

FREQUENCY OF BULLYING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: *Bullying is a form of relationship occurring between students in primary school. It is defined as intentional and repeated use of aggressive behaviours, through which the perpetrator exploits an imbalance of power to inflict pain, fear, and anxiety upon the victim. Family, primary school personnel, and peers play an important role in bullying prevention. The aim of the study was to obtain the ratings from teachers, students, and parents regarding the frequency of bullying in primary schools. The 117 survey respondents represented teachers, students, and parents of students attending the last triad of primary school. The data were collected using the online questionnaire “Bullying in primary school—a challenge for modern society”. The results indicate that bullying is a common phenomenon in the everyday life of students. It was established that pupils rated the frequency of bullying higher than parents and teachers. Differences in frequency ratings emerged between respondents for the different forms of bullying, as students provided significantly higher ratings of cyberbullying frequency than parents and teachers.*

Keywords: *bullying, primary school, parents, students, teachers*

Introduction

Primary school students spend a significant portion of their time in the school environment, forming various relationships with the individuals they encounter. These relationships include friendships, social acceptance or rejection by the peer group, and peer victimisation (Ladd et al., 2012). Peer victimisation refers to a relationship in which individuals repeatedly perpetrate violence against specific students, exploiting the victim’s perceived inability to protect themselves or stop the violence.

The pioneer of the scientific study of bullying is Dan Olweus (1995), who began the research in this area after the suicide of three teenagers subjected to bullying. Bullying is also present in contemporary society, and the pervasiveness of cyberbullying has been reported by international organizations (World Economic Forum, 2020; OECD, 2017), recognising it as a global societal risk.

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Bullying is a relationship in which negative aggressive behaviours occur intentionally and repeatedly over a period of time. Bullying involves a conscious and deliberate decision by an individual to perpetrate violence with the intention of inflicting pain, fear, or distress on the victim (Olweus, 1995). There is an imbalance of power or strength between the perpetrator of bullying and the victim, which may be visible (physical advantage) or invisible (psychological dominance). The imbalance of power as a feature of bullying is also underscored by Rigby (2007). Bullying is a relationship in which the perpetrator consciously and repeatedly engages in different aggressive actions with the purpose of inflicting discomfort, pain and distress upon the victim. Various aggressive acts that constitute bullying have been classified by different experts (Cheng et al., 2011; Olweus, 1995; Rigby, 2007; Macanović & Petrović, 2015; Stojanović & Macanović, 2022) according to the scope of their research. Independently, bullying is classified into: physical bullying (which includes pushing, hitting, kicking), verbal bullying (for example insulting, name calling), relational bullying (such as exclusion from a group) and cyberbullying, encompassing all aggressive behaviours that occur among peers online. Hence, it is a relationship between the individual perpetrating bullying and the individual who is subject to it. Bullying occurs in environments where peers and adults are present, who, by witnessing the aggressive behaviour, become bystanders. Bystanders compose a heterogeneous group of individuals with a wide range of beliefs, values, (life) experiences, and societal positions; as a result, their reactions to bullying vary. Thus, in accordance with their response, bystanders can be categorised into several types. In general, bystanders witnessing bullying are classified as: reinforcers (supporters), outsiders (onlookers), and defenders (Pečjak & Pirc, 2017). Bullying elicits different bystanders' reactions. Depending on their response, bystanders fall into the category of active or passive reinforcers of bullying and active or passive defenders of victims (Salmivalli et al., 1996, as cited in Jenkins & Nickerson, 2016; Salmivalli, 1999, as cited in Thornberg, et al., 2017; Demaray et al., Malecki et al., 2021).

Bullying is not only an issue of primary schools, but a problem of society as a whole. This is illustrated by the ripple effect model, which is based on the assumption that bullying affects everyone in the environment (Sullivan, 2011). The environments that most significantly impact an individual student are the family, the peer group, and the primary school. Given the substantial influence of peers within these environments (Haataja et al., 2014; Horton, 2016; Herkama & Salmivalli, 2016; Klemenčič et al., 2016; Maunder & Crafter, 2018; Olweus, 1995; Politi, 2014; Sullivan, 2011; Lepičnik Vodopivec & Šindić, 2022), bullying prevention programmes place a strong emphasis on the role of these contexts. This fact is also highlighted by the construct of the bioecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Ljubetić, 2014), which subdivides the environment into several concentric systems comprising the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The primary distinction between these systems lies in the degree of their (in)direct influence on an individual within a social context. The systems exerting a more direct and substantial influence on the student are situated closer to the centre (i.e. the student) of this concentric model.

The family, peer group (friends), and primary school personnel are the key figures in the social environments where the student is most involved and forms various types of relationships. Although these environments impact the student directly, it is important to also consider the indirect influence of social environments that affect them: parents' workplaces and work environments, media influence, societal values and beliefs, executive and judicial branches of society. The family ensures an individual's first contact with society, which they become part of upon birth. The family, as a social environment, represents the setting in which individuals spend most of their time. Typically, family members develop strong emotional bonds. In relation to bullying, it has been observed that the majority of parents are not aware of their child's experience with this type of violence. Most parents learn about bullying only after talking with their child, prompted by noticeable changes in their behaviour (Harcourt, et al., 2015). The finding that students are more likely to report peer violence to parents than to teachers (Fekkes, Pijpers, and Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005) highlights the importance of effective parent-teacher collaboration, as argued by Espelage and Swearer (2009), Sullivan (2011), and Olweus (1995).

According to Posnič and Košir (2016), teachers have an important role in preventing bullying, observing further that teachers' ratings of bullying frequency can be biased, as bullying tends to occur when the teacher is not present at the location. Teachers more often perceive verbal bullying than physical and relational bullying.

Similarly as teachers, students more commonly perceive verbal bullying (Pečjak and Pirc, 2014; Posnič and Košir, 2016) and are less likely to perceive cyberbullying. Despite the variability in students' ratings regarding the frequency of bullying, these results nevertheless indicate that students experience bullying up to a few times a month or more frequently (Fekkes et al., 2005; OECD, 2017).

Methodology

Bullying, one of the challenges of modern societies, is associated with various negative consequences experienced by all individuals directly involved in it in a specific environment, as confirmed by Sullivan (2011).

The bioecological theory of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1981) argues that individuals coming from different social backgrounds (in)directly influence students to varying degrees. Individuals in social environments who exert the strongest direct influence on students are individuals from the environments in which students are actively involved and spend most of their time. These individuals are: family members, primary school students and personnel as well as peers/friends.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions of pupils, teachers, and parents regarding the frequency of bullying, and to compare the respective ratings of these three groups.

Based on the research objective, the following research hypothesis was formulated:

H: Students rate the frequency of bullying higher than parents and teachers.

The research was based on the descriptive and causal-non-experimental method employed in pedagogical research.

The sample included 117 respondents, i.e. 43 teachers (36.8%), 38 students (32.5%) and 36 parents of students (30.8%) from two Slovene primary schools.

Table 1: Sample structure

Respondents	f	f%
Teachers	43	36.8
Last triad students	38	32.5
Parents of the last triad students	36	30.8
Total	117	100.0

Note: f – frequency, f% – percentage

Table 1 shows that the sample is balanced, with included groups distributed in approximately equal proportions.

Data was collected using a segment of the questionnaire *Bullying in primary school—a challenge for modern society*, which was developed based on existing questionnaires on bullying (Cheng et al., 2011, as cited in Pečjak, 2014; Rigby & Johnson, 2016; Rigby & Slee, 1993; Parada, 2006, as cited in Pečjak, 2014; Yoon & Kerber, 2003, as cited in Pečjak, 2014) and the analysis of relevant/scientific literature (Olweus, 1995; Rigby, 2002; Rigby, 2007; Salmivalli, 2010; Sullivan, 2011). The questionnaire was designed to gather demographic data and general data on the understanding of the concept of bullying from the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents. It also aimed to collect the respondents' ratings of the frequency of specific aggressive behaviours classified as bullying, ratings of the frequency of specific bullying forms (verbal, physical, relational, and cyberbullying) as well as the perceived frequency of bullying in primary schools.

The reliability of the questionnaire was tested by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which indicates the adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.929$) of the questionnaire *Bullying in primary school—a challenge for modern society*. The collected data were transferred from the web application 1ka to the statistical program for data processing SPSS 25.0. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test indicated a non-normal distribution of variables; therefore, an appropriate non-parametric test was applied during the data processing step.

Results and interpretation

Table 2: Frequency of bullying in primary school: perception of all respondents combined

	f	f%
Never	19	16.2
Once or twice	40	34.2
Occasionally (once or twice a month)	27	23.1
Often (more than once a month)	15	12.8
Total	101	86.3
Missing data	16	13.7
Total	117	100.0

Note: f – frequency, f% – percentage

Table 2 shows that the largest share of respondents estimated that bullying had occurred once or twice (34.2%). The second most common answer was that bullying occurred occasionally (23.1%). A total of 19 (16.2%) respondents rated that bullying had not occurred, while 16 respondents (13.7%) did not provide an answer to this question.

	Teachers		Students		Parents	
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%
Never	0	0.0	5	15.2	14	50.0
Once or twice	19	47.5	13	39.4	8	28.6
Occasionally (once or twice a month)	14	35.0	8	24.2	5	17.9
Often (more than once a month)	7	17.5	7	21.2	1	3.6
Total	40	100.0	33	100.0	28	100.0
χ^2 test results	$\chi^2 = 29.139$; $g = 6$; $2p = 0.000$					

Table 3: Frequency of bullying in primary school: perceptions of teachers, students, and parents

Note: f – frequency; f% – percentage; χ^2 – chi-square test

The result of the χ^2 test shows statistically significant differences between teachers, students and parents ($\chi^2 = 29.139$; $g = 6$; $2p = 0.000$) regarding the rating of bullying frequency in primary school. Teachers (35.0%) and students (39.4%) most often rated that in the surveyed primary schools bullying had occurred once or twice, whereas half of the parents (50%) answered that there had been no cases of bullying. The lowest was the proportion of teachers (0.0%) and students (15.2%) who rated that bullying had never occurred. Cramér's V indicates a medium-strong correlation between the group answering the questionnaire and the rating of the bullying frequency ($V = 0.380$; $p = 0.000$), which means that teachers were more likely to answer that bullying had occurred once or twice, while half of the parents rated that bullying had not occurred. Parents' rating that bullying did not occur is not surprising, as previous research has already demonstrated that parents often do not perceive the occurrence of bullying in primary schools. The most relevant information on bullying was provided by students, as bullying occurs when the teacher or other adults are not present at the location, which was

also established by Posnič and Košir (2016). Respondents rated that the most common behaviour consisted of a student uttering a profanity directed at another student ($\bar{X} = 1.83$), followed by students calling another student derogatory nicknames ($\bar{X} = 1.55$), and a student hitting someone. ($\bar{X} = 1.27$). Moreover, according to the attributed ratings, the least frequent occurrences were witnessing a student presenting themselves online as another student ($\bar{X} = 0.36$) and a student noticing online that another student posted inappropriate photographs of a peer without their consent ($\bar{X} = 0.57$).

Table 4: Differences in the frequency ratings of particular aggressive behaviours attributed by teachers, students, and parents (Kruskal–Wallis test)

Aggressive behaviour	Respondents	N	\bar{R}	H	<i>p</i>
A group of students excluded a student from a common activity.	Teachers	40	54.10	12.155	0.002
	Students	32	55.23		
	Parents	25	32.86		
I noticed online that another student posted inappropriate photographs of a peer without their consent.	Teachers	40	41.93	10.211	0.006
	Students	32	59.80		
	Parents	25	46.50		
Students were calling a student derogatory nicknames.	Teachers	40	50.64	7.224	0.027
	Students	32	56.19		
	Parents	25	36.58		
A student pushed another student on the ground.	Teachers	40	53.44	7.209	0.027
	Students	32	53.16		
	Parents	25	36.58		
A student tripped another student.	Teachers	40	55.94	9.584	0.008
	Students	32	51.16		
	Parents	25	35.14		
A group of students spread false rumours about a student.	Teachers	40	44.10	3.345	0.188
	Students	32	55.66		
	Parents	25	48.32		
A student falsely presented themselves online as another student.	Teachers	40	44.35	12.506	0.002
	Students	32	59.67		
	Parents	25	42.78		
A student hit someone.	Teachers	40	50.69	6.369	0.041
	Students	32	55.45		
	Parents	25	38.04		
A student uttered a profanity directed at another student.	Teachers	40	45.69	7.558	0.023
	Students	32	59.38		
	Parents	25	41.02		
A student criticised someone online.	Teachers	40	39.86	13.547	0.001
	Students	32	62.31		
	Parents	25	46.58		
A student used gossip, which resulted in a peer being excluded from a group of students.	Teachers	40	48.99	1.667	0.435
	Students	32	52.89		
	Parents	25	44.04		

Note: N – sample size; \bar{R} – mean rank; H – Kruskal–Wallis test; *p*-value – significance

The results of the Kruskal–Wallis test show no statistically significant differences among teachers, students, and parents for the following aggressive behaviours: a group of students spreading false

rumours about another student ($H = 3.345$; $p = 0.188$) and a student using gossip, which resulted in a peer being excluded from a group of students ($H = 1.667$; $p = 0.435$). Based on the mean rank, both of these behaviours were attributed the highest frequency ratings by students.

The results of the Kruskal–Wallis test show statistically significant differences between the frequency ratings of aggressive behaviours assigned by teachers, students, and parents for the following categories: a group of students excluding a student from a common activity ($H = 12.155$; $p = 0.002$); a student noticing online that another student posted inappropriate photographs of a peer without their consent ($H = 10.211$; $p = 0.006$); a student being called derogatory nicknames ($H = 7.224$; $p = 0.027$); a student pushing another student on the ground ($H = 7.209$; $p = 0.027$); a student tripping another student ($H = 9.584$; $p = 0.008$); a student falsely presenting themselves online as another student ($H = 12.506$; $p = 0.002$); a student hitting someone ($H = 6.369$; $p = 0.041$); a student uttering a profanity directed at another student ($H = 7.558$; $p = 0.023$); a student criticising someone online ($H = 13.547$; $p = 0.001$).

As indicated by the mean rank, students most frequently witnessed another student posting inappropriate photographs of a peer without their consent (teachers: $\bar{R} = 41.93$; students: $\bar{R} = 59.80$; parents: $\bar{R} = 46.50$); a student falsely presenting themselves online as another student (teachers: $\bar{R} = 44.35$; students: $\bar{R} = 59.67$; parents: $\bar{R} = 42.78$); a student uttering a profanity directed at another student (teachers: $\bar{R} = 45.69$; students: $\bar{R} = 59.38$; parents: $\bar{R} = 41.02$); and a student criticising someone online (teachers: $\bar{R} = 39.86$; students: $\bar{R} = 62.31$; parents: $\bar{R} = 46.58$).

Mean rank indicates that parents' ratings were the lowest for the aggressive behaviours comprising a group of students excluding a student from a common activity (teachers: $\bar{R} = 54.10$; students: $\bar{R} = 55.23$; parents: $\bar{R} = 32.86$); a student being called derogatory nicknames (teachers: $\bar{R} = 50.64$; students: $\bar{R} = 56.19$; parents: $\bar{R} = 36.58$); a student pushing another student on the ground (teachers: $\bar{R} = 53.44$; students: $\bar{R} = 53.16$; parents: $\bar{R} = 36.58$); a student tripping another student (teachers: $\bar{R} = 55.94$; students: $\bar{R} = 51.16$; parents: $\bar{R} = 35.14$); and a student hitting someone (teachers: $\bar{R} = 50.69$; students: $\bar{R} = 55.45$; parents: $\bar{R} = 38.04$).

Students' ratings exhibit the highest mean rank for all of the investigated aggressive behaviours categorised as bullying. The findings indicate that students most accurately reported the frequency of bullying. The ratings from parents and teachers are biased, as research has shown that bullying is less likely to occur in the presence of parents or teachers, which was also argued by Posnič and Košir (2016).

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for verbal, physical, and relational bullying, and cyberbullying

	N	\bar{X}	SD	Min	Max	Mo
Verbal bullying	93	1.78	1.04	0	3	1.3
Physical bullying	93	1.23	0.90	0	3	1
Relational bullying	93	1.22	1.05	0	3	1
Cyberbullying	93	0.75	1.04	0	3	0

Note: N – sample size; \bar{X} – mean rank; SD – standard deviation; Min – minimum; Max – maximum; Mo – modus

Table 5 presents descriptive statistics for each form of bullying. The respondents rated verbal bullying as the most common ($\bar{X} = 1.78$), followed by physical ($\bar{X} = 1.23$) and relational ($\bar{X} = 1.22$) bullying. Cyberbullying was rated as having the lowest prevalence ($\bar{X} = 0.75$).

Table 6: Differences in frequency ratings of verbal, physical and relational bullying, and cyberbullying among the respondents' groups (Kruskal–Wallis test)

Form of bullying	Respondents	N	\bar{R}	H	<i>p</i>
Verbal bullying (VB)	Teachers	38	46.75	3.315	0.191
	Students	31	52.73		
	Parents	24	40.00		
Physical bullying (PB)	Teachers	38	50.29	1.742	0.419
	Students	31	46.98		
	Parents	24	41.81		
Relational bullying (RB)	Teachers	38	47.03	3.233	0.199
	Students	31	52.48		
	Parents	24	39.88		
* Cyberbullying (CB)	Teachers	38	42.29	6.563	0.038
	Students	31	56.03		
	Parents	24	42.79		

N – sample size; \bar{R} – mean rank; H – Kruskal–Wallis test; *p*-value

The Kruskal–Wallis test for establishing differences between groups of respondents indicates statistically significant differences between groups in relation to cyberbullying ($H = 6.563$; $p = 0.038$). Conversely, no statistically significant differences were detected for verbal ($H = 3.315$; $p = 0.191$), physical ($H = 1.742$; $p = 0.419$) and relational ($H = 3.233$; $p = 0.199$) bullying.

Based on the mean rank, the ratings assigned by the group of students for verbal ($\bar{R} = 52.73$), physical ($\bar{R} = 46.98$) and relational ($\bar{R} = 52.48$) bullying, as well as cyberbullying ($\bar{R} = 56.03$) are higher than teachers' ratings (VB: $\bar{R} = 46.75$; PB: $\bar{R} = 50.29$; RB: $\bar{R} = 47.03$; CB: $\bar{R} = 42.29$) and parents' ratings (VB: $\bar{R} = 40.00$; PB: $\bar{R} = 41.81$; RB: $\bar{R} = 39.88$; CB: $\bar{R} = 42.79$). A study by Posnič and Košir (2016) highlights the importance of recognising differences in bullying frequency ratings provided by students, parents, and teachers. The authors argue that teachers may assign a biased rating of bullying frequency as violence often occurs outside their presence.

This confirms the hypothesis.

Conclusions

Bullying is a phenomenon occurring in contemporary society. It would be wrong to assume that bullying is not present in primary schools, as also acknowledged by Sullivan (2011). The study focused on estimating the frequency of bullying and assessing the role of particular groups present in the environment in preventing its occurrence.

Based on the results deriving from the frequency ratings of behaviours classified as bullying, it was found that bullying is a phenomenon that is prevalent in our societal context. Furthermore, it emerged that when rating the frequency of bullying and various aggressive behaviours constituting bullying, students perceived bullying as more prevalent than parents and teachers. As argued by Posnič and Košir (2016), these results could be attributable to the fact that students are more likely to be present at the location where bullying occurs than teachers and parents.

The difference in the frequency ratings for each form of bullying was prominent for the category of cyberbullying as students rated its occurrence higher than teachers and parents. This result is not

surprising, given the students' perceptions of cyberbullying and their higher ratings of the frequency of aggressive behaviours that fall into this category of bullying.

The findings, which provide insights into bullying, demonstrate that this issue is present in the selected primary schools. The findings are useful not only for teachers, school guidance services, and school administration but also for students and their parents; they provide a foundation for planning and taking action in cases of bullying as well as for adopting preventive measures by schools aimed at reducing bullying. At the same time, it is necessary to point out to the limitations influencing the research and the interpretation of its results, for example: small sample, providing socially acceptable answers despite ensured anonymity. It would be interesting to investigate in more detail the role of teachers in recognising bullying and taking action in case it occurs.

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UČESTALOST VRŠNJAČKOG NASILJA U OSNOVNOJ ŠKOLI - RAZLIČITE PERSPEKTIVE

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Apstrakt: *Vršnjačko nasilje je odnos koji se javlja među učenicima osnovne škole. Definiše se kao namjerno ponavljajuće agresivno ponašanje, gdje nasilnik iskorištava neravnotežu moći nad žrtvom s ciljem nanošenja bola, straha i anksioznosti. U prevenciji vršnjačkog nasilja važnu ulogu imaju porodica, zaposleni u osnovnoj školi i vršnjaci. Cilj istraživanja je utvrditi procjene nastavnika, učenika i roditelja o učestalosti vršnjačkog nasilja u osnovnim školama. U istraživanju je učestvovalo 117 učesnika (nastavnika, učenika treće trijade i roditelja učenika treće trijade). Podaci su prikupljeni putem onlajn upitnika Vršnjačko nasilje u osnovnoj školi - izazov savremene društvene stvarnosti. Rezultati pokazuju da je vršnjačko nasilje prisutno u svakodnevnom životu učenika. Utvrđeno je da su učenici procijenili veću učestalost vršnjačkog nasilja nego roditelji i nastavnici. Razlike u procjeni učestalosti pojavile su se među učesnicima u vezi s pojedinim oblicima vršnjačkog nasilja. Učenici su značajno više ocijenili učestalost vršnjačkog nasilja na internetu u poređenju s roditeljima i nastavnicima.*

Ključne reči: *vršnjačko nasilje, osnovna škola, roditelji, učenici, nastavnici.*

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