World Lumen Congress 2021 | May 26-30, 2021 |
Iasi, Romania

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<https://doi.org/10.18662/wlc2021/27>

How to cite: Gradinariu, T. (2021). An Ecosystemic Approach to Preventing Bullying in School. Risk Factors Associated with School. In A. Sandu (vol. ed.), *Lumen Proceedings: Vol. 17 World Lumen Congress 2021* (pp. 283-290). Iasi, Romania: LUMEN Publishing House.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/wlc2021/27>

An Ecosystemic Approach to Preventing Bullying in School. Risk Factors Associated with School

Tudorita GRADINARIU¹

Abstract

Previous research has shown that teachers play an important role in preventing bullying in school. Nowadays, there is a growing interest in understanding the risk factors associated with school such as the teachers' perception of the severity of bullying and their response to bullies and victims. This paper presents risk factors associated with bullying and teachers' perceptions within Bronfenbrenner's (1977) classic ecological theory. According to this paradigm, changes are required in the environments with which children interact as they develop (family, school, community and society). By exposing the factors that trigger and maintain bullying, we aim to highlight the importance of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model in designing bullying prevention strategies. We will focus on the risk factors associated with school, chief among which is the teachers' perceptions of bullying in school. Not only does this view contribute to optimizing the understanding of the importance of ecosystem theory for effectiveness prevention, but it also suggests that both research and prevention should focus on individual risk factors that influence teachers' reactivity to bullying behaviors.

Keywords: *bullying, ecological theory, bullying prevention, risk factors, teachers' perceptions.*

Introduction

At the level of scientific literature, Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus is leading the way in investigating this destructive behavior among students. Numerous studies have shown that bullying is a serious social problem (Espelage & Horne, 2008). We talk about *bullying* when a student is hit, teased, threatened, pushed, locked in a room, when tickets are sent to him with malicious, obscene, unpleasant content and when other colleagues do not talk to him (Smith & Sharp, 1994). *Bullying* is an intentional, malicious form of proactive aggression that is repetitive and characterized by a real or

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perceived imbalance of power, rendering the victim defenseless. (Arseneault et al, 2010).

The French researcher Debarbieux (2011) considers that school violence is related to repeated minor incidents, and serious victimization is rare in the school perimeter. In this author's view, a school organization can be affected by a large number of small disorders that are not important when viewed separately, but, if cumulated, make the school environment uncontrollable (Debarbieux, 2011). In the academic literature there has been intense debate about the effectiveness of certain prevention programs, which is why an evaluation of programs to bullying prevention was carried out. Nowadays, there is a consensus that the best prevention programs combine information on individual risks with an assessment of social factors: social skills, family involvement and improving the school climate. It is considered that bullying-prevention strategies, in order to be effective, must include changing classroom behavior (cooperation and participation), clear rules of behavior common to all students, staff training, external supervision and involvement of the school principal (Debarbieux, 2011).

Bullying has become a major concern for educational staff. Several researchers believe that proactive bullying programs developed at school level are effective in preventing bullying (Olweus, 1991; Pepler et al., 1994). These bullying prevention programs should be designed to bring about systematic changes in school culture (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Specialists in education and school psychology emphasize the importance of preventing bullying, opening new directions and ways to prevent it. *"The phenomenon of bullying must be analyzed in the context of its occurrence. To think of strategies, projects for the prevention of school violence means to take into account all the factors (social, family, school, personality) that can determine the violent behavior of the student"*(Sălăvăstru, 2004, p. 269).

2. The ecological model in bullying prevention

The ecological model facilitates a better understanding of bullying. Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the theory of ecological systems to explain the role of psycho-individual and environmental factors in the growth and development of the child. According to this paradigm, children undergo several processes that occur at different levels of development and in different contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, bullying is an ecological phenomenon that occurs as a result of complex interactions between intra- and inter-individual variables. Individual characteristics are influenced by the variety of the ecological context (environment) including

colleagues, family, school and community factors (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Thus, the development of an individual is influenced by five environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). All levels of the model are interconnected: if there is an activity initiated at any level, the effects radiate to other levels (Povilaitis & Bulotaite, 2013). All ecological systems as well as individual traits have been shown to be significant influences on bullying behavior, directly or indirectly (Lee, 2010). Understanding how these factors are related to bullying is one of the important steps in stopping this blight.

Microsystem. Representative of this level is the experience in interpersonal relationships. There are four microsystems that focus on the child: family experience, experience with teachers, experience with colleagues and experience in the school environment (Bronfenbrenner 1979 apud Lee, 2010). The perception of the severity of bullying is reflected in the reactivity to bullying incidents, which influences the future behaviors of bullies and victims (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). The lack of reaction of teachers conveys to students the idea that bullying is accepted and tolerated (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Olweus, 1993; Yoon & Kerber, 2003), with great chances to amplify.

Mesosystem. This is the level of social connections (students, teachers). The child's entry into a new environment, such as school, entails that it is an important link between family and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is the level at which teachers can prevent bullying. Teachers can set class rules, including bullying intolerance, and train students to develop assertive communication and conflict management skills. Also at this level, teachers can identify the bullies and potential victims and can intervene effectively.

Exosystem. This system is a broader frame and includes the relationship between two or more environments, the child being and active participant in only one of them. Exo-systems are those environments in which the child does not participate directly and actively, but which influence his development (Cala & Soriano, 2014). In the case of bullying, exosystem factors may include in-service teacher training to prevent bullying (Barboza et al., 2008).

Macrosystem. This level examines societal factors that influence the rate of bullying. At this level are the factors that create a favorable climate for bullying. These societal factors include: cultural norms that encourage violence as a way to resolve conflicts; rules that give priority to parental rights over the welfare of the child.

Chronosystem. This system represents the effect of time on bullying and the context in which it occurs. For example, society's attitude towards

violence may change over time. Given that bullying is a compartment that repeats itself over time, this level provides a degree of stability to violent behavior (Barboza et al., 2008).

Morcom (2015) believes that sociocultural theory provides both a springboard for understanding cognitive development and social and emotional learning through shared school and cultural spaces with peers and teachers. The complexity of the dynamics of this phenomenon in the school environment, which affects teachers' perceptions (Roberts & Morotti, 2000), calls for a comprehensive approach to bullying prevention. In this regard, Bradshaw (2015) states *"the available research does suggest that multicomponent prevention approaches, which address different ecological layers and target multiple risk factors, are among the most effective..."* (p. 328).

3. Risk factors associated with school. Teachers' perceptions to bullying

Recently, the interest of specialists in investigating teachers' perceptions and reactions to the three types of bullying (physical, verbal and relational) is noticeable. Although teachers play an important role in the safety of students in school, there are few studies on their attitude towards bullying behavior (Duong & Bradshaw, 2013).

Teachers' attitudes favor bullying behavior because underestimating and ignoring aggressive incidents leads to their intensification (Swearer et al., 2009). A negative perception of the school climate by students is a favorable factor for encouraging and maintaining bullying between students (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Small, Neilsen-Hewett and Sweller (2013) consider that some individual characteristics of teachers, such as age, gender and moral conscience, greatly influence the way in which they intervene in bullying, while Yoon (2004) suggests that the system of bullying would justify the involvement or non-involvement of teachers. Research by Yoon and Kerber (2003) shows that teachers who perceive bullying as very serious also report an increased likelihood of intervention. Subjectivity in interpreting the severity of bullying is determined by teachers' perceptions of this phenomenon, being considered the main factor influencing the reaction to bully and victims. If teachers are not aware of the consequences of bullying, or if they do not perceive its severity, they tend to adopt a passive attitude and display a low probability of intervention (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). The difficulty of recognizing these behaviors by adults stems from the complexity of the dynamics of this phenomenon in the school space (Roberts & Morotti, 2000). Before teachers can prevent or intervene in

bullying situation, they must recognize them. Many teachers do not have the knowledge and skills to recognize forms of bullying among students (Allen, 2010). In most studies that have looked at how teachers perceive acts of bullying, they have found that they report a lower rate of bullying than students, indicating that students are more aware of bullying than teachers (Holt & Keyes, 2004). Another dimension at which there are individual differences in the understanding of bullying is the degree of professional training or education of teachers. The level of education refers to the professional qualification and is more reflected in the quality of management and teaching strategies (Small et al., 2013).

4. Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper was to highlight the importance to use ecosystemic theory in bullying prevention. We focused on levels that directly target teachers as well on meso- and exosystem. At the level of the *mesosystem* is the student-teacher relationship. According to Swearer et al., (2013), the attitude of teachers towards bullies and victims favors bullying because underestimation and ignorance of bullying lead to their intensification (Swearer et al., 2009), and consequently we consider that initial teacher training is absolutely necessary. Subsequently, the school should incentivize enrollment of young teachers in professional training programs from the very beginning of their activity at the school. As there are few studies that have touched on the risk factors that influence teachers' reaction to bullying, we consider it important to examine risk factors which affect your perceptions from an ecosystem perspective, specifically, the analysis of ecosystems in which the teacher has developed throughout life. For example, Mishna et al. (2006) conducted a qualitative study in order to better understand how teachers perceive and react to bullying. The results of the study show that most of the teachers investigated were themselves assaulted when they were students. At the same time, Byers et al. (2011) state that traditional forms of violence, namely physical violence, are better known and understood, which is why they are not perceived as very serious.

The next level, the *ecosystem* includes in-service teacher training to prevent bullying (Barboza et al., 2008). Hidden forms of bullying require systematic prevention efforts training and professional training of teachers organized by schools (Craig et al, 2000). The effective prevention programs should aim to increase teachers' awareness of bullying, increase awareness of the bullying consequences, and train victims and perpetrators (Milsom & Gallo, 2006). The perspective of specialists should also be directed towards

the macrosystem that absorbs the teacher's interactions throughout his development, such as the myths that legitimize violence, the prejudices and beliefs of a community towards violence. Teachers, similarly to students, are influenced by the various facets of the ecological context in which they have developed. For this reason, we believe that a better understanding of the risk factors attributed to teachers is key to achieving effective programs to prevent bullying.

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