

Bullying Behaviors in Physical Education: A Tempest in the Making

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Abstract

When students do not feel safe in school, they tend to be less engaged. Bullying can occur in many places where teachers do not see it and can have a negative effect on self-image and performance. Bullying can make school a brutal experience that could turn students off to what is supposed to be an opportunity for youth development, learning, and achievement. When bullying is not handled accordingly, it can depict a message that bullying is acceptable and appropriate in certain settings such as a Physical Education class. The purpose of this study was to determine if students perceived bullying in a Physical Education setting and if they felt bullying had an adverse effect on their athletic performance. *The School Climate Bullying Survey* was administered to students across all grades in the high school: 9th through 12th. A total ($N=138$) participants (74 females; 64 males). The study consisted of 72% Latino, 20% White, 2% Black, and 6% Other. A General Linear Model yielded a significant difference [$F(131,6)=1.58, p<.001, R^2=.056$] for being bullied in P.E by gender and ethnicity. Significance was also reported for the variables bullied and affects performance, [$F(131,3)=5.09, p<.05, R^2=.042$]. Students reported being bullied in P.E. 34.8% of the time compared to 10.6% in a regular school setting. Results indicate bullying can affect student performance; therefore, P.E. teachers should be aware of bullying and devise strategies for dealing with it when it occurs. The effects of bullying can be exponential; therefore, schools should take an active role in examining the school climate. Physical educators also play a crucial role in creating a climate that encourages all students to participate regardless of their level of performance.

Keywords

Bullying, Victim, Perpetrator, Physical Education

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1. Introduction

It has been estimated that between 20-28% of children in the U.S. are affected by some form of bullying [6]. Bullying is described as a form of aggressive behavior in which a more powerful or dominant student repeatedly humiliates a weaker student using methods that can range from physical assault to verbal teasing to social ostracism [7]. Bullying occurs when a person has been exposed repeatedly over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons [8]. Bullying is not confined to the U.S., it is rather an international

occurrence. Bullying can be seen in many forms and research findings are similar globally. Rivers & Smith [9] reported direct verbal aggression as the most common form of bullying. Also reported was *direct physical aggression* (threats, physical harm, rejection, and name-calling) to be more common among boys, whereas more *indirect forms* (name-calling, teasing, rumors, rejection, and taking of personal belongings) were more common among girls [10]. Even as schools have adopted a no-tolerance policy towards bullying, the numbers of students aged 12-18 who reported being bullied has only increased in the last couple of years [11].

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Bullying can be found in a myriad of places; however, it is not a welcomed behavior in any venue, particularly where children are present. Bullying in schools is not a new phenomenon. A plethora of studies investigating bullying have been conducted in the U.S. [12-15], Canada [4, 16], Australia [17], Europe [10, 18-21], and Scandinavia [22, 23]. A common reporting of the bullying issue involves primarily two sides: the bully or the perpetrator and the victim [8]. Other areas of investigation involve locations where bullying occurs [12], gender associations to bullying [24, 25], witness reactions to bullying [26], and interventions for dealing with this common occurrence [1].

Latino students have traditionally been understudied in terms of bullying in schools [27]. Since many of these students are immigrants, understanding their emotional distress is important to consider. Latinos and immigrants are less likely to report bullying and abusive behaviors than other ethnicities [1]. While bullying can happen anywhere, schools are the top reported areas.

In schools, common reported locations for bullying are hallways, locker rooms, bus stop, and in the gym [8]. Research conducted by Mehta, [1] reported that when students do not feel safe in school, they tend to be less engaged. This is particularly concerning when the bullying occurs in a physical activity setting. Jensen, et al. [28] found that when children are bullied in physical education, they tend to avoid the setting and activities in which the bullying occurred. The research even found a carry-over affect from year to year with students who were bullied in previous years, still avoiding the environment in the present class. This creates a two-fold concern for the health of the child. A lack of physical activity can have an enormous effect on the health of a child, particularly for those who avoid physical education classes because they are being bullied. The purpose of this study was to determine the rates of bullying in a school setting among Latino students.

2. Method

The study was conducted at a local school in South Texas. Upon IRB approval, consent forms for participation in the study were sent home to the parents. Only students with informed consent forms were allowed to participate in the study.

2.1. Participants

A total of 138 ($N=138$) high school students ($n=74$ females; $n=64$ males) enrolled in grades 9 through 12 participated in the study. The ethnic breakdown consisted of 72% Latino, 20% White, 2% Black, and 6% Other.

2.2. Instrument

The School Climate Bullying Survey [5] was administered to the students in the school library and 97% of the students with returned consent forms completed the survey. The data was then entered using SPSS 21.0 with alpha *a priori* guidelines set at ($p=.05$).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in table 1. A General Linear Model yielded a significant difference [$F(131,6)=1.58, p<.001, R^2=.056$] for being bullied in P.E by gender and ethnicity. Significance was also reported for the variables bullied and affects performance, [$F(131,3)=5.09, p<.05, R^2=.042$]. Students reported being bullied in P.E. 34.8% of the time compared to 10.6% in a regular school setting.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

	Frequency	Percent
Female	74	53.6
Male	64	46.4
Latino	99	71.7
Black	3	2.2
White	28	20.3
Other	8	5.8

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine if students perceived bullying in a Physical Education setting and if they felt bullying had an adverse effect on their athletic performance. Studies well support that bullying impacts the overall health and well-being of students. Although commonplace, bullying can be difficult to identify, especially by teachers and health professionals. The low reporting of these instances by Latino students further masks the prevalence of such occurrences. Therefore, understanding both the prevalence and impact of bullying from Latino student's perspective can help inform not only interventions needed, but where these should be targeted to help control and prevent such occurrences.

5. Discussion

The effects of bullying can be exponential; therefore, schools should take an active role in examining the school climate. One of the locations that lends itself to bullying behaviors is physical education. Results indicate bullying can affect student performance; therefore, P.E. teachers should be aware of bullying and devise strategies for dealing with it when it occurs. The physical education environment (i.e., large numbers of students actively engaged, one teacher present,

and the visibility of one's performance by others) lends itself to bullying behaviors. Research has indicated solutions for P.E. teachers to these issues are such things as reducing the amount of competition [26] and a de-emphasis on winning [3]. Hand [30] suggests that physical educators also be aware of students who could be affected by these gym situations: obese students, underweight students, students with poor social skills, and students with special needs.

To reduce the detrimental effects of bullying, Nickerson [29] recommends taking steps to examine the prevalence, developing an anti-bullying policy, staff-wide training, prevention programs, strong leadership, and utilization of effective disciplinary practices. In order to better intervene with the problem of bullying, it is important to recognize the characteristics of bullies and their victims. Addressing these issues directly with the students through intervention programs is suggested. Parents, teachers, coaches, principals, and school counselors should collaboratively devise school-wide anti-bullying approaches and strategies that aim to change the peer dynamics of bullying in the attempt to transform student behavior. These projects should encourage and promote changes in the school environment that support and reflect a conducive climate and culture that is campus-wide.

Construction of a working coalition of parents, teachers, and administrators working together to improve the school climate could provide a positive experience for students throughout education. Physical educators also play a crucial role in creating a climate that encourages all students to participate regardless of their level of performance. Future research should further examine middle-school-aged youth, as this population may have higher rates of bullying [30, 31]. In addition, studies are needed to see how bullying occurs in these settings. This can inform coalitions with relevant information on ways to identify bullying occurrences in efforts to prevent and control these within the school setting.

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