

Bullying and its Effects: Experiences in Kenyan Public Secondary Schools

Florence M. Itegi (PhD): Kenyatta University Kenya Nairobi, Kenya

Email: muitegi.ku.ac@gmail.com and itegi.florence@ku.ac.ke

Abstract

It's a basic human right for children to feel safe in school and be spared intentional humiliation implied in bullying. More so the society expects schools to mold responsible citizens for sustainable development of modern society. This notwithstanding, studies have found the fear of being bullied when entering secondary schools in Kenya is enormous. Expost facto design was adopted to explore possible cause and effect among variables. A stratified random sample of 300 students was used. The findings were that bullying was a significant problem in schools; bullying was more rampant in boys' schools than girls however, majority of girls were victims, majority of boys were bullies; victims were mainly junior students among boys while among girls were from different class levels; physical violence was common among boys and verbal among girls. The study recommended empowerment of teachers to enhance supportive school environment and collaboration among stakeholders.

Key Words: Bullying, Causes, Effects, Forms, School, Secondary

1. Introduction

Bullying involves repeated harm to individual or a group by another with unequal power. The imbalance in power means that the dominant group individual or group intends to harm or disturb a less dominant one repeatedly over time (Berger, 2007).

Children and their parents need to be assured that conditions in school guarantee physical safety and psychological security. In addition the well being of the general community depends upon its young people accepting consensual values and acting accordingly. Effective teaching depends upon students respecting the teacher's authority and not interfering with each others' learning opportunities. In addition school's enrolment in the modern society, prospects and general reputation are determined by public perceptions of behavioural standards among their students. The notion of 'good behaviour' and 'discipline' raise fundamental questions about what kinds of interpersonal relationships are appropriate in a civilized society and more so the school. Williams, Chambers, Logans and Robinson (1996) observed some of the debilitating health symptoms of bullying to be headaches, abdominal pains, poor sleep, bed wetting and feeling sad. In US a study on cyber bullying was prompted by suicide of a cyber bullied student and established that; bullying was a significant problem with 4 out of 5 students admitting being bullied and 1 in 3 having bullied someone.

Parents and pupils alike are concerned about the problem and, therefore, we need to bring it out into the open for examination and discussion. Primarily it is only the victim who suffers. The teacher and the rest of the group may remain unaffected. The exposure of the problem in itself can go a long way in curtailing the bully's activities. A distressing factor is that bullying in schools is often

sustained over a long period of time, being handed on from class to class or even year to year especially in secondary schools where those joining from primary school are mainly targeted by older students.

In Kenya, a lot of effort has been concentrated in the area of discipline in general but little is said about the problem of bullying. This study therefore sought to analyse the determinants of bullying in public secondary schools.

2. Statement of the problem

Bullying in schools is an infringement of the basic values of the individual. Olweus (1992) argued that it is fundamental democratic right for a child to feel safe in school and to be spared oppression and repeated intentional humiliation implied in bullying. Bullying at school is “a problem that is elusive” a costly problem that involves physical and emotional harm at a time when public demands for safer schools, and worst of all a problem that so far defies solution.

The past few years have seen violence and vandalism become an almost daily occurrence on school grounds. Several studies have found that fear of being bullied when entering secondary schools worried children more than anything else. In Kenya some students miss school either because they are bullied or because they are recipients of other clandestine activities such as extortion. Bullying in schools interfere with mental as well as physical health of the children. In some cases acts of bullying cause untold misery to learners and their parents.

In Kenya researchers have concentrated in the area of discipline in general but little is said about the problem of bullying. This study sought to investigate the extent of bullying in secondary schools, the forms, the differences in the incidence with respect to gender and age and the areas of high risk in the school.

3. Objectives of the study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent of bullying in public secondary schools.
2. To determine the various forms of bullying that are experienced among students in secondary schools.
3. To establish the relationship between gender of students and forms of bullying experienced.
4. To investigate the relationship between bullying and class level of students.
5. To establish effects of school environment, family background, child characteristics and social factors on bullying.

4. Literature Review

Reviewed literature covered the concept of bullying, causes, effects and forms of bullying. Bullying is particularly likely in groups from which the potential victim cannot readily escape. Schools are such institutions since schooling is normally compulsory and changing schools or being educated at home are not easy alternatives especially in countries where learners are faced with issues of access to various levels of education.

As regards causes of disciplinary problems, low economic status, peer influence, lack of parental guidance, religious instructions and shortage of schools and teachers have been considered to be contributing factors Kuthemba, Hauya, and Tizifa (1996). In view of public concern about violence

and indiscipline in schools and the problem faced by teaching profession today, it is important to consider what action can be taken by relevant authorities, to secure an orderly atmosphere necessary in schools for effective teaching and learning to take place.

In Britain bullying is viewed as an attack carried out solely by one individual against another, one individual against a group, one group against another group or a group against one individual Olweus (1992). In addition, a person is bullied when he/she is exposed regularly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more persons. Bullying is further defined as the long term and systematic use of violence, mental or physical against an individual who is unable to defend himself in an actual situation. Bullying has to be a negative activity exerted by two or more individuals against one or a well-defined group. The bullies interact with each other, in some way reinforcing each other's behavior. This behaviour can be described as 'mobbing'. In Kenya most bullies work in groups mostly formed by students from slum areas in day secondary schools and middle income class in boarding schools. Such groups recruit new members every beginning of the year to ensure the culture is sustained.

Bullying is an activity occurring over a prolonged period of time rather than being a single aggressive act, it involve the powerful attacking the powerless; and it can be verbal, physical or psychological in nature often for no good reason (O'moore and Hillery, 1991). According to Valarie (1991), it may be verbal, physical or psychological in nature and in form of socially acceptable behaviour, as in case of a highly competitive approach to academic, sporting or social success, which by intent makes others feel inferior or causes distress to them; It is necessarily a repetitive attack, which causes distress not only at the time of each attack but also by the threat of future attacks; It is characterized by the dominance of the powerful over the powerless in whatever context.

A study by Strathclyde University (1996), established that eleven per cent of students questioned said they were put off school by bullying and four percent reported being bullied everyday and six per cent said they had suffered for years. Velarie (1991), commented that the problem is covert, well hidden from staff in school but organized by students themselves. In addition it may take form of social ostracism, name calling, malicious gossip, or a competitive academic approach behaviour which is not easily identified as bullying by the victim. The head teachers and teachers should in consultation with the Board of Governors develop expected school behaviour policies, which are clearly understood by students, parents and school staff. Passive supervision is not adequate to deal with problems of bullying because it is secretive.

Reid (1986) argued that bullying contributes to pupil absenteeism, disruption, underachievement and general levels of malaise in schools. Good behaviour is not merely a necessary condition for teaching and learning to take place; it is an outcome of an effective education, and a means for more than superficial classroom conformity (Duckling, 1987). Bullying is associated with physical or psychological violence persistently occurring against someone who is fragile or vulnerable in power or strength. It is different from playful behaviour because there is clear intention to harm or torment the other and usually older stronger and more powerful bullies pick on young, isolated and weaker victims (Smith and Sharp, 1994).

Victims of bullying do appear trapped in the situation frequently over a long period of time. If they can see no escape, depression can result Trad (1987). In Kenya secondary schools, new students

especially in form ones called (Monos) and those who transfer at lower levels were all time victims of bullying. Senior girls borrow items such as books, money and clothes from younger ones and keep them for good. Senior boys introduce form one boys to drugs such as 'bhang' and alcohol by force Githinji (2001). In U.S the National Center for disease control survey 1987, revealed violent threats and students carrying knives. The annual crime report for Californian schools the same year noted murders on school premises, 600 guns seized, cases of assault, robbery and extortion in junior schools alone.

Teachers spend a considerable amount of time disciplining students instead of teaching. The social image of the school also suffers due to loss of confidence in the school as a credible institution for learning and training Kuthemba, Hauya, and Tizifa (1996). The schools have found it hard to discipline a child who has defeated his parents at home and this has brought a situation in which parents and teachers blame each other for indiscipline in schools. In Kenya some prefects molest other students and this causes resentment making them target of attacks during disturbances. Between 1991 and 2000 cases of rape and widespread destruction of school property was witnessed in various parts of the country (Republic of Kenya (2001). However many in government and academicians viewed this as general unrest. A comprehensive analysis of determinants of bullying would be important in understanding how factors in and outside the school impact students' behavior.

The curriculum should be able to offer students opportunities for self development, a sense of personal worth and access to the goals the society promotes. Otherwise learners can engage in several forms of deviant behaviour including bullying to express their rejection of the aims of the school. In some cases the curriculum has been seen as promoting the view of one group only according to Velarie (1991). The academic nature of the Kenyan curriculum make those who are not able to achieve high grades feel frustrated and lack self esteem which is demonstrated every time students are about to have mock examinations in secondary schools. Due to the value attached to the academic examinations they dread having them as the final ruling on their destiny.

Schools with most of the bullying activities are associated with limited resources. In addition learners in schools with negative atmosphere are negatively influenced by peers. Gendron, Kirk & Nancy (2011), associated picking and bullying others with schools that do not have supportive and nurturing environment. Essentially, positive perceptions of school climate promoted high self esteem among learners and predicted lower levels of bullying. Schools need to change radically their timetabling structure so as to reduce slack time, when vandalism and conflicts tend to occur. Effective measures include reducing number of students out of class at any time and maintaining a good learning environment that prevents misbehaviour (Kounin, 1971).

A study by Ndambiri (1993) on causes and methods used to curb indiscipline in Kirinyaga District identified stealing, vandalism, rape, fighting, sneaking and taking drugs among serious discipline cases. Bullying in schools is covert activity occurring without adult witness; teachers only hear about it second-hand, if they are aware of it at all, and parents are often the last to know. The bully, victim and any observer remain silent, because there is still a stigma in our society against telling tales. It would appear that the problem has been under estimated by adults. In some African communities violence is tolerated and is viewed as proof of manhood.

Mellor (1990) found that two groups were more likely to be victims of all types of bullying that were measured; those living with their father only, and those living with someone other than their parents. Only children in the family and children with two siblings were least likely to be victims. Children from large families were more likely to feel rejected by others. Thus family environment determines participation of students in bullying as either victims or bullies.

Personal characteristic including gender contributes to either being targeted as a victim or being a bully. Mooij (1994) found that in secondary schools bullies did not like school, they were troublesome in class often carried some sort of weapon-often a knife or stick and used soft drugs. Fearful children, physically weaker than peers, cautious, withdrawn often find it difficult to make friends. They avoid aggression and confrontation and lack confidence skills to elicit support from their peers. In addition teasing and bullying often pick out features such as a large nose, protruding ears, obesity, glasses or extremes of stature. These features however, may not be the reason for bullying. The traditional bully is a lonely child socially or academically inadequate, a child bullied by others but who attacks weaker victims to compensate Velarie (1991). Olweus (1992) found that larger percentage of boys was exposed to direct bullying. Another result of the study was that boys carried out a larger part of the bullying to which girls were subjected to.

The wider society is sometimes blamed for some of the conflicts that erupt in schools. In Kenya conflicts between ethnic groups, political parties, cases of divorce and the general rivalry over resources has been on the rise. Githinji (2001) blamed strikes on permissive society, for instance some parents threaten to beat up headteachers for disciplining their children. Musa (2001) argued that children in Kenya lack role model. Stories of rape, corruption, immorality, drunkenness, deception and others associated with role models are so rampant that we cannot help but somewhat agree with the youth that role models are in short supply in the modern society.

5. Research Design

This study adopted an ex-post facto design. The researcher investigated independent variables such as age, sex, family background, students', characteristics and school environment in retrospect for the possible relationships and effects on dependent variable, that is bullying which has been going on in schools. Stratified random sampling technique was applied in which the school categories formed stratas from which, proportional allocation was applied for each strata to contribute to the sample to ensure that mixed, girls and boys schools were represented according to their proportion with 6,000 students 5 % sample was selected (300 students) which formed a convenient sample according to sampling procedures by Weirsman (1986). Data for this study was collected using a questionnaire for the students and an interview schedule for self identified victims. Quantitative data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics in form of percentages, tables, pie charts and bar graphs. Qualitative data were coded and categories created to form themes guided by study objectives.

6. Discussion of Findings

Among the main findings bullying is prevalent in Kenyan secondary schools. Some 98.3% of the boys in the sample and 97.6% of the girls indicated 'yes' while 1.7% of the boys and 2.4% of the girls indicated 'No'. In addition majority (60.8%) of girls and (92.2%) of boys admitted that bullying problems were experienced in their own schools compared to 39.2% of girls and 7.8% of

boys who responded 'no' showing they did not consider bullying problems as being experienced among students in their schools. From the data it was apparent then that bullying was a considerable problem in secondary schools but has been accepted as part of early school life experience by students. Cook, Williams, Guerra, Tia and Shelly (2010) established that bullying is not a problem specific to any culture and is prevalent world wide as demonstrated by international research base..

In view of self identification 20.0% of boys participated as bullies compared to 7.2% of the girls. With regard to victims 43.5% of boys compared to 48% of the girls identified themselves as victims. However, it was noted that some girls fell victims of bullying from both boys and girls and this contributed to 48% victims, which is higher than that of the boys (43.5%) especially in the mixed schools. The greater majority of boys on the other hand 80% were bullied mainly by boys. Of greater concern is the view that bullying of girls by boys is an advancement of gender violence which undoubtedly affect girls self esteem and ability to learn. This situation is made worse by the fact that for girls who are victims their parents and guardians are often hesitant to speak out against it and in some cases results to truancy leading to early pregnancies and finally dropping out of school. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

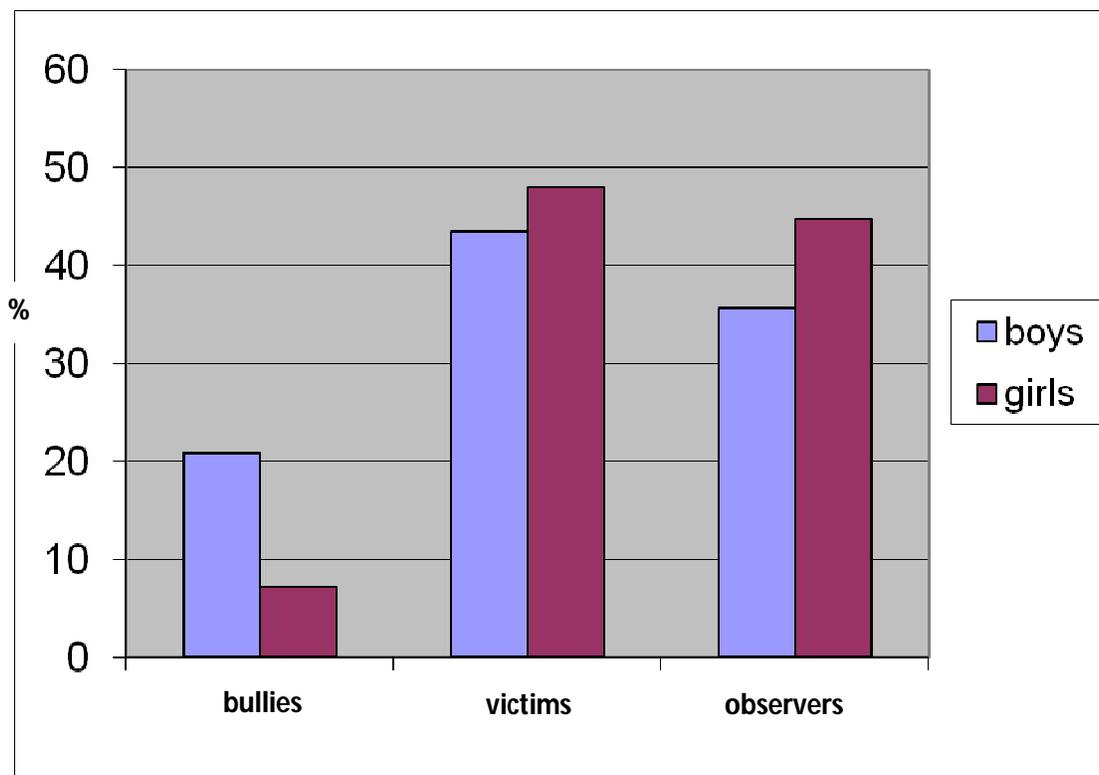


Figure 1: Self identification of Students as Bullies, Victims or Observers

Findings on frequency of bullying indicates that 57% of boys compared to 83.2 % of girls were rarely bullied. Some 24% of boys and 76% of girls were often bullied respectively. In addition 19% of boys and 11% of girls reported being bullied several times in a week. This is a clear indication that bullying is a significant problem that cannot be wished away. In mixed schools bullying occurred in form of sexual violence against girls where those who declined the sexual advances especially by senior boys had a difficult time in school. This resulted in coupling as girls tried to

secure protection whereby such relations ended up in early pregnancies and the consequent drop out of school. It was also evident that the spread of HIV AIDs was exacerbated by cases of sexual violence associated to bullying. Figure 3 shows an analysis of data on boys and girls who reported being bullied often, rarely or several times in a week.

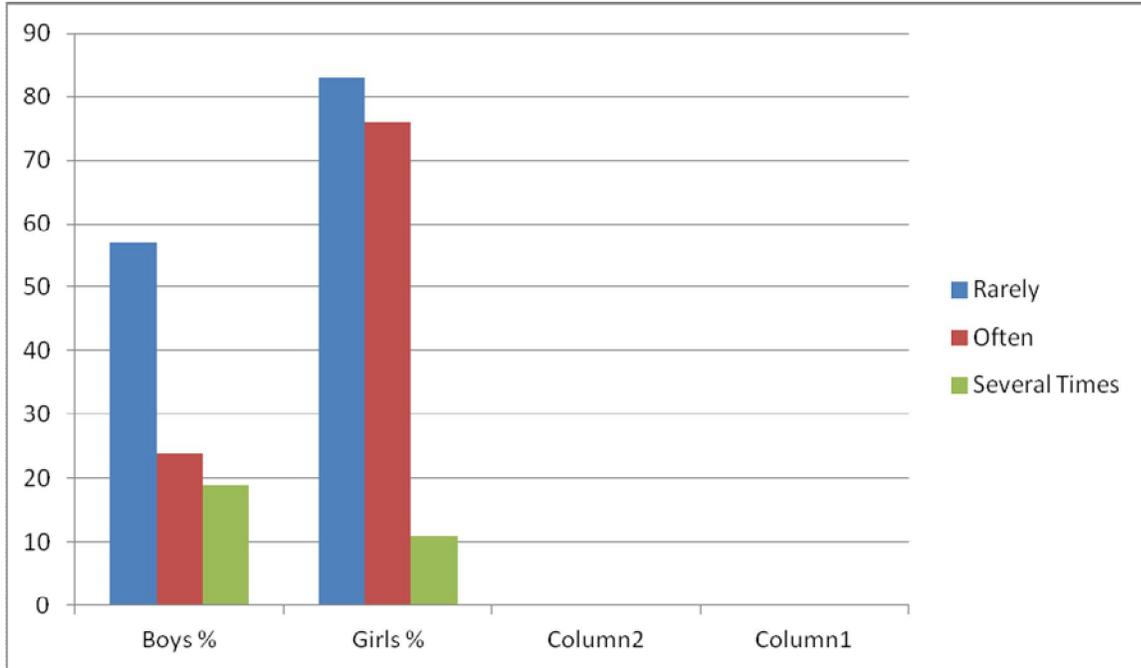


Figure 2: Frequency of Bullying

With regard to victims in relation to class level it was apparent that being bullied decreased with class levels among the boys. The results shows that (64%) of victims were in Form one compared to 24%, 10%,and 2% in Form Two, Three and Four respectively. The trend was different among girls where bullying was prevalent among students in same class levels. More peculiar is the high number of victims in Form 4 followed by Form 1. One victim reported that rummours were common among senior girls and could sometimes get to levels where some opted to transfer to another school. More serious cases were reported in mixed day schools as opposed to pure girls’ schools and some cases were linked to sexual harrasment by boys and consequent rummours among the girls’ peers. In this case the form ones are weak as majority of victims while senior students devoted most of their time to studies with little time to pick quarrels as shown in Figure 4.

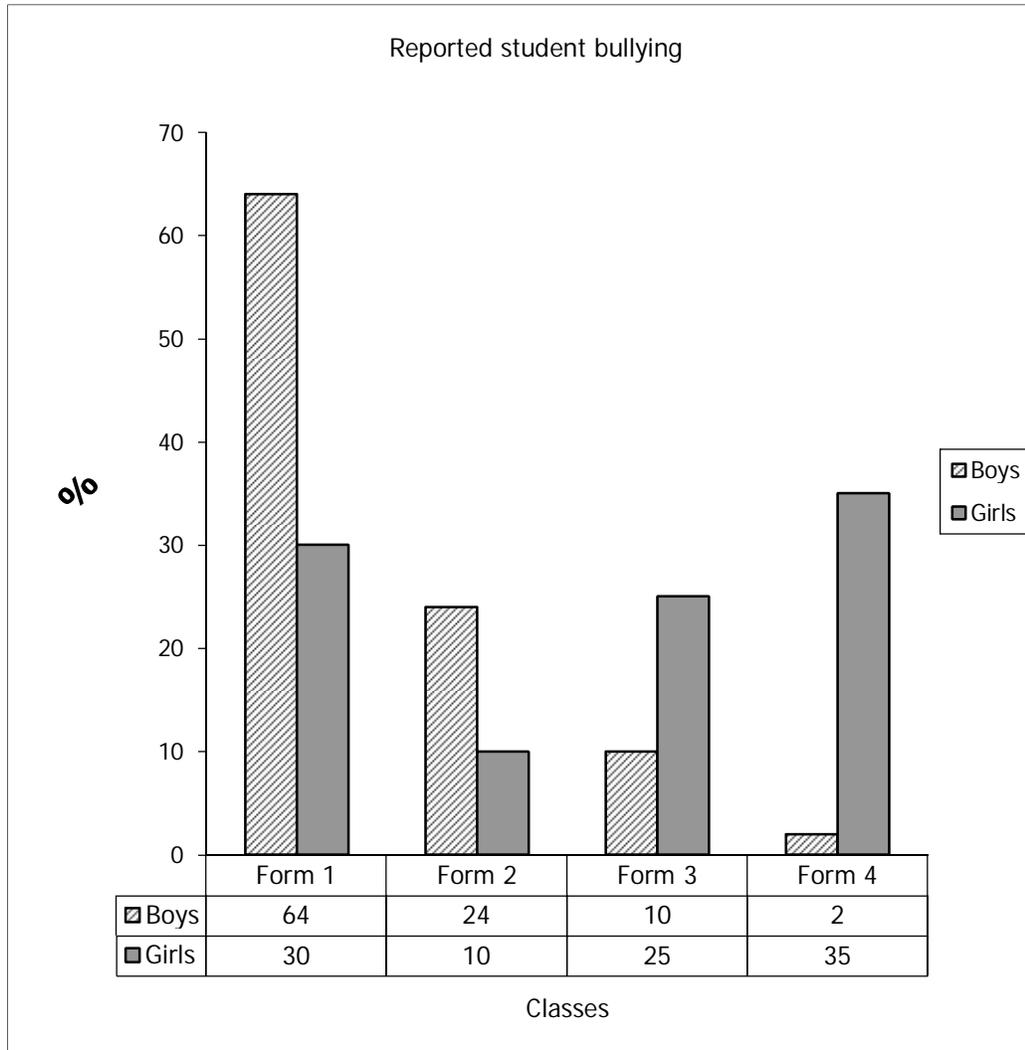


Figure 3: Self Reported Victims and their Classes

On the aspect of classes of bullies' majority of victims reported to have been bullied by students in higher class (57.6%) for girls and (77.4%) for boys. This argument was confirmed by one victim as follows:

bullying is a cycle that is very hard to break especially in boarding secondary schools. Form Ones are strangers from the time they join a school to the they graduate to Form Two through promotion on the night before the reporting of "monos" . On this night they senior boys plan all kinds of crude behavior against them. During our time we slept in the neighboring forest fearing for the worst. Those who remained have stories to tell. This occasion prepares the Form Twos to take up the revenge mission as Form Ones report the the following day.

This is a clear indication that every year in the school calender a fresh crop of bullies is sown to ensure the culture of violence does not die out.

Physical bullying specifically described as hitting, kicking and beating were the most common among boys (44.5%), compared to negative rumours, which was the most frequent (60.8%) among girls. The second common form was threats among boys constituting 40.9% compared to insults (25.6%), which came second among girls. Boys were more likely to be physically hit than girls as physical bullying among girls took only 1.6%. Having “property damaged” was more common among boys (5.2%) compared to 1.6% among girls. Figure 5 presents the forms of bullying reported by students.

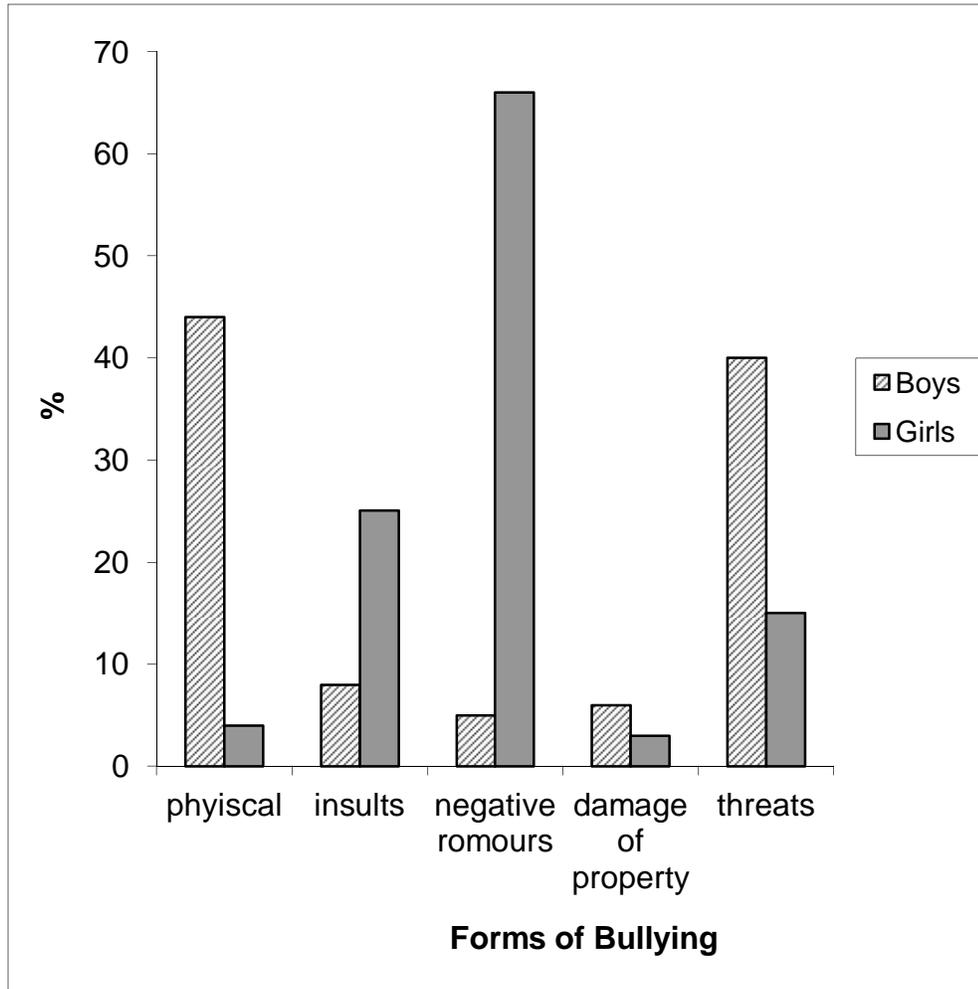


Figure 4: Forms of Bullying

It emerged that some of the threats among boys were actually executed as one of the victims narrated how his class mate transferred from one school when some boys dug a hole and forced him in. “The big boys threw him into the rubbish pit and started the fire ... one of the big boys protested and started fighting them ... the boy escaped and never returned we heard he transferred to a day school”. UNISA study 2012, revealed that alongside traditional forms cyber bullying is becoming prevalent where four in every ten students are bullied by receiving upsetting messages, being called names or threats with majority (53%) experiencing emotional disturbances.

Most bullying incidents were reported to have been carried out after school (63.2% for girls and 55.7% for boys). The second most frequently reported time was break time with 35.7% for boys and 23.2% for girls followed by between lessons with 6.1% for boys and 12.8% for girls and finally during lessons with 2.6% for boys and 0.8% for girls respectively. The high cases of bullying after school implies that bullying was not only a problem in schools but spilled over to the society. In day schools it was common on the way home as reported by one victim.

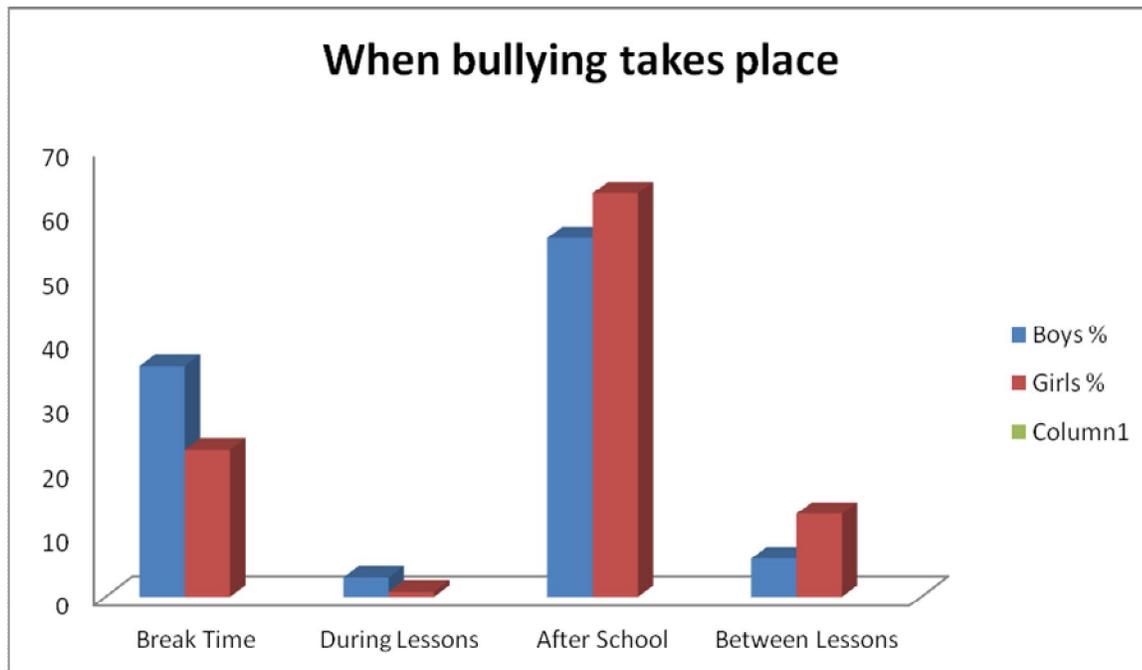


Figure 5: When Bullying Takes Place

Bullying among boys mostly took place in the dormitories (52.2%), followed by others 22.6%, class 13.04 %, play ground 7.0 % and corridors 5.2 %. According to one victim poorly lit areas around the classes and dormitories were notorious as senior boys waylaid younger ones on their way to the toilets or while moving from one class to another at night. The trend was different among girls with majority reporting being bullied in class, followed by others 24.0 %, dormitories taking 20.0 %, corridors 18.4 % and finally playground with 12.0%. In the category of others included, water points, dining hall, canteen, bathrooms and bus stop. One girl narrated how senior girls could remove their buckets from the que and talk sarcastically to the effect that they were busy and had no time to waste while form Ones have more time in the school. These information is presented in Figure 6.

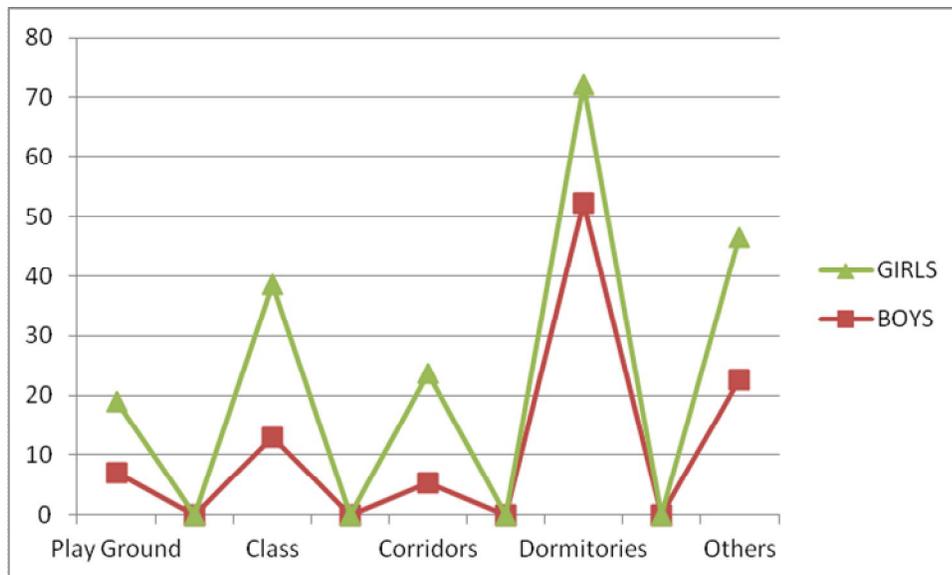


Figure 6: Where Bullying Takes Place

The results in Figure 7 indicates that most bullying among boys took place in the dormitories (52.2%), followed by others 22.6%, class 13.04%, play ground 7.0% and corridors 5.2%. The trend was different among girls with majority 25% reporting being bullied in class, followed by others 24.0%, dormitories taking 20.0%, corridors 18.4% and finally playground with 12.0%. In the category of others the question required them to specify and the most common responses were, water points, dining hall, canteen, bathrooms and bus stop. However it is important to note that girls were more than boys in the sample hence their figures remain high especially when percentages are used.

An analysis of factors influencing bullying in secondary schools in shows that bullying is mainly influenced by “student behaviour” (52.9%). Among boys younger and weaker students were more vulnerable. More surprisingly learners with special needs emerged as casualties while the bullies were mainly those who did not like school and used drugs.

Majority of students identifies behavior of individual students to be the major cause of bullying with (80%). The second factor that influence bullying was “social factors” (24.2%), ‘to be famous’. “School environment” contributed only to (2.5%) in relation to “other factors”. Students also mentioned ‘drugs’, ‘media’, ‘jealousy’ and ‘peer pressure’. This was interpreted to mean that situational and interactional factors among the students play a major role in influencing bullying, hence the need for guidance and counseling services for students in schools. Schools as socializing agents varied. As such in some schools bullying especially among boys is almost acceptable. The school management, teachers and even students view it as a ritual that enable boys to mature and graduate into tough and self reliant individuals who can defend themselves, their family and the community. In some cases discipline was misinterpreted to mean cowardice. Most cases were associated with conflicts over facilities such as dormitories, canteen, dining halls, bathrooms, water points and cloth hanging lines.

In relation to performance of bullies majority of the victims 23.5 % and 25.6 % claimed to be average for boys and girls respectively. Also majority of bullies were “average” in the previous

term performance. Some 3.4% of bullies claimed to have “good” performance in the previous term among boys and 0.8% for the girls. It also emerged that more girls were observers compared to boys.

Lack of information on the part of the teachers makes it difficult for them to intervene. Many of the victims 40.3% and other students in the sample 32.5% reported that peers almost never intervene while 68% felt that telling a teacher did help their situation and 32% felt that it did not help. It was evident that other students rather than teachers helped the victims with 63.5% of girls compared to 36.5% for boys. This study indicates that 47.2% of students reported that they would rather avoid being involved in bullying affairs, which they witness for fear they themselves might in turn become new targets.

A wide range of suggestions for dealing with the problem were given; strict supervision by teachers 12.5% for instance teachers to be around after school and during weekends, in the field and dining hall and during break time; Bullies should be severely punished. Use of guidance and counseling for bullies on the need to respect and appreciate one another no matter the age gender or class; Expansion of school facilities and; Cooperation between students, parents and teachers to curb bullying.

7. Conclusion

The study established that bullying was a significant problem affecting boys schools more than girls. Hence boys exhibited a higher level of tolerance of bullies than girls and that bullying thrived in secrecy. Senior boys bullied younger ones while senior girls were victims of bullying. Physical violence was common among boys than girls who mainly experienced verbal bullying. Student characteristics were a major cause of bullying followed by social factors commonly described as to be famous and peer influence because bullies emerged as heroes. School environment also contributed significantly. Different factors interact in influencing bullying in schools hence, future emphasis should be put in the reinforcement of cohesion of staff and the head teachers, to build a good climate in the school and formulate rules and regulations specific to bullying in schools. Optimistically school reforms and interventions aiming at preventing and reducing bullying in future will yield positive results.

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