

School Experiences Retrospectively: Relationship Between Recall of Bullying Experiences and Perception of Schools by Pedagogy Students¹

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Abstract

The presented study explored the memories of 332 pedagogy students about the bullying experiences and their former schools. Findings indicate that: (1) young adults have very different experiences with bullying, (2) time spent at middle school was assessed as the worst, (3) general judgment of school was correlated with bullying experiences, especially students who were involved in bullying problems as a victim or bystander were less positive in their appraisals of school. The study provides a unique account of how young adults view their school experiences. Data is discussed in terms of its psycho-educational implications.

Key words: *school bullying, prospective teachers, pedagogy students, retrospective study, school climate, appraisal of school*

Introduction

Nowadays, pedagogical and psychological studies focus mainly on subjective experiences of students and identify them as school climate (Kulesza 2011; Tuściak-Deliowska 2014). Therefore, school climate is a reflection of the school

¹ The research was carried out as a part of the BSTM 6/14 – I WNP APS project. The presented article is another one in a series of the author's articles in the retrospective research area devoted to the school experiences of prospective teachers.

environment properties experienced by students. Schools climate is regarded as a micro subjective category – as the environment in the eyes of units. School climate analysis takes into account a broad spectrum of possible interactions. School climate contains many variables (dimensions), which interact with each other and associate with students' behaviors in many different ways (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2012). School climate provides a good basis for explaining the formation of the well-being of students in school, facilitates the interpretation of their accomplishments and attitudes toward various aspects of life.

School climate has recently become an important category in the study of violence and aggression at school. Bullying is a pervasive problem that is estimated to impact on almost one-third of students and has been found to be the form of school-based violence that affects the greatest number of children and adolescents (Craig et al., 2009). Research on school bullying conducted over the past four decades has contributed greatly to our understanding of the complexity of the problem as well as the challenges we face in addressing it (Hymel and Swearer, 2015). It has been shown that bullying is prevalent in all schools and has serious negative consequences during its manifestation and, in the longer term, for the health and well-being of students who are frequently victimized as well as for other students (Rigby, 2010). From a social-ecological perspective, bullying exists within the larger context of school climate (Nickerson et al., 2014).

There were theoretical grounds which confirmed that students involved in bully/victim problems are less predisposed than others to view their school in a positive light (Yoneyama and Rigby, 2006). Blaya et al. (2006) suggested that victimization is reflected in a negative perception of all dimensions of school climate. Involvement in bullying (both as perpetrator and victim) is associated with a relatively negative image of the school and class climate regardless of sex. It is possible that students who are involved in risky or aggressive behaviors may be more inclined to perceive their school in negative terms (Klein et al., 2012). Also, a study conducted by Nickerson et al. (2014) registered that students involved in bullying as perpetrators, victims or both had more negative perceptions of school climate, however, it varied by specific aspects of climate studied. Chronicity of victimization was also related to differences in the perceptions of all aspects of school climate. Cross-national analyses conducted by Harel-Fisch et al. (2011) showed that children with negative school perceptions experience twice the relative odds of being involved in bullying as compared with children with no negative perceptions. The above-mentioned findings highlight the importance of understanding bullying within the larger aspects of school climate. School climate could be viewed as a barometer reflecting individual school experiences (Petrie,

2014) and as a source of information in helping to highlight children who may be involved in bullying victimization (Yoneyama and Rigby, 2006).

Consequently, the perception that students have of their school environment is argued to have an impact on their behavior within the school settings like academic achievement, learning motivation, school avoidance (Koth et al., 2008; Petrie, 2014). Thus, from this point of view, it is important to focus on the social and emotional context of school functioning as well as to utilize school climate measures.

In connection with the cited findings, there are two issues that we need to consider. In the above-mentioned studies, the researchers focused mainly on identifying students as the perpetrator, the victim, the bully-victim or without such experiences and then compared their perceptions of class/school. We have no information about the perceptions of school climate by students who are witnesses, bystanders of bullying behaviors. Research on school climate and approval of violence in school life among adolescents, conducted by Tłuściak-Deliowska (2012), revealed that satisfaction with school is positively correlated with good relationships between students and negatively correlated with noticing manifestations of violence among peers. Thus, bullying bystanders may also have negative perceptions of school. Furthermore, the results of Tłuściak-Deliowska's research (2012) showed that important predictors of a higher level of approval of violence in social life are: lack of satisfaction with school, reflection that students' rights are not respected at school and perception of school as a place where the intensity of antisocial behavior among students is high. Aggressive behavior and hostility in interpersonal relationships may cause the weakening of inhibitions against aggression because it may seem that aggression is a common and accepted feature of interaction, hence an increase in the approval of it (Frączek, 1985).

The second point is that empirical research on bullying and perceptions of school are being conducted now, among today's students, in the "present tense", which is justified because of searching for solutions to this problem and implications for educational and prevention practices. An interesting approach to the study of school violence and other school experiences is retrospective research. The research by Craig et al. (2011) showed that pre-service teachers who had personal experiences of involvement in bullying (mainly as a victim) showed greater sensitivity in identifying different behaviors exhibiting signs of violence. "Personal history" clearly correlated with a greater interest in intervention in situations of school violence. Memories of prior experiences operate in ways similar to beliefs, thus influencing attitudes and, subsequently, behavior. Autobiographical memories of schools, former classmates and their behaviors, relations with teachers, as well as other school experiences – are an important part of personal identity of people and

the sense of self (Haugh et al., 2015). Recalls of the past allow us to determine if past school experiences were important for a person. From this point of view, individual school experiences of pedagogy students become important and interesting.

Study Aim

The purpose of this study was to examine (1) young adults' personal past experiences of school bullying, (2) general perceptions of their former schools and (3) the relationships between bullying experiences and the individual appraisals of schools. It was hypothesized that (1) respondents had sporadic experiences with school violence, (2) pedagogy students tend to evaluate their previous school well and (3) perceptions of school would be less positive among adults who had more victimization and bullying bystanders experiences.

Research Methodology

Research Sample

Participants in the study included 332 students attending educational (pedagogical) studies in the Faculty of Education Sciences. The study was carried out in 2015. The socio-demographic characteristics of the studied sample are presented in Table 1. The average age of the respondents was 22.69 years ($SD = 4.44$, $min.=18$, $max.=48$). Most of the participants were women (317; 95.5%), which is characteristic of the teaching profession in Poland.

Table 1. Demographic and individual characteristics of participants

Some characteristics of pedagogy students		Frequency	Percentage
Gender (N=332)	Female	317	95.5
	Male	13	3.9
	N/A	2	0.6
Stage of the study (N=332)	Beginning	150	45.2
	Ending	145	43.7
	Postgraduate studies	37	11.1

Some characteristics of pedagogy students		Frequency	Percentage
Study program (N=332)	Full-time day program	187	56.3
	Evening-weekend program	108	88.9
	Postgraduate (weekend)	37	11.1
Type of graduate secondary school (N=332)	General	279	84.0
	Specialized	27	8.1
	Technical	26	7.8

Instrument

The Retrospective Bullying Experiences Questionnaire (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2015) was used in this study. The quantitative part of the questionnaire was divided into three periods of school: primary school, middle school and high school. Each period consisted of overall assessment of school and different experiences associated with peer violence. First, the participants were asked how they assessed the time spent at school, with the use of a 5-point response scale from “very bad” to “very good”. Next, the respondents were asked to indicate how often (from 1-never to 5 – very often) each type of behavior (1) they witnessed (bystander), (2) they experienced (victim), (3) they manifested (bully). At the end of the instrument, there was an open-ended question asking the participants to provide any other comments about bullying or best remembered bullying occurrence from school days.

Data analysis

The IBM SPSS Statistics version 23 was used for data management. Analysis first considered the descriptive statistics of the main variables (appraisals of schools, recollections of bullying experiences), some of which are reported here, then it investigated differences between appraisals of school levels and finally relationships between the major variables. According to the last, open-ended additional question, a data source was free written statements, therefore the most appropriate way to analyze them was content analysis. Taking into account the issues of this text, statements were selected in which the respondents expressed an opinion about their former schools². These statements will be cited as a supplement of quantitative data.

² Respondents' statements discussing various aspects of school bullying are the subject of article: Tłuściak-Deliowska (2016), Retrospektywne spojrzenie na przemoc rówieśniczą w szkole (Retrospective view on peer violence at school), *Kultura i Edukacja* (in press)

Results

Recollections of bullying experiences

At the beginning, the prevalence of bullying experiences during school days of pedagogy students was established. Results were divided in terms of the type of bullying experiences. The table below presents the frequency of bullying behaviors experienced by the respondents as a witness, victim and perpetrator at different school levels.

Table 2. The frequency of bullying experiences during school days by pedagogy students

Types of bullying experiences	Primary School		Middle School		High School	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Experiences of being a bystander	3.08	.73	2.89	.91	1.84	.74
	N = 324; $\alpha = .892$		N = 307; $\alpha = .933$		N = 313; $\alpha = .917$	
Experiences of being a victim	1.65	.57	1.43	.55	1.16	.29
	N = 326; $\alpha = .869$		N = 303; $\alpha = .902$		N = 321; $\alpha = .827$	
Experiences of being a bully	1.34	.36	1.20	.23	1.13	.21
	N = 324; $\alpha = .815$		N = 303; $\alpha = .745$		N = 319; $\alpha = .774$	

The higher the mean score, the higher the frequency of particular bullying experiences. The estimates presented in Table 2 suggest that a relatively small proportion of pedagogy students was involved in bullying problems at school. The mean scores are in many cases slightly higher than 1 (at 5-point scale). Nevertheless, it is evident that the participants were more often bystanders of peer violence than bullies. Furthermore, the mean scores are dropping with school level.

Retrospective evaluations of time spent at schools

The next investigated issue was perceptions of former schools by the pedagogy students. The main results are presented in Figure 1 and in Table 3.

To sum up, the above data show that the time spent at middle school was assessed by the respondents as the worst ($M = 3.74$; $SD = 1.08$). In relation to this school, there were the most negative appraisals (very bad – 5%, bad – 8%,

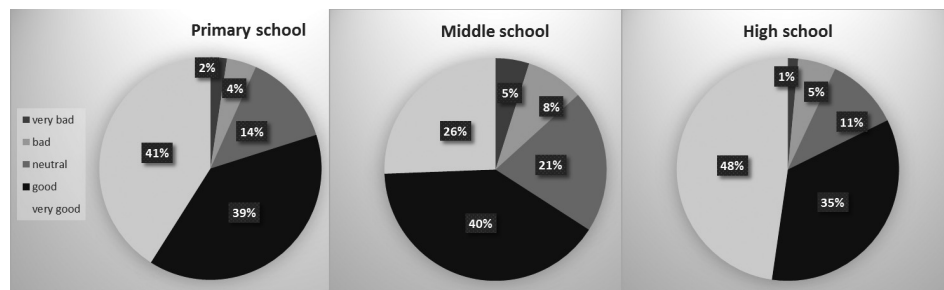


Figure 1. The overall assessment of three school levels by pedagogy students (N=332)

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, t-student values and levels of statistical significance of differences between retrospective appraisals of schools

Compared categories	Mean (SD)	t	df	p
PS	4.12 (0.96)	5.658	306	p < 0.001
MS	3.74 (1.08)			
MS	3.74 (1.08)	-6.064	304	p < 0.001
HS	4.21 (0.95)			
PS	4.14 (0.93)	-1.100	325	n.i.
HS	4.21 (0.95)			

PS – Primary School, MS – Middle School, HS – High School

neutral – 21%). Average appraisals of middle schools differ significantly from both the primary and high school assessments ($p < 0.001$), and there were no significant differences of comparison between the appraisals of primary and high schools.

Relationships between bullying experiences and overall assessment of schools

The last stage of the analysis involved relationships between the main variables. Results of correlation analysis between bullying experiences and overall appraisal of schools are presented in the table below.

Table 4. Correlation coefficients: bullying experiences and appraisals of schools

Type of experiences	Overall appraisal of primary school
Experiences of being a bystander PS	-.36**
Experiences of being a victim PS	-.44**
Experiences of being a bully PS	-.11
	Overall appraisal of middle school
Experiences of being a bystander MS	-.31**
Experiences of being a victim MS	-.51**
Experiences of being a bully MS	-.08
	Overall appraisal of high school
Experiences of being a bystander HS	-.12*
Experiences of being a victim HS	-.18**
Experiences of being a bully HS	0.01

PS – Primary School, MS – Middle School, HS – High School

*correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The conducted analysis determined that overall evaluations of schools were correlated with two types of bullying experiences. There are negative correlations between experiences of being a bystander and being a victim of bullying. Correlation coefficients were the highest in relation to primary and middle schools.

School experiences based on pedagogy students' free statements

On the basis of their own experiences, the respondents formulated statements which express their attitude to their former schools. Unfortunately, the statements express a negative opinion of schools. Some examples are presented below:

“(...) I was a laughing-stock because I had no «trendy» clothes. My parents could not afford them. After this experience, I believe that school uniforms in schools are a very good thing, but some consisting of shoes, socks, and shirts, trousers, skirts. (...) I think that middle school is the worst period in each child's life” (Female, 20 years old, 8PEP)

“I think that the system of eight grades of elementary schools should be restored and middle schools should be removed, or attention should be paid to this institution, because it is a place where all «pathologies» occur in the students.” (Men, 20 years old, 26PE)

“Absolutely I must condemn schools, because “educators” washed their hands off the matter” (Victim in the middle and high school; Female 27 years old, 53PEPn.)

“(…). If I become a teacher one day, I will never let it happen to my students! (...) (wrongly accused of abusing another girl; Female 19 years old, 46PEPn)

Discussion and conclusions

The presented study explored the memories of pedagogy students about their bullying experiences and schools. The study provides a unique account of how young adults view their school experiences. Findings indicate that: (1) young adults have very different experiences with bullying, (2) time spent at middle school was assessed as the worst, (3) general appraisal of school was correlated with bullying experiences, especially the students who were involved in bullying problems as victim or bystander were less positive in their appraisals of school.

The results of the presented study suggest that watching and participating in bullying in childhood is not easily forgotten. The respondents reported a higher level of witnessing and victimization in primary school compared to higher education levels. The results of the presented study also confirm a significant relationship between school bullying past experiences and perceptions of school. In particular, those respondents who experienced bullying in schools assess and recall school as the worst thing. Also, the negative appraisals of school correlate with being a witness of bullying behaviors. It does not, however, establish causality. Nevertheless, it may be concluded that involvement in bullying problems as a victim and bystander at school is likely to be associated with relatively negative perceptions of the school. We can speculate that victimised students are inclined to dislike the school because their school is likely to contain students who have bullied them. Victimized students may also be comparatively negative in their appraisals of school environment because they feel that they are not well regarded by others in the class (Yoneyama and Rigby, 2006). Moreover, students may feel that the school had not helped them, despite the fact that it had been one of the

main tasks of the school institution, and such insights were revealed in the free statements of the respondents of this study.

Interestingly, despite the fact that the higher frequency of aggressive behaviors was associated by the respondents with primary school, the time spent at middle school was evaluated as the worst. Furthermore, in this case the correlation coefficient between experiences of being a victim and appraisal of school was the highest. To explain that fact, at least two things must be pointed out. It should be noted that there is a qualitative change of aggressive behaviors with age (Craig et al., 2009). Physical aggression is replaced by verbal and relational, hidden violence. It is obvious that physical aggression is much easier to see than hidden violence, therefore there is a higher incidence of this type of experiences in primary schools than at later stages. Relational bullying is regarded as a more sophisticated form, it leaves no visible traces but inner pain. Therefore, despite the fact that the frequency of this type of experiences at this school level is lower, it may have more influence on the student's functioning and development. Victimization at this school level is more serious than at primary school (Schafer et al., 2004). Unpleasant experiences have a strong emotional appeal and are easily available in autobiographical memory (Fijałkowska and Gruszczyński, 2009). The second issue, which may be important for the overall appraisal of middle school level, is student – teacher relationships or school organizational culture. These issues were raised by the respondents at the end of the questionnaire in free statements. Further research, complemented by these elements, could provide interesting results and explain to a greater extent the negative retrospective appraisals of middle school. Earlier research (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2012) conducted among adolescents showed that students are satisfied with their middle schools in comparison with different kinds of high schools, despite the presence of inner aggressive behaviors. Thus, maybe some other school factors play a protective role.

The existence and functioning of middle schools (3-year Junior High School) in Poland has been often analyzed recently. Junior High Schools are negatively judged by public opinion. Ongoing discussions concern the elimination of this school level and return to the “old/past” solution (before 1999), which includes 8-year primary schools and 4-year secondary schools. What is also discussed is the severity of aggressive behaviors among schoolchildren and other problems connected with student functioning. It should be noted that middle school is a difficult school because young people who attend it are at a difficult age (13–15-year-old schoolchildren). The pedagogical sense of middle schools was to gather, in one place, young people in a difficult period of adolescence in order to apply appropriate, relevant to their needs, methods of educational influence. Therefore, it should

be concluded that if the current methods fail, we have to look for better ones to improve teaching and educational methods, as well as to improve school culture and climate, regardless of school level.

The presented study has limitations which are typical of retrospective studies (Schafer et al., 2004). Nevertheless, the obtained results are interesting and significant because the study was conducted among students of pedagogy. It could be expected that prospective educationalists' own experiences from school days impinge on current attitudes and a sense of "mission" as a future educator.

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