Bullying Among Special Education Students With Intellectual Disabilities: Differences in Social Adjustment and Social Skills

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Abstract
Harassment and bullying among 186 students with intellectual disabilities, ages 12 to 21 years, in special education schools were examined. The differences between bullies and victims in terms of social adjustment and social skills were investigated. No prototypes characterizing differences in social skills were found between the three subgroups: victim, bully, and victim–bully. However, bullies and victim–bullies exhibited significantly higher levels of challenging behaviors, such as temper tantrums, unruly and quarrelsome behavior, and a tendency to lie and steal. Significant correlations were also found among actions as a bully, violent behavior, and hyperactivity. Being a victim was correlated with emotional and interpersonal problems.

In this study we describe the phenomenon of harassment among students with intellectual disabilities, examining the aspects of social adjustment and social skills in relation to this phenomenon in two special education schools in Israel. Our aim in this study was to investigate in depth the extent of harassment among these students, as reported by the students themselves.

Harassment is defined as aggressive behavior, in which a powerful and influential individual or group (the bullies) consistently display antisocial behavior, with the intention of harming the less dominant individual (Olweus, 1991, 1993; Rigby, 2002; Smith & Sharp, 1994; Smith & Thompson, 1991). Olweus (1987) added the finding that bullies acquire superiority over their victims, who are usually unable to defend themselves and are physically, emotionally, or socially weak in many different ways: physically in size and strength and/or mentally in social competence, such as in gaining the support of other children. Olweus stressed that the concept of bullying, as opposed to other types of violence, refers specifically to a situation that is characterized by an imbalance of power between the victim and the bully, which makes it different from other types of violence, where the protagonists’ powers may be balanced. Rigby (1996) noted that in England the common term is bullying, but the term harassment is more common in the United States. The term serves in both cases to define this behavior as a specific type of violence.

Studies conducted in regular schools present a diversified picture regarding the scale of the harassment phenomenon. Some researchers have found that harassment is a common and normative phenomenon in schools (Olweus, 1987; Kusel & Perry, 1990; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Whitney & Smith, 1993). In considering gender differences, Craig and Pepler (1995b) found that boys reported harassing others more frequently than girls did (23% and 8%, respectively). Boys and girls reported that they were victims of harassment to the same extent (Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995).

In an extensive study in Norway, Olweus (1993) found that about 84,000 students (15% of the student population, 1 out of 7 students) in primary and secondary schools were involved in harassment as victims and/or as bullies. Of these, about 9% were victims and 7% reported repeatedly harassing others; about 1.6% were both victims and bullies.

Hoover, Oliver, and Hazler (1992) studied adolescents in the United States. They asked respondents retroactively whether they had experienced harassment when they were between the ages of 5 and 17 years. The authors found that 81% of the boys and 72% of the girls claimed that they had
been victims of harassment at least once. Bosworth, Espelage, DuBay, Dahlberg, and Dayther (1996), who examined 558 students in secondary schools in the Midwestern United States, reported that 29% of the students reported harassing other students during the previous 30 days.

In a Canadian study, Pepler and Craig (1997) investigated 4,743 children from the first to the eighth grade; about 6% of the children admitted that they had bullied other children more than once or twice over the past 6 weeks, 5% reported that they were victims, and 2% of the children reported that they were both bullies and victims.

Rigby (1996), in a study of the scope of harassment in schools in Australia found that 1 out of 6 or 7 students was a victim of harassment on a weekly basis, or even more frequently; 20.7% of the boys and 15.7% of the girls reported that they were victims of harassment at least once a week. Similar and even higher incidence of harassment was reported in the following countries: England, Scotland, Ireland, Japan, Spain, France, Italy, Holland, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Poland, and Australia (Smith & Morita, 1999).

In Israel harassment occurs more frequently in regular schools than in special education schools. Har’el, Kenny, and Rahav (1997) published a study conducted in Israel on behalf of the World Health Organization (WHO). They found that about 25% of the boys and about 10% of the girls took part in harassment at least three times during the school year. According to this study, 35.7% of the boys and 21.2% of the girls reported that they were victims of harassment at least three times during the year. Israel ranked fifth on the victims’ frequency list out of 23 countries.

The literature on harassment distinguishes between the personality of the bully and that of the victim: Researchers have found that boys who bully are stouter and/or taller than their peers, act in groups with a numerical advantage, or are aided by social popularity, all of which give them advantages in terms of power (McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 1997; Olweus, 1987, 1991, 1993). Roland (1989) found that, contrary to boys, girls who bully usually tend to be physically weaker than other girls in their class.

Bullies are portrayed as being emotionally aroused when playing and when engaged in sports and tend to be argumentative. They tend to display a need for dominance, assertiveness, and control through the use of force and demand that their wishes be fulfilled at any cost. They evince a violent temper and an inability to exercise self-control and are impulsive and nonconformists. Most bullies show no remorse for hurting others and take no responsibility for their actions. They are usually underachievers, though they exhibit a positive self-image and enjoy high status, at least in the early years of school (Batche & Knoff, 1994; Perry et al., 1990; McMaster et al., 1997; Olweus, 1987, 1991, 1993; Stephenson & Smith, 1989). Most bullies have a low frustration threshold and find it difficult to postpone gratification. They are capable of talking themselves out of complicated situations and will not hesitate to use deception.

Various researchers have found that bullies display aggressive behavior towards their peers as well as their teachers, parents, siblings, and others. They have a positive attitude towards violence and are easily attracted to situations with aggressive content (Olweus, 1887, 1991, 1993; Stephenson & Smith, 1989). A number of researchers indicate that contrary to the prevailing myths, bullies are not anxious and have plenty of self-confidence. There is only limited support for the hypothesis that they bully others because they feel bad about themselves (Batche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993).

McMaster et al. (1997) found that the victims may belong to a different ethnic group than the population among which they reside, learn, and work; they may be exceptional physically and unusual in appearance (e.g., short, fat) and/or exceptionally intelligent. However, Olweus (1991) maintained that the findings of his study do not support the “stereotype” (as he called it), according to which the victims have exceptional physical attributes (i.e., are weak, short, fat). In 1993, he added that some of the victims suffer from body anxiety, fear of hurting themselves or of others hurting them. They do not excel in sports and are also less competent in various games. Roland (1989) found that low self-esteem was a common characteristic among students who were vulnerable to harassment, noting that the victims may view themselves as deserving their fate, as if they convey the message that “I deserve to be a victim.” He also revealed that victims of harassment tended to belong to relatively poor social strata and achieved less well on intelligence tests. Stephenson and Smith (1989) supported Roland’s (1989) findings: They found a relationship between social discrimination and harassment. The victims were not popular among their peers and had low self-esteem. They were cau-

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tious, sensitive, and quiet. They were characterized by passive behavior, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence.

According to Olweus (1991), the victims were predisposed to feelings of failure and shame; they tended to represent situations in a negative manner and to feel less intelligent and attractive. They were found to be socially isolated and to have few close friends or no friends at all. Their relations with adults (such as teachers and parents) were frequently better than with their peers.

The third group, identified as being both bullies and victims, display still other typical features. They are described as having a hot temper, being hyperactive, restless, being emotionally immature, and clumsy (Rigby, 1996). They are usually provocative and when under attack, respond with violence, which, in turn, causes them to be victims of more attacks (Besag, 1989). This group is the least liked in school and these individuals are low in academic achievement and in social adjustment (Craig & Pepler, 1995a).

Olweus (1993) placed special emphasis on a subgroup called “provocative victims.” According to Olweus, these children have specific characteristics, in most cases in addition to the above mentioned characteristics of both victims and bullies: They are bad-tempered, hyperactive, restless, clumsy, immature, and find it hard to concentrate. Difficulties in concentration and in paying attention coupled with hyperactivity could be interpreted by the surroundings as being provocative and lead to harassment. Moreover, Rigby (1996) noted that these victims are considered provocative because they do not remain passive when aggression is directed at them, which escalates the cycle of harassment. These victims often do not evoke empathy or sympathy in adults, including the teaching staff.

Stephenson and Smith (1989) mentioned that this could be the most difficult group to identify because at first glance they appear to be the victims. These researchers have also found that most of the harassment by these students is physical in nature because they are impulsive and react quickly to both intended and unintended physical jostles and are easily provoked. Stephenson and Smith (1989) found that in certain cases reactive victims start as victims and turn into bullies in an attempt at retaliation. They noted that those victims who are also bullies are the children with the lowest self-confidence, who are liked the least, and are academically underachievers in comparison with other victims. Craig and Pepler (1995a) assessed students belonging to the victim–aggressor group as being at high risk of adjustment difficulties.

This typology is consistent with common sense. Indeed, some of the personality attributes are expressed in actual behavior according to which we identify a person as being either a bully or a victim. For this reason we were interested in investigating whether this typology would also be found among students attending special education schools.

Children and adolescents with disabilities are in real danger of physical violence and sexual assault (Morrison, Furlong, & Smith, 1994). Martlew and Hodson (1991) found that children with special needs who were mainstreamed into regular education were teased more than children without special needs. O’Moore and Hillery (1989) also found that children studying in remedial classes became victims of harassment more frequently. Thus, about 12% of the children in remedial classes in mainstream schools reported that they were victims of harassment compared to 7% of the children without special needs in regular schools.

There are at least three factors that could increase the risk of children with special needs being involved in harassment situations: (a) These children bear a stigma related to their disability, making them an obvious target for harassment; (b) children with special needs in an inclusive environment may experience inadequate protection against the bullies in such environments; and (d) certain children may react aggressively and become victims–bullies themselves (Nabusoka & Smith, 1993).

Social and personality variables are integral aspects of the phenomenon of harassment. One of the prominent characteristics of populations with intellectual disabilities, distinguishing them from nondisabled populations, is deprivations and disabilities in social adjustment and social skills and competencies (Basquill, Nezu, Nezu, & Klein, 2004; Jahoda, Pert, & Trower, 2006a; Luckasen et al., 2002).

Social adjustment is defined as the individuals’ ability to find their place in their physical and social environment, consistent with their age and culture (Loveland & Kelley, 1988). Rubin, Booth, Rose-Krasnor, and Mills (1995) noted that the level of social adjustment reflects the extent to which children get along with their peers or their ability to achieve personal goals in social interactions, while maintaining positive relations across time and situations (Eisler & Frederiksen, 1980; Greshman & Elliott, 1990).
Deficient social skills may include defective information-processing, defective social perception, egocentric communication patterns, and difficulties in problem-solving (Basquill et al., 2004; Jahoda, Pert, & Trower, 2006b). These deficient social skills may remain unchanged across time and even deteriorate over the years, if no intervention is conducted by an external agent; deficits may be manifested in adjustment problems, social isolation, juvenile delinquency, and/or mental problems (Greshman & Elliott, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987). Children with deprivations in social skills tend to have low self-esteem, and be shy and passive (Eisler & Frederiksen, 1980). They also find it difficult to integrate socially with their peers and meet socially accepted norms (Volling, Mackinnon, Rabiner, & Baradaran, 1993).

The present study was conducted in two special education schools. Our aim was to examine whether there is (a) a difference in social skills between the students identified as bullies and (b) those identified as victims and (c) a difference in personality characteristics between the two categories. We hypothesized that bullying students would obtain a higher score on social skills, expressed specifically in the level of their assertiveness and initiating behavior, when compared to students who are victims and those who are both victims and bullies. In addition, we hypothesized that there would be differences in social adjustment and personality variables in the dimensions of hyperactivity, challenging behavior, problems in relations with peers, and emotional problems between students identified as bullies and those identified as victims (i.e., that a higher score would be obtained among bullying students on the dimensions of hyperactivity and behavior problems in comparison with others, both victims and bully-victims) whereas the victims would obtain a higher score on the dimensions of problems in relations with peers and emotional problems in comparison with bullies and with students who are victims—bullies.

Research Tools

Harassment is defined here as verbal abuse of another and as physical and emotional harassment. Three different types are victims of harassment, those who bully others, and those who are both bullies and victims.

Instruments

Harassment/Bullying Questionnaire. This instrument, which was based on the Harassment/Bullying Questionnaire developed in Scandinavia by Olweus (1991) and used by Herz (1995), was administered individually to the students, who filled in the answers. We translated it into Hebrew and re-translated back to English to ensure that the Hebrew version was similar to the original. This questionnaire has been validated and used extensively in Scandinavia. When tested for reliability with a regular student population in Israel, 77.7% reliability was found between the two parts of the questionnaire, comprising a similar number of items, on the three specific scales of the harassment measure. Three items from the questionnaire Breaking the Silence (Bryen, Carey & Frantz, 2003) were added; these questions dealt with topics not covered by the Bullying Questionnaire: (a) was forced to do things I did not want to do, (b) was sexually touched without my consent, and (c) had property stolen. This questionnaire was developed for a population with developmental (physical, cognitive, and communication) disabilities.

In order to get a more thorough and reliable picture of the level of harassment in school, we asked teachers to evaluate each of their students and fill in a questionnaire on violent behavior.

Aggressiveness questionnaire. To reinforce the validity of the findings, the educational staff also filled in a questionnaire dealing with the level of the students’ aggressiveness. The teachers filled in a part of the Teacher’s Report Form (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1986), which was translated into Hebrew (Hertz, 1995). For this study, we chose the 10 questions dealing with the aggressive trait, considered by Achenbach and Edelbrock to be the most valid items on the questionnaire. The questionnaire

Method

Population

The research sample was selected from the population of two special education junior high and high schools in Israel. There were 186 students between the ages of 12 and 21 years with mild developmental and intellectual disabilities: 107 students were examined (57.5% of the total population) in School 1, and 79 students (42.5%) in School 2. The proportion of boys and girls was similar in both schools; the boys were 56.5% of the total population and the girls, 26.3%. We used a chi-square test and found no differences between the students in the two schools on the gender variable.
includes such items as shows violent behavior; is quarrelsome, brutal, impertinent, insolent, bad tempered, aggressive, and unruly; and has temper tantrums. This questionnaire made it possible for us to examine the relative aggressiveness of the students as assessed by their teachers. Internal reliability (Cronbach $\alpha$) of the questionnaire was .95 for Items 1 through 10.

The following instruments were used to examine the level of social skills and social adjustment, with the educational staff reporting on the students:

**Questionnaire on student’s social skills.** The staff assessed the level of each student’s social skills. This variable was examined by using means of a part of the Social Skills Rating System (Greshman & Elliott, 1990), translated into Hebrew. The part dealing with social skills is a scale with 10 items relating to the student’s initiating behaviors. To adapt the questionnaire to the target population, we removed one item. In this questionnaire the teacher grades the frequency of the behavior from 0 to 2, with the higher grade reflecting a higher level of aggressiveness. Previous investigators have demonstrated that the questionnaire is sufficiently reliable, $\alpha = .74$, in relation to reliability of measures of social skills (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). The internal reliability (Cronbach alpha) of the questionnaire as used in this study was .79 for Items 1 through 9. The social skills included interpersonal behaviors, such as knowing how to introduce him/herself, displays self-control, invites others to join in group activities, initiates social relationships, initiates discussions with peers, gives compliments, volunteers to help peers in classroom activities, and joins in a group’s activities even without being invited.

**Social adjustment questionnaire.** The Self-Descriptive Questionnaire, which was filled in by the teachers, deals with the children’s behavior (Gorman, 1997). It was developed for children ages 4 through 16; in the present study it was used with adolescents who had intellectual disorders. When testing for validity, we found a correlation of .92 with the Rutter (1967) behavior questionnaire for the overall grade related to the children’s difficulties.

In accordance with the research questions, we examined social adjustment on four scales: Hyperactivity, Challenging Behavior, Interpersonal Relations With Peers, and Emotional Problems. The internal reliability (Cronbach $\alpha$) was .81 for the Hyperactivity scale, .81 for Challenging Behavior, .74 for Interpersonal Relations with Peers, and .81 for Emotional Problems.

**Findings**

The findings in the present study indicate that 83% (75% boys) of the sample population from the two schools reported having undergone some kind of bullying of the following types: sworn at, 59%; laughed at, 52%; told nasty, rude things, 46%; beaten, 34%; pushed, 34%; threatened with harm, 33%; kicked, 28%; pinched, 20%; forced to do things they did not want to do, 19%; sexually touched without consent, 18%; and/or had property stolen, 18%.

In order to create a clearer distinction between the three categories (bullies, victims, and victims–bullies), we identified only those in each category who scored highest and were found within the 30% of their category. A total of 92 students were thus identified: among them, 50% were bullies; 18.5%, victims; and 31.5%, both bullies and victims. A high percentage of bullies were also victims.

Significant correlations, $r = .32, p < .01$, were found among the students’ answers on the Bullying Questionnaire, exhibiting high levels of harassment and the teachers’ assessment of these students as being violent.

We continued to compare the three subgroups of students: those who were identified as being a bully, a victim, or a bully and a victim on the scores given by the teachers on the Social Skills Rating System. Contrary to our hypothesis, no significant difference was found on social skills and being either a bully or a victim or both. Thus, having social skills used in interpersonal relations, such as knowing how to introduce oneself, being helpful to others, self-control etc., was not typical of students in any of the three categories. No significant correlations were found between any of the items on the social skills questionnaire and the three subgroups of students.

We then checked for possible differences in social adjustment and personality variables between the three groups. Significant correlations were found on all four scales: being a bully was significantly correlated with being hyperactive, $r = .26, p < .01$, and with displaying behavior problems, $r = .26, p < .01$. Being a victim was significantly correlated with having emotional problems, $r = .29, p < .01$, and with having problems in interpersonal relations, $r = .20, p < .05$.

In spite of the above correlations, when com-
paring the three subgroups of students (bullies, victims, and bullies–victims), we found significant differences only on the scale of behavior problems, \( F(2, 89) = 8.28, p < .001 \); on the other variables (hyperactivity, interpersonal relations, and emotional problems), there were no significant differences. Thus, the only difference we found between being a bully, a victim, or both was manifested on challenging behaviors, comprising behavior problems such as having temper tantrums, being unruly and quarrelsome, tending to lie and steal. Bullies and bullies–victims exhibited significantly higher levels of challenging behaviors. Indeed, as shown above, there were significant correlations between being a bully and being hyperactive and having behavior problems. However, even though emotional problems were significantly correlated with being a victim, this was not found to affect a difference between groups when all three subgroups were compared, which is consistent with our previous finding of no correlation between social skills and any one of the three subgroups.

**Discussion**

In this study we found that in the two special education schools examined, the extent of the phenomenon (49% out of the population studied reported being harassed) is not very different from percentages in regular schools. Overall, harassment in regular schools in Israel is a frequent phenomenon. In a special report to the Minister of Health, it was stated that in the sixth and seventh grades, 63.8% of the boys and 36.4% of the girls were involved in acts of harassment against other students at least once a year. A slightly higher percentage were victims; 68.7% of the boys and 53.2% of the girls said they had been victims at least once a year. Harassment decreased in the upper grades, and in the 10th grade, 50.3% of the boys and 22.7% of the girls were involved in harassment (Har’el, Kenny, & Rahav, 1997).

The finding of no differences between the three subgroups on social skills raises several issues. Maybe the popular typology, even though it is based on surveys and research, is an oversimplification of the phenomenon of violence in schools. Another possible explanation is that most students with disabilities undergo some kind of abuse, mostly outside the school, in their neighborhood, by service providers such as the bus driver of the special school bus, and even at home to a much higher degree than do students in regular schools, as shown in other studies (e.g., Reiter, Bryen, Shachar, & Lapidot, 2005). Thus, we suspect that to some extent nearly all students with disabilities are victims. Even those considered bullies at school are actually victims outside the school walls.

The correlations among being a bully and violent behavior, hyperactivity, and behavior problems are noteworthy. Intervention programs in areas such as art therapy, physical activities, and music can contribute to lowering the level of harassment in the special education schools. However, attention must also be paid to the fact that being a victim was correlated with emotional problems and interpersonal problems. Thus, special attention should be paid to therapeutic and educational programs aimed at empowering students with disabilities.

Our overall purpose in this study was to become familiar with the harassment phenomenon and to conduct a preliminary exploration of its existence among children with special needs in two special education schools. We have presented a preliminary account of the frequency of various types of harassment and the characteristics of the students involved. The fact that no prototype characterizing each of the three subgroups (victim, bully, and victim–bully) was found, although three such prototypes were found in the regular student population, points to the need for further research.

The overall picture of the high incidence of harassment among students with special needs calls for action. First, more research should be conducted in this area. It is a difficult field to study because the issues under investigation are private, painful, and may involve families as well as outside agencies, such as the police, lawyers, social workers, and psychologists.

Another conclusion to be drawn is that there should be formal and informal ways to channel and deal with complaints. Intervention programs for children and adults with disabilities must encourage them to open up and disclose any experiences of harassment (Bryen et al., 2003; Rose, West, & Clifford, 2000). The whole staff—professionals and paraprofessionals—as well as the support staff must be ready to listen and take action in this area. Apart from the staff running the program, there should be open and ongoing communication with outside agents, as noted above. The other conclusion is that preventive measures should be taken, and all students with special needs, whether bullies, victims, or both, should be empowered through enhancing...
their self-awareness. Victims should learn how to fight back, be assertive, and know how to resist the bully. Actually, at times the very first step is helping students become aware of the fact that they are being abused and that acts against them are legally prohibited; they should be taught defensive behaviors that will assist them in pushing the bully away. As for the bullies, as suggested in previous studies (Basquill et al., 2004a; Jahoda, Pert, & Trower, 2006), strengthening their positive social identity and working on their social traits and competencies, such as helping others or active problem-solving, may replace their aggressive behavior.

References
Bullying among special education students

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