Developing a Philosophy about Bullying and Sexual Harassment: Cognitive Coping Strategies Among High School Students

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Abstract

Bullying or harassment are a part of the everyday experience of many school children in the U.S. Bullying can take many forms and, while not acceptable, is considered almost inevitable. Despite exposure to various anti-bullying programs instituted in the schools, bullying persists and students must figure out how to deal with this phenomenon. This exploratory study investigated the views of secondary school students on bullying and harassment as well as their strategies for handling this form of peer interaction. One hundred twenty-two students (N = 122) from three rural high schools participated in this action research inquiry. The data were gathered from five focus groups and 52 individual interviews. The study found that students in these schools used cognitive coping mechanisms and strategies to manage the impact of bullying when it was directed toward them. The article describes students’ reactions to being victimized as well as their interpretations of their peers’ actions. Findings inform violence prevention programs by providing the students’ perspective on dealing with this pervasive issue.

Introduction

Bullying, in its many permutations, is a prevalent form of social behavior among secondary school students (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2001; Devine & Lawson, 2003; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001). Research indicates that there is a popular belief that so-called teasing, bullying, and harassment are inevitable and ultimately innocuous (Olweus, 1993a; Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1999). However, a contention that teasing and bullying are harmless is countermanded by recent research that denotes the long-term effects (Coggan, Bennett, Hooper, & Dickinson, 2003; Due et al., 2005; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005) and by incidents of mass school violence often perpetrated by the recipients of chronic bullying and teasing (Gibbs & Roche, 1999; Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2000). Victims and witnesses of bullying often experience it as offensive and hurtful (Coloroso, 2004; deLara, 2002; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994). This study investigated ways in which secondary school students conceptualize bullying and harassment and in what ways they attempt to manage this form of student-to-student interaction. Numerous forms of bullying exist in our schools. The continuum ranges from psychological intimidation (e.g., group exclusion, starting rumors, sexual gestures) to verbal abuse to physical abuse (hitting, kicking, inappropriate touching, sexual abuse) to life-threatening violence (threatening with a weapon, attempted homicide) (deLara, 2006; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Nansel et al. (2001) reported that 30% of U.S. students in the 6th through 10th grades were involved in moderate or frequent bullying activities, as perpetrator, victim, or both. Consequently, some students are afraid to go to school at all. Every day, 160,000 children skip school due to fear for their safety (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2003) surveyed over 10,000 students and found that more than one in 20 high school students skip school over safety concerns. Children with learning difficulties (Mishna, 2003; Shea & Wiener, 2003; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005) and those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT) are particularly targeted (Fineran, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Lambda Legal, 2002). GLBT students are five times more likely to miss school due to concerns for their safety or to have been threatened with a weapon than are heterosexual adolescents (Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Human Rights Watch, 2001). As a result, nearly one third of GLBT teens drop out of school due to bullying, harassment, and fear for their safety at school (Lambda Legal, 2002).

Sexual Harassment

Much of the psychological and verbal bullying that transpires between students is sexual harassment (AAUW, 2001; Fineran & Bennett, 1998). Sexual harassment can appear in many guises, from unwanted remarks to dating violence to stalking (AAUW, 2001). Technological advances such as instant messaging (IM), text messaging, cell phone pictures, personal Web sites, MySpace, and Web logs (blogs) have promoted a new and virulent form of abuse by
adolescents of one another (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). Young people receive unwanted sexual pictures or similar material from peers as well as aggressive types of online contact (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). In all of its forms, sexual harassment interferes with healthy social development and academic success (Fineran & Bennett, 1998). Both girls and boys report high rates of being sexually harassed at school—83% of girls and 79% of boys (AAUW, 2001). Half of the students in the AAUW survey admitted to sexually harassing someone else. In the same sample of over 2,000 children, 38% said that teachers and other school employees sexually harass students.

Definitions of Bullying

The preponderance of research tends to use adult definitions of bullying and harassment, and most interventions to prevent or curtail bullying, are adult-determined (Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Harachi et al., 1999; Hazler, Miller, & Green, 2001; Olweus, 1993b). However, children and adults differ on their definitions of bullying; children’s tend to be broader and do not necessarily encompass the idea of a power differential (deLara, 2002; Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006; Phillips, 2007). Students' definitions and perceptions of violence at school are contextual, influenced by gender, age, grade level, ethnicity, geographic region, peer group associations, family factors, level of moral development, and individual attribution of cues in the environment (Alloy, Peterson, Abramson, & Seligman, 1984; deLara, 2002; Fatum & Hoyle, 1996; Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Hudley & Friday, 1996; Litke, 1996). Alternative research efforts have allowed students to define aggressive situations, exchanges, and interactions in various parts of the school and among various subgroups, including teachers and other adults (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Astor, Benbenishty, & Marachi, 2004). Kanetsuna & Smith (2002) describe seeking social support and telling an adult as coping strategies at school. Pelligrini & Bartini (2000) point out that students purposely congregate in specific groups to protect themselves from bullying by others. Students modify their behavior to conform with their peers and to avoid being bullied by them (Eamon, 2001; Lashbrook, 2000). They also rely on their close friends to protect them from instances of bullying and harassment (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Adolescents use a psychosocial strategy called peer predictability to avoid bullying or aggressive peers (deLara, 2002). This tactic consists of attempting to gauge the possibility of aggressive behavior of particular classmates based on mood, current behavior, and past behavior. Coping strategies at school include cognitive problem-solving skills and emotion-focused skills (Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002). Kanetsuna & Smith (2002) describe seeking social support and telling an adult as cognitive problem-solving, and ignoring, being nonchalent, or crying as emotion-focused approaches to coping. Forms of coping vary by age, gender, and type of mistreatment at school (Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002; Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). These studies indicate that research is seeking to provide an understanding of the types of coping mechanisms children and adolescents employ and their reasoning behind them. Prior research provides an explanation for a few of the mechanisms adolescents use to mediate bullying and harassment during the school day. This study was interested in investigating other cognitive or behavioral strategies that secondary school students might utilize.

Student Strategies to Deal with Bullying

Students employ various cognitive and behavioral strategies to feel safe from their peers at school. Pelligrini & Bartini (2000) point out that students purposely congregate in specific groups to protect themselves from bullying by others. Students modify their behavior to conform with their peers and to avoid being bullied by them (Eamon, 2001; Lashbrook, 2000). They also rely on their close friends to protect them from instances of bullying and harassment (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Adolescents use a psychosocial strategy called peer predictability to avoid bullying or aggressive peers (deLara, 2002). This tactic consists of attempting to gauge the possibility of aggressive behavior of particular classmates based on mood, current behavior, and past behavior. Coping strategies at school include cognitive problem-solving skills and emotion-focused skills (Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002). Kanetsuna & Smith (2002) describe seeking social support and telling an adult as cognitive problem-solving, and ignoring, being nonchalent, or crying as emotion-focused approaches to coping. Forms of coping vary by age, gender, and type of mistreatment at school (Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002; Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). These studies indicate that research is seeking to provide an understanding of the types of coping mechanisms children and adolescents employ and their reasoning behind them. Prior research provides an explanation for a few of the mechanisms adolescents use to mediate bullying and harassment during the school day. This study was interested in investigating other cognitive or behavioral strategies that secondary school students might utilize.

Social Cognitive Theory

A useful contribution to the analysis of students’ behavior in the context of schools can be found in social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory provides a framework for understanding, predicting, and changing human behavior. The theory identifies human behavior as the interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment (Bandura, 1986, 2001). In this model, the interaction among the variables of person, behavior, and environment involves the influences of a person’s thoughts, beliefs, and cognitive competencies (Bandura, 1986, 2001). Personal interactions are therefore evaluated in light of past experiences of the individual as part of the environment. This framework is helpful in looking at the ways in which adolescents process social encounters.

Acceptance and Exclusion

Children and adolescents want to be accepted by their peers. Developmental psychologists recognize that feeling accepted is a basic human need (Baumeister, & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000; Rohnr, 1975) and may be fundamental for adequate psychosocial development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kurzban & Leary, 2001). School-age children
and adolescents demonstrate basic psychological needs for safety, belonging, autonomy, and competence, (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Newman & Newman, 2006) and schools that provide these basic needs reap the benefits in terms of respectful relationships among students and with adults (Osterman, 2000; Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004). Rejection by family is psychologically damaging for children (Rohner, 1975; Vorrasi, deLara, & Bradshaw, 2005). Similarly, relational aggression, or social exclusion, is an important risk factor impacting social-psychological adjustment (Crick, 1996; Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006). Social exclusion from groups is a potent form of bullying given the developmental need of young people for acceptance and belonging (Osterman, 2000). The seminal work of Goffman (1963) on social exclusion suggested that a person is stigmatized or isolated as a result of not meeting normative expectations of role requirements. Further, members of marginal groups, such as the mentally ill, are at high risk of social exclusion (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Those stigmatized for failure to meet role expectations and/or classified as part of a marginal group, are considered “beyond the protection of social norms” (Kurzan & Leary, 2001, p. 187). Social exclusion is practiced by adolescents (Crick, 1996; Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006) and, at the same time, most adolescents take action to escape group alienation (Garbarino & deLara, 2002). Buhs, Ladd and Herald’s 2006 study found that being socially excluded led to social withdrawal and the curtailing of opportunities for those excluded. [end of page 76] The inherently human need to belong promotes willingness to suffer whatever it takes to be accepted (Guynn & Aquila, 2004). Adolescents will participate in demeaning activities to be included in a group or organization of peers (Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Guynn & Aquila, 2004). Consequently, students are willing to put up with a certain amount of bullying, harassment, or hazing while at school. Bullying and harassment are virulent enough to cause students to ban together during the school day for protection, to skip school, and for some, to drop out altogether. This study sought to understand bullying and harassment from the students’ perspective and to identify their coping mechanisms for dealing with these problems.

Questions for the Study

This study addresses the following questions: How do students perceive the teasing, bullying, or harassment that they may witness or experience during the school day? What means do they utilize to deal with it?

Methods

Sample

Three rural high schools partnered in this case study and were selected based on their willingness to participate in this inquiry. The school districts met the criteria for “rural” used by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A total of 122 students participated from the tenth grade. Five focus groups were conducted with a total of 70 students. Fifty-two individual interviews were held with students for a total sample of N = 122. Due to the iterative nature of the study, 12 students (four students from each school) first interviewed in focus groups were interviewed individually also. The 12 students volunteered to be interviewed individually and were chosen to represent a range of differing academic abilities. Throughout the process, the full spectrum of academic achievers contributed (i.e., high achieving, average achieving, and at-risk). Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to ensure that all students were represented. One of the five focus groups was composed exclusively of high [end of page 77] achieving students; one was exclusively at-risk students. Individual interviews were conducted to follow up on themes and questions that emanated from the focus group processes and data. Of the students contributing to the inquiry, 52% were female and 48% were male; they ranged in age from 14 years to 17 years. The student participants were from the tenth grade at each school. Each school had a mean of 115 students in grade 10. The drop-out rate among the three schools varied from 0.2% to 4.3%. Approximately 4% of the students represented minority groups (1.8% African-American, 1.1% Hispanic, and 1.0% Asian or Native American); the rest were Caucasian. The mean of students eligible for free or reduced lunch program was 30%. The demographic variables of school district size and socioeconomic status of students’ families were roughly equivalent among the three schools.

Procedure

A letter describing the study was mailed directly to the parents and guardians of all students in the tenth grade in the three schools. Consent forms accompanied the letters. Students were also asked to sign assent forms at the time they participated in focus groups or individual interviews. The study fulfilled all requirements of the university’s Internal Review Board. The focus groups and the individual interviews utilized a semi-structured interview format. Each focus group and interview was approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Examples of questions asked of the students included: How do you feel about teasing? How do you deal with teasing and bullying
at your school? Do you see sexual harassment happening at this school? Do adults at your school notice sexual harassment? To ensure capturing the students’ own perspective, no definitions of teasing, bullying, or harassment were provided to them.

Analysis

Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and case studies methodologies were utilized for data collection and analysis. This was supplemented by social cognitive theory and a general systems theory focus reflecting that the students were embedded within a system consisting of many subgroups as well as being influenced by the whole (Bowen, 2004). This inquiry was designed as an action-research exploratory case study. Action research is gaining popularity in public school research due to its underlying philosophy of democracy and empowerment (Cranton, 1996). The concepts of dealing with real-life problems, data collection for the purpose of significant change, and participation of stakeholders in the research process as described in action research models (Cranton, 1996; Greenwood & Levin, 1998) were central to the design of this project. To ensure confirmability of the data, journal entries were used as a means of providing an audit trail for the research. An audit trail can decrease bias and increase confirmability allowing the findings to escape the likelihood of being “investigator-bound” (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The confirmability of the data was determined by consistent themes and consistent data from one source substantiating those of another. The themes that surfaced during the focus groups were similar to the themes that emerged from the individual interviews, thereby lending to the credibility of the findings (Crowley, 1993). Member checks and triangulation were employed to further substantiate credibility, authenticity, and coherence of the data.

Results

Students readily and willingly shared their thoughts and ideas in all focus groups and during the individual interviews. They seemed pleased to be asked and relieved to have a forum for discussing the issues of bullying and harassment at school. The students at all three schools reported witnessing or receiving various types of bullying and harassment. The data point to a range of reactions among the students to these occurrences. The students said there was a difference between good-natured hassling and mean-spirited harassment meant to hurt. One boy, 16, provided this clear description: “I can definitely tell by observing someone if they’re joking or they’re trying to be hurtful. You can see it in the recipient. If he laughs and shrugs it off and kind of just walks away, you can tell it might bother him, but if he laughs and still stands there, you can tell it’s just good-natured fun.” Almost without exception, the students said they were able to determine the difference between what was supposed to be fun and what was intended to cause harm. Students offered that “autistic kids” had difficulty sorting out the difference. In this study, the at-risk students interviewed both individually and in the group said they were recipients of bullying by others. At the same time, they often defined themselves as “bullies.” The average academic achievers believed that they were more often the target of teasing and sexual harassment than of bullying. This middle-of-the road group admitted to bullying others on occasion, especially students with learning disabilities. The students in the high academic achieving category did not see themselves as either bullies or the victims of bullying, but did experience what they quantified as “some” sexual harassment. These students did notice that sexual harassment took place at their schools but tended to think that bullying and harassment were less prevalent in their schools than their average achieving or at-risk peers. The data suggest that students attempted to define bullying and harassment for themselves as well as differentiate it from good natured teasing and “fooling around.” Further, students utilized their own strategies, often cognitive mechanisms, for dealing with instances of bullying and harassment.

Student’s Perceptions of Teasing, Bullying, and Harassment

In the following section, students’ perceptions of the differences among teasing, bullying, and harassment are described. Included are the students’ descriptions of the reactions of school personnel to observing sexual harassment. In addition, students’ strategies for dealing with bullying and harassment are presented.

Teasing

The following quotes are examples of responses to questions about teasing such as Do people tease each other here? How do you feel about teasing?: “I feel fine about it because it’s sort of a way of breaking the ice and people get talking” (boy, 16). “Just go out in the hallway and you’ll see people pushing and picking on each other all the time” (girl, 16). “Go to any high school, full of teenagers. There’s bound to be disrespect” (boy, 16). “There will always be people who put other kids down to make them(selves) feel superior. There will always be a popular group. There will always be the nerds, you know” (girl, 15). These statements specify the range of responses to the question
on teasing. Some considered it to be useful (as in “breaking the ice”) in a social situation while others saw it as “disrespectful” behavior or as a means of establishing social hierarchy. The varying degrees of reaction may exemplify individual tolerance for so-called teasing or underscore the fact that many forms of bullying and harassment are still classified together, by adults as well as children, under the category of teasing. As the questions progressed, it was evident that the students tried to distinguish the differences.

**Bullying**

Bullying was experienced as a form of interaction beyond teasing. Students said bullying was “mean” behavior. They related that bullying took place for many reasons, among them: to make yourself feel better by taking out your aggressions on someone else, to get money or some other desired object from a peer, and to make yourself look good or powerful in front of your friends. The quotes below are expressions of what the students considered “being mean” or bullying as opposed to teasing or “just fooling around.” They were in response to the question *How would you describe bullying?:* “One day two boys shoved me into a gym locker and closed the door. I had to stay there pounding to get out till the kid who owned the locker came along” (boy, 15). “In 9th grade, I was regularly dragged into the boys’ restroom by a group of four kids. I got beat up in there and then had to go to math class” (boy, 16). “People say things about your clothes, how you look, where you live. They start rumors about you. They want you to feel bad” (girl, 16). Students said sometimes they received help determining the difference between teasing for fun and interactions meant to harm. One girl, age 15, said: “My mom helped me figure it out before she started teaching again. The environment at my house is welcoming. We joke around- you give it; you take it- but it’s not hurtful. So that’s how I learned how to joke around and how to tell when someone is trying to be mean. That’s how I learned the difference. I learned that you should try to help someone else- help them instead of putting them down.”

**Sexual Harassment**

In this inquiry, all of the students in the focus groups and the individual interviews were cognizant of the concept of sexual harassment signifying that the adults in their lives were educating them about this problem. Their ideas about the presence of sexual harassment in the school represented diverse places on a continuum. However, the majority believed that adults did not recognize sexual harassment between students. They concluded that adults ascribed any sexual behavior they observed to playful and mutually acceptable interchanges. When asked: “*Do you see sexual harassment happening at this school?*” They had these reactions: “I see a lot of it. Unless you’re going out with a guy . . . the other boys go up to you and pinch your butt” (girl, 14). “There probably is some (sexual harassment) here. And there are some girls that I can’t figure out why they put up with their boyfriends- why they stay with them” (boy, 16). “There are guys who go too far in what they say and do. They usually back off, but you feel like slapping them” (girl, 16). “Somebody wrote ‘faggot’ on my neck in permanent marker. Everybody in school saw it that day and made fun of me” (boy, 15). As a follow up question the students were asked their opinions about adult awareness of sexual harassment at school. These are some representative answers to the question: “*Do adults notice sexual harassment?*” “A lot of times it goes unnoticed” (boy 16). “Adults don’t notice most of the time. There’s too many kids and not enough of them” (boy, 16). “If they did (notice it), they wouldn’t do anything about it because they would just see it as flirting. Cause if you walk down our hall [end of page 81] you’d see all the couples kissing all the time. Because we don’t have the No PDA (public displays of affection) Rule here . . . so if the teachers saw it, they wouldn’t think it was sexual harassment (girl, 14). Because the school allowed public displays of affection (PDA), it was difficult for adults to interpret what behaviors constituted harassment and what behaviors constituted mutually acceptable interactions, according to this girl. One focus group said they had a “No PDA Rule” in middle school. They concluded that, while difficult to enforce, it would help curtail instances of sexual harassment. The students had been exposed to the concept of sexual harassment by teachers and other adults and knew that it was a form of inappropriate behavior. It was evident that not all students were certain about the exact parameters of behavior that constituted sexual harassment. The rules about public displays of affection (PDA) that changed from school to school seemed to promote confusion for them. Sexual harassment or the fear of sexual harassment was a concern expressed by approximately one quarter of the girls in the focus groups. Their concern was over verbal expressions, psychological intimidation through gestures made toward them, and unwanted physical touching. One third of the girls stated in individual interviews that they believed even sexually inappropriate touching was something that they had to figure out how to accept or manage. Approximately 10% of the boys commented that they were concerned about sexual harassment in the restrooms and in the locker rooms. While more of the girls experienced sexual harassment, eleven boys indicated worries about sexual harassment taking place in the locker rooms and the restrooms. Interestingly, neither the boys nor the girls considered being called or calling someone else a “faggot” a form of sexual harassment. They were very
clear that this term is used “all the time” and it is meant as an expression of general derision. Though it may be employed with specific purpose on some occasions (as in the quote above), there is typically no sexual connotation attached to this word.

**Strategies for Dealing with Bullying and Harassment**

According to the students, everyone had to put up with a certain amount of teasing, bullying, and harassment. All articulated that sometimes it felt impossible to do so, especially when the behavior was characterized as “mean.” In the instances of “mean” behavior, the adolescents [end of page 83] seemed to work doubly hard to determine their course of action in response. Their options included:

- Doing Nothing
- Utilizing Cognitive Strategies
- Telling an Adult
- Retaliating

### Doing Nothing

Doing nothing was the strategy of first choice for students when bullied or harassed. It provided them with the ability to walk away and not risk escalating a situation. It gave them, what they considered, the upper hand by being “the bigger person.” Doing nothing and walking away indicated to the antagonist that they would not be baited by bullying. It was also considered the hardest choice of action. This was due to the inherent unfairness the students experienced when being taunted by others.

### Utilizing Cognitive Strategies

The students seemed to be employing cognitive strategies or mechanisms to deal with bullying and harassment. Among the strategies were what students called “taking it” and also the development of a philosophical stance. Both mechanisms provided a means for students to contend with offensive or distressing forms of student-to-student interaction. One cognitive strategy students discussed was the concept of “taking it.” By this they meant that they had to interpret the behavior of their peers to determine if it was good-natured fooling around or if it was mean-spirited bullying. Most often, they believed that if the behavior directed toward them was in the bullying or harassing category, they would have to put up with it or take it. These comments were typical of many made by the students: “People call you a ‘scrub’ or something and you say ‘ok’ (to yourself). You can’t let it bother you. They just want the attention. I know that myself because that’s what I used to do” [laughs] (girl, 15). “One of the ways that a person can ‘take it’ is by saying (to himself) ‘this is stupid’ and just walk away” (boy, 17). “Kids say stuff. You’ve just got to ignore it and go on with your life” (girl, 15). [end of page 84] The students seemed to struggle with the pros and cons of being bullied as well as how to deal with bullying. This was most clearly exemplified by the following comments: “I know it’s an important life lesson to figure out how to deal with bullies. But whether you should have to deal with bullies, I don’t think so. It helps for later on in life- to stand up for yourself” (boy, 16). “I feel unsafe at school if there’s a bully kid. I can handle myself pretty well. But I don’t want to have to. On the bus there’s been a problem in the past, and it has bothered me. But now I just back away and say ‘whatever’ (boy, 15). All of the adolescents agreed saying something innocuous in response to being bullied was a good and safe strategy. In other words, a measured response to the bully could not be taken as intended to incite him or her. Simply saying “whatever,” for example, was a way to indicate that the insult (verbal, psychological, or sexual) was heard and seen and had no impact on the recipient of the bullying. After saying something innocuous, the students said they would walk away.

### Developing a Philosophy about Bullying and Harassment

One tactic that many students mentioned could be considered developing a philosophy to accommodate bullying and harassment. To manage bullying or harassing interactions the students said it was important to “get objective and rational” so that they could understand disrespectful behavior as someone’s bad mood or insecurity. They spoke philosophically about student life, in general, and about being treated badly at times by various individuals or groups. The following quotes are examples of a form of cognitive exercise employed in conjunction with their own individual philosophical stance: “When somebody disses (disrespects) me, I mean I’ll always have that in my head. But they’re just one kid in high school. I mean come on; it doesn’t matter that much. (I say to myself) ‘Yeah that person doesn’t like me; but there’s so many other people that do’” (boy, 16). “You have a philosophy. . . . yeah, they don’t know me; they’re not a person to hang around with if they have to be like that’” (boy, 17) [end of page 85] “With every place you go, you’re going to have people who pick on you. You can’t totally make the picking on, the bullying, and the fighting stop. It’s always going to occur. If you feel that terrible about it, then you should tell somebody about it’” (girl, 16). “It takes a bigger person to walk away, my dad says. So I’ve done that a lot. If I do have a conflict with someone, I just say ‘let’s stay our separate ways.’ My dad gave me the advice, ‘do the smart thing; don’t have to do the aggressive thing’” (boy, 16). “There seems to be a philosophy that unpleasantness is cool. If you can take it (the unpleasant
treatment, being picked on, bullied) then you’re cool. On the other hand, you could be cool, too, by standing up to being bullied” (boy, 16). These adolescents developed a philosophy that helped them cope with the bullying they experienced and witnessed. Their reaction and analysis seem compatible with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001) which points out that social learning occurs from observations in social interactions in the environment combined with personal interpretations from past experiences. Getting advice from parents helped several students develop a philosophy and strategy that worked for them. In addition, the teenagers appeared to believe, or be able to talk themselves into believing, that bullying or other harassing directed at them was “stupid” and inconsequential. They concluded those doing the bullying were likewise “stupid,” inconsequential, and “going nowhere.” Further, they would consciously tell themselves that they had friends who cared about them, rendering the persons harassing them insignificant. These beliefs, according to their reports, were essential in order to let go of feelings incurred from being bullied and to be able to “take it.”

**Telling an Adult**

Another form of taking it, and short of retaliating, was to approach an adult. Adolescents stated that telling an adult was, in many ways, a last resort. The majority of students said they should be able to handle being bullied and several mentioned that even favorite teachers expected them to “work it out ourselves” rather than to report problems with peers. Unfortunately for those in the study, telling an adult about troublesome interactions with peers did not result in what the adolescents considered to be positive results. The quotes below are indicative of their sentiments.[end of page 86] “I tried to tell the assistant principal about this kid who was following me around and touching me but nothing happened” (girl, 15). “I’ve told my guidance counselor about getting pushed around. He talked to the guy but didn’t really do anything to him. It just made it worse for me” (boy, 16). It should be noted that perhaps the students were unaware of actions taken by school personnel on their behalf.

**Retaliating**

There appeared to be a limit that when reached meant a student no longer would accept mistreatment and would consider some form of standing up for him or herself. This limit or line of demarcation was individually determined. There were appropriate ways of standing up considered quite appropriate and those considered abnormal by the students. A verbal rejoinder to an antagonist was the mildest and most acceptable form of retaliating. Students were not always able to absorb bullying, harassment, or so called teasing. They struggled over trying to contain their emotional responses and behavior after being bullied. The struggle is evident in these comments: “I mean if people joke around with me and I don’t like it, I’ll stand up for myself and say something to them. I won’t just sit there and take it, but most of the time it’s just good- natured stuff” (boy, 15). “Of course nobody can take it forever. If you take school seriously and want to do well, it mounts up and it is all very, very stressful for teenagers” (boy, 17). “If someone gets picked on a lot, he or she might rebel by giving it back. Then they would be a bully too” (boy, 17). “Sooner or later you’re going to crack. You can’t keep it all in forever” (boy, 16). During focus groups and in individual interviews, students said that anyone who can’t take it is “not mentally sound.” Approximately, three quarters of the students expressed this sentiment. Some illustrative comments are presented below:[end of page 87] “You read articles about school violence and they talk about kids who get picked on being violent. If I get picked on, I don’t get upset about it” (boy, 16). “People tease you and some people get all worked up over nothing. They get into a frenzy. They get violent with people over nothing” (girl, 16). “It takes a mentally strong person to try to ignore it and forget it (bullying)” (boy, 15). Getting “upset,” getting “into a frenzy,” or becoming violent were all considered maladaptive and indicative of mental health problems. In this study, students said those who can’t or won’t take it (bullying and other forms of harassment) might strike back or retaliate in some manner they considered inappropriate. As far as the majority of students in both the focus groups and individual interviews were concerned, anyone who couldn’t take it had mental health problems. Further, if he or she acted on feeling upset, the students considered that person “a troublemaker.” Other research supports the idea that students, school personnel, and community members view those who strike back when bullied as mentally unstable (Aronson, 2000). The students believed that bullying was an implicit part of school life and that a student was expected to handle his or her feelings about its occurrence. One girl, 14, articulated a moral dimension that other adolescents in the study experienced about the concept of “taking it” and harassment. She said only students who were “not mature” would retaliate in seriously violent ways to this “normal” part of life. Further, to retaliate violently carried moral implications. In the spectrum of actions that are right and wrong, while teasing still resided in a gray area, violence in response to even continual bullying or harassment remained clearly wrong in the estimation of the adolescents interviewed. This adolescent said: “Some kids could get violent but most just take it and deal with it. The really more mature ones just take it and go ‘whatever’. If people turn into like ‘your worst enemies’ that’s just wrong and you’ll hate yourself for it (being violent and not taking it)” (girl, 14). One boy, age 16, offered another reaction. He spoke to the question of why some people react strongly to being bullied. He said: “Maybe they can’t take it anymore . . . Maybe they don’t see the consequences. If I blow up, I have to rebuild my whole reputation again; it’s blown. I’m not going to waste it on doing dumb things; it’s not worth
Many alterations in schools begin over being “dissed” (i.e., being treated disrespectfully by another student). When a child is victimized, his or her response may be to bully back or to bully someone else (Cleary, 2000). However, students in this study said retaliation risked an escalated encounter with one person or group, at that time, or at some time in the future. They also pointed out an interesting difference between male and female students with regard to physical retaliation. The students were in agreement that boys were more likely to avoid physical confrontation than girls were. Their hypothesis for this was that boys know they can be seriously hurt in a physical show-down; girls are less apt to be. They based this conclusion on the relative strength of males to females. Similarly, James Gilligan (1996) found in his work with male prisoners that they would hope for a guard to intervene when another prisoner “called them out.” If the guard intervened, the prisoner could save face and not have to retaliate to defend his honor. This could rescue him from the potential serious harm of a physical altercation.

Discussion and Implications

The students in this study believed that bullying and harassment are inevitable in high school. They confided that they often had to struggle to figure out how to handle a situation in which they were being bullied. Their strategies were to do nothing, utilize various cognitive mechanisms, tell an adult, or retaliate. The finding on their use of cognitive mechanisms is supported by the tenets of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and research on children’s cognitive processing in bullying situations (Gini, 2006). According to the study participants, the ability to ignore or accept teasing, sexual harassment, bullying, or verbal intimidation is necessary to get by in high school. For the most part, individuals figured out how to interpret and endure the verbal or psychological and sometimes physical abuse that was directed at them by others. The majority of students recognized there could be two kinds of so-called teasing: playful or mean-spirited. Figuring out the difference was problematic for some students. In the case of what was considered mean-spirited, an adolescent had to work doubly hard to determine a course of action. Cognitive mechanisms were one strategy for dealing with bullying, and harassment during the course of the school day. Students used cognitions such as telling themselves that the other person was in a bad mood, had a problem, or was insecure. They convinced themselves that, though someone may be bullying, taunting, or harassing them, what was said or done to them was inconsequential. One implication of the use of these cognitive behavioral exercises is that students with the greatest social-emotional intelligence had the greater ability to figure out how to manage distressing social interactions. Though they did not condone it, these study participants clearly expressed an understanding of the connection between a student’s inability to continue to accept bullying and the possibility of resulting physical violence. In social cognitive theory, any behavior that transgresses the norm is regulated by both social sanctions of the group and by internal self-sanctioning. Bandura suggested (1991), “People refrain from transgressing because they anticipate that such conduct will bring them social censure and other adverse consequences” (p. 68). Further, people self-censure or self-regulate because it brings a sense of self-respect and they “refrain from transgressing because such conduct will give rise to self-reproof” (p. 68). The students indicated that if someone cannot “take it” he or she may be considered “not mentally sound” or mentally ill. This is a risky position for any adolescent as it can lead to social exclusion and possibly to being “beyond the protection of social norms” (Kurzban & Leary, 2001, p. 187). The fear of social exclusion based on the power of group norms may be playing a role in these students’ decision to accept bad behavior directed at them in the form of bullying and harassment. The adolescents did not want to risk social censure by reacting too emotionally to being bullied and stated explicitly that those who did were “not mature” or “not mentally sound.” Regulating their reactions and emotions in the face of being taunted was a source of self-respect and self-satisfaction. Because these adolescents accepted that bullying was inevitable and inescapable, they believed that accepting a certain amount of interpersonal mistreatment, in the form of bullying and harassment, was necessary. The students also believed that the ability to accept peer abuse connoted good mental health. Those who could not were considered “not mentally sound.” Because social inclusion is highly valued by adolescents, the students did not want to risk being designated as odd or mentally ill. Consequently, these adolescents seemed to be willing to be bullied to maintain a place in the group. This is consistent with findings by Phillips (2007) on punking and social hierarchy. However, ongoing bullying among students in a school indicates that the system has not figured out how to implement fully programs that promote and preserve interpersonal respect (Garbarino & deLara, 2004). This is consistent with the work of Aronson (2000) on bullying and disrespectful behaviors in the schools and Sarason (2001) on bullying and systemic change. As long as those who act out against being bullied can be viewed as unstable or mentally ill, even by their own peers, the school as a system does not have to make any significant correction to system-wide patterns. The students prized emotional regulation, even under conditions of bullying or sexual harassment. Maintaining emotional composure seemed to help facilitate acceptance by peers and ensure group inclusion. This leads to the questions: What are the implications of this normative peer behavior for dating relationships? What are the implications for their future adult relationships? The
factors that dispose someone to “take it,” to be able to deal with abuse from peers, deserve further research attention. The students indicated that there was a connection between this ability, which was strengthened by cognitive mechanisms, and the ability for containment of retaliation. Further research may promote cognitive-behavioral programs that would reinforce an individual student’s capacity for dealing with peer abuse while schools continue to investigate means of reducing bullying during the school day in a systemic way. Telling an adult about being bullied, though encouraged typically by school personnel, was not the first line of action for these students. Only in rare instances did students approach an adult about bullying directed towards them. Talking with an adult was usually reserved for concerns over “being followed,” being touched inappropriately, threats of physical violence, or experiences of physical violence. The reason for this, according to study participants, was that telling an adult either “makes it worse” or “they don’t do anything about it anyway.” Given that there is a clear link between the possibility of serious school violence and the precursor of verbal or psychological violence (Gaughin, Cerio, & Myers, 2001; Vossekui et al., 2000), the lack of support experienced by the students seemed a missed opportunity for school personnel. Schools must make sure that there is a connection between students’ experience of relating distressing information to adults and what students perceive to be adequate follow-up. The students stated that adults either were unaware of the amount of sexual harassment in the school or that they would have trouble recognizing it. In particular, students stated that rules about physical or sexual contact varied from one school to another within the same district.

This is problematic as it places students in the position of contending with this issue basically on their own. School personnel need to take a close look at what students consider to be bullying and harassment. From there, local districts can decide on appropriate programming to address student concerns. The findings from this exploratory study underline the need for understanding bullying and harassment as students define it and the need for systemic change. The study points out the value of involving adolescents in the process of problem definition and solution. Students were very willing to discuss the ways in which they conceptualize bullying and harassment. Because students are defining bullying and harassment in terms of their experience and attempting to manage it, ongoing discussions with trusted school personnel aimed at system wide solutions may serve to reduce incidents of bullying by including the students’ perspective.

References


