Bullying in early adolescence: An exploratory study in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract  Background and objectives: This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of bullying among intermediate school students in Saudi Arabia to inform preventive measures. Materials and methods: Qualitative methods were applied. The study was conducted at four intermediate schools. Students, parents, and school professionals participated, and data were collected through observations, interviews, and focus groups. Emergent themes and sub-themes were identified through coding.

Results: A total of 91 individuals participated: 40 students, 31 school professionals, and 20 parents/caregivers. Three main themes and multiple subthemes were identified: 1) types of bullying, 2) factors encouraging bullying, and 3) the impact of bullying. The lack of safe environments, recreational facilities, and inconsistencies in addressing problematic behaviors were subthemes that were found to be conducive to bullying, whereas dislike of school, racism, aggressiveness, and social isolation were emergent subthemes that were reflective of the potential impact of bullying. With this process, a model for bullying practices is described.

Conclusion: A better understanding of the bullying experiences among adolescents has been obtained. Preventive measures need to target the factors that the participants identified as conducive to bullying.

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1. Introduction

Bullying, which is known to occur globally among children and adolescents, comprises repeated forms of physical, verbal, social, or emotional aggression that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The victim, perpetrator, and the witnesses of bullying may suffer from serious long-term consequences [1], including devastating effects on the individuals’ mental, social, and physical health. In 1983, the suicide of three bullied children in Norway was the leading reason for the first serious intervention at the national level to confront bullying [2]. Children may be bullied for various reasons, including their appearance, speech, or lack of coping mechanisms [3].

Bullying has been reported at varying rates around the world. Globally, 17–69% of 13 year old students have reported exposure to bullying [4]. Prevention programs have been developed which focus on education and increasing the awareness of bullying and its negative impacts [5,6]. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), bullying has only been addressed very recently. Some large-scale epidemiological studies have been conducted in recent years and have provided national estimates for the prevalence of bullying. Jeeluna, a national study addressing the health needs of adolescents in the KSA, found that 25% of students had reported being exposed to bullying within the past one month preceding the study. Males were more likely to engage in bullying compared to females (27.1% versus 22.7%) [7]. Adults in the KSA reported their adverse childhood experiences, including exposure to bullying during the first 18 years of their lives. It was found that 21.5% of adults reported exposure to peer violence during their childhood, with males reporting this more often than females (28.2% versus 14.7%) [8]. Although there appears to be insufficient awareness of the issue, bullying is apparently prevalent in KSA, as is the case in other parts of the world.

In KSA, the first anti-bullying campaign was conducted by the National Family Safety Program (NFSP) in 2011. Trained adolescent volunteers provided peer education to students in schools in the capital city, Riyadh [9]. The campaign was well received by students and school professionals. National efforts are now needed to combat this problem. The aim of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of adolescents’ experiences of bullying to further inform the necessary preventive efforts.

2. Materials and methods

This is a cross-sectional study that was conducted in the capital city of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in April 2014.

2.1. Study area/setting

The study was carried out at male and female intermediate schools in Riyadh. Four schools (two male and two female) were selected and invited to participate. The schools included both public and private schools. Schools in KSA are generally gender segregated. A minority of schools are co-educated, but these schools were not included in this study.

The participants included 1) students in intermediate school (grades 7–9), 2) parents/caregivers of students attending the participating schools, and 3) school professionals (teachers, counselors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and principals) working at the participating schools.

Students participating in the focus groups were selected though a combined process of random sampling using student lists and targeted sampling based on observations (see below). Parents and school professionals were invited to participate based on the purposive method: school administrators were asked to select the school professionals and parents/caregivers that, in their opinion, would be most willing to participate in and contribute to the discussion on this subject.

2.2. Data collection

Multiple means were used for data collection:

1) Observations: Students at each participating school were observed during recess, including students in grades 7–9. Observations of verbal and non-verbal expressions of students at the participating schools were conducted and documented through note taking.
2) Focus groups (FGs): Three focus groups were conducted at each school: one each with students, parents/caregivers, and school professionals. A discussion guide using short, simple, and open-ended questions was used. FGs were audio-recorded. Additional observations of non-verbal communication were noted.
3) Individual interviews: One interview was conducted at each school with the school principal/vice principal. These in-depth interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of her/his experiences with the peer relationships and bullying that takes place at the school. A semi-structured interview guide was used with further investigative discussion as needed.

Data collection was carried out by two research teams, one group of male researchers and one group of female researchers, as access to the schools is gender based. Each team comprised of an experienced senior qualitative researcher and 2–3 junior researchers. The two senior researchers conducted structured and standardized training for the junior researchers’ field work and data collection. Attendance and completion of the training prior to his/her involvement in the study was a prerequisite for all junior researchers.

The FGs and individual interviews were led by the senior researchers. The junior and senior researchers were responsible for note taking, documentation, and posing additional questions. The focus groups and individual interviews were all conducted in Arabic.

2.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed alongside the ongoing data collection. Based on well-known and rigorous qualitative analysis methods and an inductive approach [10–12], the data were reviewed and analyzed. Emergent concepts were identified and grouped to form themes. The themes were reviewed by the researchers, and through consensus, the final emergent themes were agreed upon. The verbatim
quotes of participants were used to support the emergent themes. These quotes were translated from Arabic into English for the purpose of this paper.

Approval for conducting the study was granted by King Abdullah International Medical Research Center.

3. Results

A total of 40 students (20 females and 20 males), 31 school professionals comprising teachers, school counselors and principals (22 females and nine males), and 20 parents/caregivers (11 females and nine males) participated in the study, resulting in a total of 91 participants.

Three key themes emerged during the analysis: 1) types of bullying, 2) factors conducive to bullying, and 3) the impact of bullying.

Each theme included several subthemes (Table 1).

3.1. Types of bullying

Both student and adult participants reported the various types of bullying that occur at schools. Although there was a consensus that these behaviors occur at school, many of the adults did not necessarily perceive these behaviors as particularly problematic. For some, it was considered to be the usual mischief in which some children engage.

3.1.1. Verbal

Verbal forms of bullying were not uncommon. Name calling and verbal insults were reported to occur among the students.

"...you are fat, you are chubby." (A parent describing what some students call each other)

"...they do not speak politely to each other." (A parent describing the students)

3.1.2. Physical

Physical fights are sometimes underestimated by adults and considered to be ‘rough’ forms of play with one another. This is particularly true among male students.

"Most of the time, students will start joking with each other and then end up fighting." (Male teacher)

Although physical bullying is generally thought to occur mainly among males, females also reported exposure to such incidents.

"A student tied the hair of two girls together and then she hit them hard." (Female student)

3.1.3. Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is usually thought to occur with an adult perpetrator. Though uncommon, it was reported that sexual harassment, usually verbal in nature, does sometimes occur at schools.

"One student asked another to remove his clothes." (Male teacher)

Such encounters were reported to have occurred in school bathrooms, where no supervision is obviously present.

3.1.4. Psychological/social

Intimidation and imposing dominance on peers was reported to occur in various ways. The misuse of certain privileges given to students was also described.

"If anybody talks during class, I will write down their names so that they lose (school) marks." (A student reporting how a student ‘in charge’ of class behaves when teacher is away)

"She threatened me." (Female student)

"He threatened us with weapons." (A male student talking about another student)

A phenomenon that has been witnessed at girls’ schools is 'Boyaat' (tomboys). Boyaat is an occurrence in which students attempt to intimidate their peers either with their expressions or by exerting a sense of strength and power through the formation of groups/gangs. One school professional mentioned to a parent that they (the school staff) do not want to get involved in the students’ quarrels: "The girl is famous for being a Boya (tomboy), and she has a group (gang) of 6—7 girls, so we (school professionals) avoid trouble" (Mother reporting what school professional had told her). No similar gang experiences were reported at either of the boys’ schools.

3.1.5. Cyberbullying

Given the frequent use of technology among adolescents in Saudi Arabia, cyberbullying comes as no surprise. Spreading of rumors, social isolation, and blackmailing were all reported to have taken place in cyberspace.

"She takes photos of her peers." (Female school principal referring to some girls taking photos of their peers and then blackmailing them with these photos)

"They (students) swear at each other and in school (using social media)" (Female teacher)
3.2. Factors conducive to bullying

3.2.1. School environment

a. Lack of a secure school environment

There was a belief among the students that their schools do not provide them with the necessary protection from bullying. They felt that they had to defend themselves "...to protect myself." (A male student reporting why he is learning karate)

or seek support from an older sibling or a Boya when a bullied victim did not feel confident defending oneself. Students were not confident in school professionals' ability to support them in such a situation. Some students were also concerned about being punished if they reported such behaviors to school professionals.

School professionals reported being hesitant to address bullying due to the negative attitudes some face from parents when addressing students' behavioral issues.

Interestingly, the teachers also felt unsafe: "Any parent can assault us. There is no security for us." (Male teacher)

This quote refers to the lack of policies that address the rights of school professionals when exposed to inappropriate behavior from students' parents.

b. Lack of recreational activities

There was a repeated complaint among the participants about the lack of recreational activities and sports at schools; the time spent at school was exclusively for academic purposes. The students were frustrated at the lack of extracurricular activities. Some also lacked the motivation to learn. These frustrations may have been channeled into negative behaviors among the peers. Unsupervised activities may have also set the stage for bullying among the students.

"The only thing we do is study and study more." (Female Student)

"The only thing teachers care about is the curriculum." (Female student)

c. Inconsistencies in approaches to problematic behaviors

The discussions revealed school professionals' inconsistencies in the approach to students' problematic behaviors. Despite the existence and availability of school/Ministry of Education (MOE) guidelines for misconduct, the school staff seemed to have their own personal methods for dealing with problems.

"I solve problems myself without going to the principal." (Teacher reporting how she deals with the conflicts between students.)

"There are points for behaviour from which we subtract, and the final step is suspension" (Male teacher, describing MOE guidelines)

3.2.2. Parent—school relationship

a. Communication

Poor communication between schools and parents was repeatedly cited:

"For the teacher-parent meetings, we invite 230–240 parents. Only 6–10 parents attend. They are usually the parents of excellent students. The problematic students — their parents only come whenever there is a problem." (Male teacher)

"When a student is absent, the school does not call (his/her home) to make sure everything is all right." (Parent)

"Parents think they can do whatever they want because it is a private school." (Male counselor)

b. Blame

Mutual blame between the parents and the school professionals was also described. This is expected with the poor communication described above.

"My daughter is right and you are wrong." (A teacher describing a parent's response to their child's problem)

"As if we are making things up." (A female teacher referring to a parent's refusal to believe the school)

Furthermore, there was a tendency for school professionals to blame some of the students' misbehavior on poor parenting.

3.2.3. Student—teacher relationship

For the most part, students expressed unhealthy relationships with their teachers:

"Get out of my face!" (Female student reporting what her teacher once said to her.)

"Your parents did not raise you well." (Female student reporting what her teacher once told her)

"The school counselor threatened me." (Female student)

"When my mother comes, they (school professionals) treat us well." (Female student)
Occasionally, positive student–teacher relationships were described:

“She (teacher) understands us, has a sense of humour, and is lovely. If I need to talk, I go straight to her. If she notices that we are tired, she asks us how we are doing. Even if she shouts at us, we still love her.” (Female student)

3.3. Impact of bullying

3.3.1. Dislike of school
Many students reported negative attitudes towards school:

“If it were up to me, I would have stayed at home.” (Female student)

3.3.2. Racism
It was apparent that students were aware of others’ countries of origin and lineage. This was often reflected in what they said or acted towards one another:

“She made fun of me because I am a foreigner.” (Female student)

“... Tabouleh... Hummus... Taamiyah...” (Female teacher reporting that students give each other names based on famous dishes from their countries of origin.)

“They make fun of my accent.” (Male student)

“A girl comes and helps another girl against the others, even if they do not know each other, only because they belong to the same tribe.” (Teacher)

3.3.3. Aggressiveness

“A student acts aggressively towards her family members because she is repressed.” (Female teacher)

3.3.4. Isolation

“(They) spread rumors (about each other) and exclude others.” (Female teacher)

“My daughter’s schoolmate blocked her on Instagram.” (Parent)

4. Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study addressing experiences with bullying among adolescents in KSA. We have been able to obtain a comprehensive and multidimensional view of this problem by involving not only students but parents and school professionals as well.

It is important that all involved have acknowledged that bullying occurs in schools among peers, as acknowledgment is the first step in addressing any matter. The nature of these behaviors, however, was not entirely clear for some of the adult participants. Some underestimated the behaviors or incidents and viewed them as typical conflicts that sometimes occur between adolescents. This may be a result of the lack of awareness about bullying and its seriousness, but the poor communication between parents and school professionals may further increase this gap in awareness.

The multiple factors conducive to bullying can, in essence, be viewed as the determinants of bullying. As in the ecological model [13], the factors relating to the individual and the microsystem of the surrounding relationships (student—teacher relationships and parent—school relationships), the environment (school environment), and the exosystem (the policy and system procedures) were identified. The determinants of bullying have largely focused on the individual, and specifically, psychological, determinants [14]. Through this qualitative approach, we have been able to identify the next level of determinants as viewed and expressed through our participants.

The emergent themes reflect a potential model for the process of bullying (Fig. 1). The various factors conducive to bullying may lead to such problematic behaviors, which in turn result in negative consequences, such as negative attitudes towards school, social isolation, and aggressiveness. This may subsequently breed further bullying and aggression. Exploring these experiences of bullying among intermediate grade school students has allowed us to gain a better understanding of the problem. Preventive measures need to be targeted at the factors that the participants have identified as being conducive to bullying. This in turn could disrupt the process and result in less bullying (Fig. 1).

4.1. Prevention at the individual level

Beginning more proximally, awareness-centered programs addressing communication skills for students, parents, and school professionals are necessary. Strengthening the alliance between parents and school professionals will support the achievement of a common goal for enhancing the lives of their children or students, respectively. Engagement with one another, not only when problems arise but throughout the year, is necessary and important. Communication skills, along with life skills and instilling tolerance towards one other, is important for young adolescents and should be addressed earlier. Recognition of the fact that young people all share common interests and goals despite differences in background, dialect, and appearance is important. Tolerance and respect of one another will allow adolescents to reach their full potential in social and academic achievement.

The seriousness and negative impact that the various forms of bullying have on victims, bullies, and bully-victims need to be relayed to all. School professionals have been shown to have low levels of knowledge of other important matters, such as child maltreatment [15]. With this study’s findings of students’ lack of support in a bullying situation, one would anticipate that school professionals similarly have a low level of knowledge of bullying and its consequences. These speculations, however, must be confirmed with future studies. Education and awareness of normal
adolescent development is also important for all and will help one’s understanding of the differences between normal adolescent behavior and problematic behavior. Knowledge of such may also support effective communication between students and their parents and/or school professionals. Skills on how to manage or address a bullying situation are also necessary and must be taught to all.

4.2. Prevention at the system level

Important issues were identified, reflecting the need for change or modification at the system level. Education reform has been a rousing topic in KSA. Academic development and achievement are appropriately of primary concern to school professionals. High levels of school pressure have been found to have an effect on peer victimization [16]. Therefore, with the lengthy period of time spent at school, schools may be utilized as a means for positive adolescent and youth development. This can either be done through the introduction of extracurricular activities or by embedding school curricula with non-academic activities that will contribute to positive adolescent development.

It was also evident that there were inconsistencies in following school and the Ministry of Education’s guidelines, policies, and procedures. For some, this was attributed to lack of knowledge of the existing guidelines or policies, and for others, it was an inconsistency in the application of policies or the use of personal judgment in dealing with situations. Addressing a bullying situation is discussed in the MOE guidelines for misconduct. It is discussed alongside many other problematic behaviors and so is not highlighted in any particular way. Clarity may be provided by addressing bullying as a distinct topic of its own and in more details due to its prevalent nature. The documentation of specific guidelines, policies, and procedures for handling a bullying situation is worthwhile and necessary. Education of all stakeholders, including students and families, about existing policies and procedures is necessary, and enforcing the application of such procedures in a consistent manner will systematically support resolution of the problem. Access to policy manuals should be made available to all.

Though the nature of this study does not allow the identification of causality, the emergent themes certainly direct us to points that are important to consider in future studies on bullying and bullying prevention. These findings are from one region of the country. Though not generalizable, there is no reason to believe that there would be a dramatic difference in experiences of bullying among young adolescents in other parts of the country. This, however, can be further elucidated in future studies. These efforts aimed at the prevention of factors that are conducive to bullying, one will expect a decrease in the rate of bullying. The implementation of adolescent health surveillance systems, which have been previously recommended for KSA [7], will surely show the impact and effectiveness of such prevention efforts.

Conflict of interest

This is to declare that all authors have no conflict of interest.

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