

## BULLYING PHENOMENON IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS : A RESEARCH PROSPECT

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### ABSTRACT

Bullying is a prevailing and perhaps the most under-reported safety problem in either Malaysian schools or elsewhere. Various reports show that bullying has long-lasting harmful effects, for both victims and bullies. However, there has been no specific study that addresses this problem in Malaysia. Therefore, this paper proposes a study that can be undertaken in looking into a deeper insight of bullying problem, which may lead to the design and implementation of prevention and intervention. A modified Peer Relations Assessment Questionnaire (Rigby 1997) will be used to assess perceptions of the nature and extent of student violence, bullying, student engagement in violent behaviour towards peers, and victimisation (from the perspectives of parents, teachers and students). Other constructs central to the study will be measured by researcher-designed (or modified) instruments. Pupils' conduct, performance and school attendance will be measured by teacher ratings.

### INTRODUCTION

Rampant news on the violent school bullying cases by a group of young offenders reported recently had shocked the nation. The latest case involved a form two student, Sherman Mohd Jaafar from a secondary school in Tumpat, Kelantan. He suffered from neck and back injuries after he was beaten up by five of his seniors at the hostel. Other reports told similar gruesome story - a form 3 student from a secondary school in Bandar Bukit Besi, Dungun, Terengganu was bullied by five students from the same school and injured a few areas in his body; a form four student from Sek. Men. Teknik Teluk Intan, Perak was also beaten up by 10 senior students in the hostel which caused him a broken right arm and bruises on his body and face; and victim Muhammad Afiq Qusyairi Baharuddin, 13 years old, from Sek. Men Agama (SMA) Al-Maidah Addinia, Kuala Lipis, Pahang, was almost paralysed after being bullied. All of these incidents happened not long after the shocking death of a bully victim, Muhammad Farid Ibrahim, a student of a religious school in Negeri Sembilan.

What are the causes of these violent cases? The reports described small matters, such as being accused of stealing clothes and other valuable things, reluctant to lend a telephone or kettle, or small argument during football games, as being the causes. However, how would these trivial factors lead to the brutal, vicious punches and kicks? I believe that other factors have greater role in inducing the bullying, and since to date there has been no study done on this problem in Malaysia, the proposed study may be able to fill the gap in the crime literature.

### Bullying Defined

Bullying occurs when there is a power difference between the bully and the victim. It happens when a child who is older, stronger or more powerful socially, inflicts harms upon weaker peers. Bullying includes a wide range of behaviours : name calling, extortions, physical violence, slander, isolation, spreading rumours, damage to other property and verbal intimidation (Smith and Sharp 1994). However, not all taunting, teasing and fighting among students constitutes bullying. According to Olwens (1997), two persons who possess approximately equal strength (physical or psychological) and are at fight or involved in a quarrel is not considered as bullying.

### The Bullying Phenomenon – An Overview

Why does bullying occur? Numerous researches concur that typical bullies are often characterized by impulsive, a strong need to dominate other, a large circular of friends who share the similar violence values and support them and have little empathy for the victims (see, for example, Pulkkinen and Trembly 1992). Evidence also suggest that bullies tend to be low-academic achievers, experience negative peer relations and negative teacher-relation, and are at least of average popularity (Agness

2000). Contrary to the popular belief, bullies do not suffer from poor self-esteem. They have demonstrated unusually little anxiety and insecurity (Olweus 1997). Bullies also generally come from broken families, or have been abused by the parents during their childhood (Patterson 1986). On the other hand, researches on peer victimization reveal that the typical victims are more anxious, vulnerable, lack of self-confident, afraid of confrontation and have fewer friends. They are often smaller, weaker, and are likely to be depressed and over-protected by parents (Olweus 1997).

An additional factor that could explain the increased bullying is personal morality, which can be determined through the extent of bullies' knowledge of moral, because many people do not engage in crime because they believe it is wrong ethically and morally. The decline in attitude that crime is wrong has been a leading factor to the growth of crime (Becker 1995).

The bullying experience is so common that it is thought of as simply a rite of passage or relatively harmless behaviour that helps to build young people's characters. Yet, report after report has shown that bullying has long-lasting harmful effects, for both victims and bullies. For example, in 2002, the American Medical Association warned that bullying is a public-health issue with long-term mental-health consequences that require more resources and attention in the future. It also believed that bullying is much more widespread and harmful than anyone knew.

No country is free from this bullying phenomenon. The extent of the problem is measured by prevalent studies conducted around the world. The Malaysian Crime Prevention Foundation Vice-Chairman, Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye (2004), believed that the bully statistics were underestimated as some schools might not have gone to the police to protect their reputation, or to avoid complication. However, if we look at the following shocking statistical evidence, the danger in allowing the bullying problem to go unchecked is too great to be ignored:

- In the U.S, every year, according to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 4.8 million students are threatened physically, verbally or emotionally by other students. As many as 7% of eight-graders stay home at least once a month because of bullies. Everyday, 160,000 students skip school fearing they will be the targets;
- In the U.K, every year, at least 16 children commit suicide, 19,000 children attempted suicide and 2 million children see their doctors for physical and psychological problems related to bullying (Salmon 1998);
- Wang et al. (2002) found that in Hong Kong, 17% of the secondary students admitted bullying other students, while 18.3% reported that they had been the victims; and
- Rigby (1995) reported that 1 in 6 students in Australian schools reported being bullied at least once a week. Similar situations were found in schools in Canada, Scandinavia and Ireland (see, for example, Boulton and Underwood, 1992).

### **THE EFFECTS OF BULLYING FROM THE ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE**

Bullying and victimization in the school have been universally recognized as damaging psychological, social and even physical development of children. Unchecked bullying leads to even greater human and economic costs. Victims are likely to have poorer health, more frequently contemplated suicide, often absent from school and suffer from depression, social dysfunction, anxiety and insomnia (Rigby 1996). Research on abuse within family consistently demonstrates that the abused are likely to become abusers when they have family of their own, leading to the suggestion that children who are bullied are more likely to become bullied themselves. Garbarino suggested that the victims bully to "compensate for their experiences of victimization at home" (1996 : 193). According to Poway (California) Unified School District, if each of its 32,000 students attends school just one more day per year, the district state funding will increase to US\$ 1 million. Given that 160, 000 American students skip school every day, there is a clear macroeconomic rationale for investing in program to curb the bullying problem.

Being bullied repeatedly can result in emotional distress, which, in turn, diminish the capacity to learn, increase social isolation and, thus, encourage dropping out from school (Craig and Peplar 1996). A 14

years study conducted by researchers from University of Oregon's Department of Economics established that the victims of bully attain fewer years of post secondary education, are less likely to be employed after graduation, and for those who work, earn lower income. Further, the paper demonstrates that low self-esteem and poor attitude in high school are significant predictors of the degree supervision under which individuals ultimately work. These, and other relationship in the paper suggest that real education and economic consequences of bullying in the U.S have been previously ignored or at least under-reported.

In addition, children who have been bullies during school years have a much higher chance of later committing crime acts. Olweus (1993) reported in one study that 60% of students identified as bullies in grade 6-9 had a criminal conviction by the age of 24, and 40% had at least 3 convictions. Pelleran (2005) estimates that it costs US\$85,000 to US\$125,000 a year to house a juvenile in a treatment program. If that same child goes to prison as an adult, it will cost US\$45,000.

In the same vein, high levels of engagement in peer bullying is associated with delinquent behaviour in Australian teenagers. The aggressive bullies at schools tend to grow as aggressive adults who have committed higher rates of criminal activities, marital violence, child abuse and sexual harassment, alcohol and chemical dependency (Haemaelaeninen and Pulkkinen 1995). Surprisingly, adults who admit for being bullies at school frequently experience a greater degree of depression (Dietz 1994). Depression has been estimated as one of the most costly mental health disorders in Western countries.

Early intervention into bullying is identified as part of national crime prevention strategies in countries such as Australia, UK, and US. Growing public awareness of bullying and its social consequences has led to many research attempted to better understand the bullying phenomenon. Many of these studies are social studies; determined to study the physical and psychological of the victims and bullies. Yet, an economic approach is a simple method that helps us understand better a surprisingly large fraction of the regularities that we observe in bullying. Indeed, the earliest theory in crime literature, the Classical School of Criminological Thought believes that humans are rational, reasoning individuals who weigh and control their actions and destinies. Beccaria (1764) believed that crime was a reflection of materialism and represented the criminal's attempt to improve his/her material condition. Beccaria also believed that human behaviour is a result of individual choices motivated by two substances: pleasure and pain. People will choose the behavioural alternative that maximize the amount of pleasure and reduce the amount of pain.

The similarity of the above theory with the economic approach is uncanny. A nobel laureate, Becker (1968) had designed a model that assumes criminals are rational individuals acting in their own self-interest. The criminals, or potential criminals, base their decision to commit a crime by comparing the benefits and costs of engaging in crime.

The benefits from crime can be categorized into two: monetary gains (for example, stolen car in property crime) and psychic benefits. In term of bullying, it is a satisfaction gain from the pain of their victims as discovered by Olweus (1997).

The costs of crime also consist of two parts: the forgone wages from legitimate activities and the probability of being arrested and punished. Since the bullies are still at school, we assume that the first cost is irrelevant in this study.

Economists generally believe that criminals are risk-takers, and for them the certainty of punishment is more important than the magnitude of the punishment. Thus, the likelihood of being caught and convicted can act as a deterrent. Most bullying cases never result in an arrest. If the bullies believe that their bullying actions will be reported to authorities, there is a probability that the bullying cases will drop. However, studies confirm that many victims and witnesses of bullying are terrified and fail to tell teachers or even parents (see, for example, Sampson: <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/mime/open.pdf?Item=272>). Among reasons why bullying cases are under-reported are : fearing of retaliation; bullied are convinced that the teachers are uninterested of solving the cases; and intervention from parents. These will make the situation worse. Thus, this study aims to design the mechanism that encourages victims or witnesses to report the bullying.

Ironically, many of bullies arrested in violent bullying cases are not prosecuted. The school administrations normally pardon the crime, or reduce the penalties. Economic approach says that if the

punishments are reduced if convicted, the probability of crime incurred will increase. Crime reduction can, therefore, occur through reducing the benefits of crime or raising the probability of being caught, or the costs of punishment conditional upon being caught. Consequently, this study intends to investigate whether the actions taken by the authorities in dealing with convicted bullies are following strictly to the school's rules and regulation.

However, the levels of crime are not just determined by the level of deterrence. Indeed, in most economic studies, deterrence is important, but it can explain at best a tiny fraction of the overall level of crime. In principle, social factors can explain a significantly greater amount of crime. Freeman (1992) found that youths in poverty are most likely to get involved in crime, arrested and convicted than youths who are wealthier. Astonishingly, he also discovered that church attendance is a particularly strong predictor of the level of crime. Glaeser and Sacerdote (1999) showed the most important variable which explains the increasing crime rates in the U.S. was the percentage of single parent families in the population. The alarmingly growing number of divorced couple and illegitimate children are the root cause of most violent crimes. In 1994, William Niskanen, the chairman of the Cato Institute, reported that a 1% increase in births to single mothers appears to increase the violent crime rate by 1.7%. Of course it is not the babies who are committing the crimes; illegitimacy is a proxy for a general decline in moral values and attitudes toward authority. As Charles Murray portrayed in the Wall Street journal, "illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time – more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare or homelessness because it drives everything else" (in Becker 1995).

Case and Katz (1991) found that the youths' tendencies to be engaged in crime increase substantially when peers are also engaging in crime. This study echoes the findings by the social studies, for example, Pulkkinen and Trembly (1992) where bullying is normally committed by a gang, not an individual.

Another simple force that explains the increase in crime by youths from economic perspective is teenagers may discount more heavily in assessing the costs and potential punishment. Punishment is something that will come in the future; therefore, groups that more heavily discount the future will be more likely to be engaged in crime. Drug users, through observations, tend to commit higher rate of crimes because the cost of drug use comes later. Since many young students smoking cigarettes, which contain nicotine, which is more harmful than drugs, it is interesting to see whether heavy smoking leads to violence bullying.

In short, the economic perspective sees crime as evitable. It is a result in part, at least, of public policies regarding to among others, education, poverty and income distribution. Thus, to improve the crime rate is by improving those policies. However, to achieve this, the root of the problem needs to be understood first.

### **A RESEARCH PROSPECT**

The gruesome pictures presented earlier show that the impact of bullying in the school years can extend beyond the bully and victim to the peer group, school and community at large in the form of criminality and mental and physical health problems. Like other crimes, a theoretical framework of bullying from the economics perspective is difficult to construct. Despite its popularity, very few children and adults are actually identified with it. Thus, instead of probing for better understanding, it ends up creating an enigma out of a child so labelled.

The scenario presented above is enough to warrant a deeper insight of bullying problem so that effective prevention and intervention could be designed and implemented. Taking the issues of bullying is going to bring considerable economic rewards, as well as to the society as a whole. Intervening to reduce the rate of bullying may in the long term not only reduce violence in the school community, but also prevent the development of anti-social behaviours in the bullies, and reduce the long term emotional disturbance in the victims.

Thus, a study is proposed on this issue with the hope not only to identify the underlying factors that contribute to the rate of bullying in schools, but also to critically analyse the consequences of bullying on the psychological, emotional and mental health of both bullies and victims, not to mention the

economic prospect of the country. The far-reaching goal is to develop appropriate and effective anti-bullying mechanisms for secondary schools which can as a stimulus for a movement in calling for educational revolutions. In effect, safer, less violent secondary schools communities will be created, which are conducive to greater educational and vocational attainment by their students.

It is suggested that the scope of the research includes various types of schools that are available in Malaysia. The data collected would be able to give a rich description of the investigated phenomena from different perspectives. National-type schools like the Chinese and Tamil schools, would offer descriptions and attributes from the, perhaps, racial and background perspectives. Data from the religious schools, on the other hand, would inform the occurrence of bullying despite the religious education and upbringing inculcated in the students.

Since the research aims to assess the nature and extent of bullying among their students, the proposed methodology of gathering information would be the modified Peer Relations Assessment Questionnaire (Rigby 1997). The questionnaire will be used to assess perceptions of the nature and extent of student violence, bullying, student engagement in violent behaviour towards peers, and victimisation (from the perspectives of parents, teachers and students). Other constructs central to the study will be measured by researcher-designed (or modified) instruments. Pupils conduct, performance and school attendance will be measured by teacher ratings. Basically, the information is needed to design effective anti-bullying mechanisms. The data will be analysed statistically using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (version 12.0) for reporting frequencies and disaggregating information. Since the study will also look at the bullying from the economic perspective, a simple model of the incentives faced by individuals to commit bullying will be constructed, and the data will be gathered from the official reported crime statistics as well as self-reports. The model econometric analysis will then be employed to determine the determinants of bullying rate.

## CONCLUSION

Reports of violent crimes are currently on the rise. It is very daunting that this increase in violent behaviour has also been accompanied by a decrease in the average age for violent offenders. In addition, it seems apparent that the victims of youth violence are usually other young people. As with other damaging behaviours, prevention for aggression and violence should begin as early as possible. Bullying may be one early indicator of a group of behaviours that contribute to the development of antisocial and/or aggressive behaviour patterns in late adolescence and adulthood. A research is proposed with the aim of preventing the development of aggressive and antisocial behaviours in adolescents by addressing bullying in the schools. By understanding the underlying factors contributing to the increasing rate of bullying would be able to prevent the consequences of bullying on the psychological, emotional and mental health of both bullies and victims.

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