.6	53.1	41.6	59.5	36.3	44.5
What to do if bullied	48.3	59.5	60.6	64.4	39.4	53.0

Notes:

(a) Items describing teacher actions are given in full in Appendix 2.

(b) Ns relating to responses were as follows:

    (i)   For actions taken 'often' by teachers in class the Ns ranged from 830 to 842 for non-bullied students and from 649 to 661 for bullied students,

    (ii)   For actions rated as 'helpful' Ns ranged from 618 to 809 for non-bullied students and from 457 to 643 for bullied students.

For each of the 11 actions the bullied students saw the classroom work to address bullying as occurring less often than was the case for those not victimised. The actions were each seen as less helpful by those who had been bullied.

Perceived motivation of teachers

Students were asked to indicate whether they thought teachers at their school wanted to do something about bullying. Although most students believed that all the teachers wanted to stop it, the proportion of bullied students who thought so was much lower, with 58.7% indicating that this was the case compared with 76.4% of others.

Finally as a measure of the perceived commitment of teachers to stop the bullying, students were asked: Do teachers keep an eye on students in the schoolyard to stop bad things from happening? Table 6 summarises the results.

Table 6: Percentages of students reporting on how often teachers keep an eye on bad behaviour in the schoolyard

	All	**Not bullied**	**Bullied**
Yes, they do	52.1	57.8	44.8
They mostly do	31.8	29.5	34.7
They do only sometimes	11.4	10.0	14.0
They rarely or never do	4.4	2.7	6.5
Ns	1,500	841	659

Chi square = 32.28, df = 3, $p < .001$ In general, the bullied students perceived teachers as less inclined to monitor what could be happening in the schoolyard.

Discussion

Students who had been bullied during the preceding 12 months perceived the environment in which bullying could take place more negatively than others did. They perceived that all nine different ways of bullying took place more often. At the same time (as indicated in Table 1) rankings of the prevalence of the kinds of bullying were similar for both groups, that is, in

order of prevalence: covert and verbal, physical, cyber, and harassment of a sexual or racial nature. This order of prevalence is consistent with that previously reported internationally (Wang, Iannotti and Nansel 2009; Modecki et al. 2014).

In a number of other ways, bullied students perceived the environment more negatively. They felt less safe in each of three locations; they believed it was especially unsafe for more vulnerable students who found it hard to defend themselves. They were more likely to report that bystanders were present when bullying occurred and thought that they were less helpful, and that bystanders speaking out to discourage the bullying was less effective. More of them perceived that bystanders encouraged the bullying. Compared with those who were not bullied, they were more inclined to perceive that students in general do not tell anyone if they are bullied. Generally they saw the outcomes after students had gone to a teacher or counsellor for help after being bullied as less positive. A lower proportion of them thought that teachers provided input in lessons to counter bullying; fewer of them saw teachers' classroom work as helpful. They were more likely to question teachers' commitment to address the problem of bullying.

These results suggest that the experience of being bullied may strongly affect the way students view their school environment and the work of teachers in countering bullying. An alternative possibility is that students who are negatively inclined are those who are more likely to be bullied. It is known that negative states of mind such as feeling depressed and having low self-esteem are related to being bullied at school (Hunter, James, Boyle and Warden 2010; Malecki et al. 2015) and may increase the risk of being bullied (Egan and Perry 1998). What is evident from this study is that students who are bullied tend to take a relatively negative view of interpersonal relations among peers at their school and of how the problem of bullying is being addressed.

Differences between the perceptions of bullied and non-bullied students were evident in their responses to questions about bystander behaviour. First, bullied students are more likely to report that bystanders are present at least half the time when bullying occurs. The higher estimate of bystander presence in this study is in agreement with estimates of the presence of bystanders when bullying occurs in Canadian schools, based upon direct naturalistic observation (Pepler and Craig 1995). A further difference between the perceptions of bullied and non-bullied students concerns the actions (if any) by bystanders to help the victim and also in the effectiveness of any help that is proffered in stopping the bullying. Those who had

been bullied, who were arguably more sensitive to the issue, were likely to report that bystanders tended not to intervene and when they did it was often ineffective.

Differences relating to students informing others when they were bullied were also evident. Bullied students saw informing others as less common than non-bullied students did. They also saw outcomes of telling a teacher as more negative. These results suggest that non-bullied students are less aware of the reluctance of victims of bullying to inform on others (Rigby and Barnes, 2002; Rigby and Bagshaw, 2003) and may overestimate the effectiveness of teacher interventions. Bullied children give a variety of reasons for not informing such as the fear that those bullying them (sometimes these are members of their friendship network) may bully them further or reject them after learning they have 'told'. Some report that they do not trust the teachers or believe that they are unable to stop the bullying (Rigby and Johnson, 2015).

This study also throws light upon the question of whether students are generally aware of the nature and extent of the bullying that is taking place at their school. The evidence presented suggests that they are. The rank ordering of kinds of bullying as perceived was highly similar to that derived from reports of the bullying actually experienced by students. It may be suggested that the similarity in the rankings is due to students not differentiating between responding according to what they think is the case for students in general and what had happened to them. However, the high correlation between the frequencies of perceived and experienced bullying held true for students who had not been bullied.

The finding that estimates based on perceptions (even of those not bullied) were higher than those derived from reported experiences suggests that the students were highly conscious of the bullying going on at their school and may exaggerate its prevalence.. This may be a consequence of the high level of attention that has been given to bullying behaviour by both schools and by the media. An alternative explanation is that students may underreport their own experiences of being bullied.

Although students may as suggested overrate the prevalence of bullying in a school, especially if they have been bullied, it should not be assumed that the problem of school bullying is merely one of perception and may be dismissed by providing more objective evidence. Rather, one may see the negative views of those bullied as amplified by an underlying sense of insecurity and pessimism. Their needs should be addressed in two ways. One is by developing in such children a sense of resilience and optimism, as may be achieved

in well implemented programs of social and emotional learning (Durlak et al. 2011; Humphrey 2013). The other is through improvements in the capacity of counsellors and teachers to intervene more effectively in cases of bullying. Currently the level of success of schools in Australia in stopping cases of bullying from continuing, based on student reports, is slightly lower than 1 in 3 (Rigby and Johnson 2015); this is similar to the reported rate in other parts of the world (Rigby 2014). There is considerable scope for improvement in this area.

Limitations

Although students were selected from a wide range of educational jurisdictions, permission from parents to enable students to take part utilised an ethically required 'opting in' procedure which resulted in a non-random sample of students. Further, selection was limited to students in Years 5–10, thereby excluding students in early primary school and late secondary school. Generalisations relating to the findings need to be limited to the context of mainstream government schools in Australia and invite replication in other educational systems.

Conclusion

This is the first study to compare the perceptions of students who had experienced being bullied at school and those who had not. Both sets of students showed an awareness of bullying at their school and were in agreement about the relative prevalence of different forms of bullying. However, the bullied students were consistently less positive than others about the school environment in which the bullying took place and were more negative about the steps being taken at the school to address the problem. This study sheds light on some of the sources of their discontent.

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Appendix 1: Items employed to assess the prevalence of nine kinds of bullying

1. Ignored, left out on purpose or not allowed to join in
2. Hit, kicked or pushed around
3. Lies or nasty stories told to make other kids not like them
4. Made afraid of getting hurt
5. Made fun of and teased in a mean and hurtful way
6. Sent harassing texts or emails
7. Cruel things said online or on social networks such as Facebook
8. Sexual harassment by another student
9. Harassing students because of their race.

The response categories were: Never, Sometimes, Quite often and Very often.

Appendix 2: Items employed to assess teachers' actions to counter bullying

Here is a list of things that teachers may do in class at your school. Please indicate what is true at your school. Response categories: Never, Sometimes, Often.

Then say how helpful it is in stopping bullying at your school. Response categories: Not at all, A bit helpful, Helpful, Very helpful.

1. Teachers encourage us to respect one another.
2. Teachers expect us to include other kids who are different from ourselves.
3. Teachers discuss with us how we can help students who are having a hard time.
4. Teachers explain how we should behave towards others when we are using cyber technology, such as when texting or sending online messages to other students.
5. Teachers ask us to work with other students to solve problems.
6. Teachers teach us how to keep safe online.
7. Teachers talk with us about what we can do if we see someone being bullied.
8. Teachers help us to understand how people might feel when bad things happen to them.
9. Teachers make time for us to talk to each other in a group about things that interest us and any problems we have at school.
10. Teachers suggest ways in which arguments can be settled peacefully.
11. Teachers advise us on what to do if we are bullied by someone.

Thank you for your suggestions on how the article could be improved for publication. As you suggested, I have included in the Introduction - as paragraph 3 - a clarification of the relationship between 'perception' and 'experience' as employed in this article.   I have also modified the next paragraph to include a reference to a particularly relevant paper by Brosch (2013) from which I quote. As requested, I have now moved the paragraph on 'Limitations' to an earlier place. The conclusion has been modified to emphasise the uniqueness of the study.

I also noted that I had not provided in the text some relevant information in the headings for Tables 2, 3 and 4**.** I have added ': percentages reporting.'

Short biography

Dr Ken Rigby is Adjunct Professor in the School of Education and the Hawke Research Institute at the University of South Australia. His research interest is in bullying in schools. He is the author of several books and numerous articles in this field. See ken.rigby@unisa.edu.au