

Reducing the Incidence of Bullying and Improving Elementary School Performance:

Enhancing Effectiveness of School Programs

Longitudinal Cohort Study on the Filipino Child
UNFPA-OPS Policy Notes Series_No. 2



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A recent national baseline study shows high lifetime prevalence of violence against children and raised concern on the negative long-term impact of such violence on children's mental, emotional, and physical development (CWC and UNICEF, 2016). These consequences particularly affect those receiving repeated aggression of any form. The perpetrators of violence as well as those who witness violent acts are not spared these adverse consequences (Wolke, et al., 2001; Wolke and Lereya, 2015; Woods et al., 2009). The Longitudinal Cohort Study on the Filipino Child¹ (Cohort Study) provides additional national data on current prevalence of violence on children. Experiences with violence that were reported by the children included violence from friends and classmates, from parents, from other adults, and witnessing violence at home. This Policy Note focuses on violence on children by friends or classmates and its current effects on school performance of children experiencing such

¹The Longitudinal Cohort Study on the Filipino Child is a collaborative undertaking of government agencies, development partners and demographic researchers aimed to examine how the lives of Filipinos are changed in the course of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda (OPS,2018). The research strategy is to prospectively observe a nationally representative sample of 4,952 Filipinos from age 10 through 24 (2016-2030) and collect data on significant life course milestones such as puberty, school completion, labor force entry/exit, sexual activity initiation and other reproductive health events, and marriage. Data collected at each survey round are analyzed to determine the interplay of child, household and community attributes that explain various health and socio-demographic outcomes among the cohort. A qualitative segment was added to the study on a non-probability sample of marginalized children (adolescents aged 15-19 who identify themselves as lesbians or gays, 10-year old children with disabilities and those residing in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDA), armed conflict areas and indigenous communities) outside of the cohort sample(OPS, 2019). Study findings will inform policy decisions, program design and service delivery efforts.

violence. In this way, this Policy Note adds to the discussion on bullying in schools, which is a continuing concern.

The Cohort Study

Data from the baseline survey among 10-year-old children show close to 45% of the cohort reported being hurt by words or actions done by friends, while physical violence was experienced by 38% of those surveyed (Table 1). There are higher rates for the Visayas for both types of violence compared to Luzon and Mindanao. Boys were also found to have experienced a higher rate of physical violence from friends or classmates compared to girls (OPS, 2018).

The likelihood of experiencing peer violence was found to be positively associated with being male and living in the Visayas compared to living in Luzon². Identifying as a member of indigenous people (IP) was negatively associated with the likelihood of experiencing peer violence (possibly indicating some level of protection being provided within the IP family/community), while residing in areas with flooding in the last 3 years (possibly a proxy for risky or stressful environments) increased the risk (OPS, 2018). For disadvantaged children, being bullied adds another layer of stress to their circumstances. In the qualitative component of the Cohort Study (OPS, 2019), which focused on marginalized children and youth¹, bullying among peers was reported in all the marginalized sectors. Data from in-depth interviews of 10-year-old marginalized children and focus group discussions among 15-19-year-old lesbians and gays reveal poignant stories of their experiences with and ways of handling bullying. Some of them fought back against the bullies while some did not report the bullying for fear of retaliation. Teachers, parents, classmates, friends, and siblings were among those mentioned as people they sought help from when bullied. Bullying from adults/family/teachers was also experienced by these children except among the IP children. While this appears consistent with the quantitative results on IP children, possible under-reporting of experiences with violence may also come into play.

Figure 1 below shows the impact of experiencing peer violence on school outcomes. Children who reported physical violence from their peers were less likely to have higher grades, more likely to miss classes, and less likely to aspire for a college education.

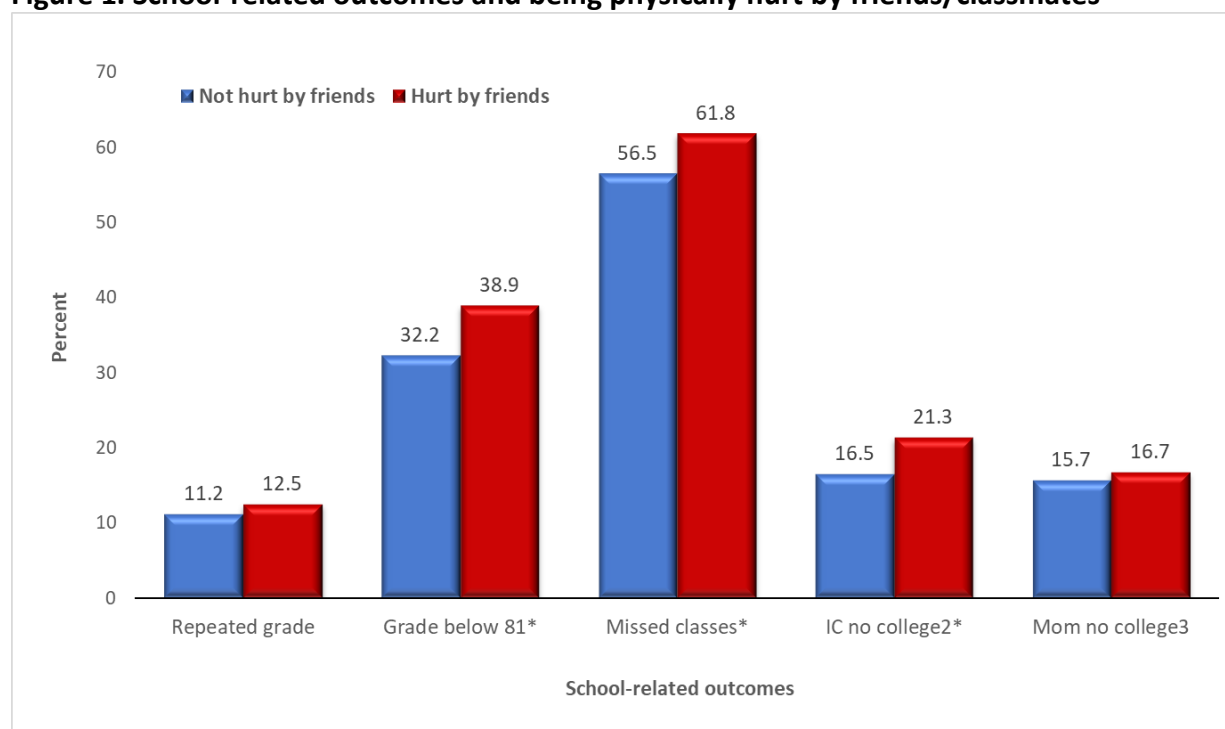
²Data from the Cohort Study Baseline Survey (OPS, 2018) reveal that children in the Visayas and Mindanao are disproportionately more disadvantaged compared to their Luzon counterparts in various child development indicators. Households in the Visayas and Mindanao have lower socio-economic status relative to those in Luzon (e.g., more households in V/M that are 4Ps beneficiaries and from GIDA; Visayas has the most number of communities with poverty alleviation programs).

Table 1. Types of reported violence on children by friends or classmates by island group¹

Type of Reported Violence	Luzon	Visayas	Mindanao	All
Reported that friends or classmates hurt their feelings ^c % (n=4,820)	44.9	48.7	41.1	44.6
Reported being physically hurt by friends/classmates ^{a,c} % (n=4,823)	37.2	44.1	36.8	38.5
Reported that parents hurt their feelings ^{a,b} % (n=4,823)	17.1	24.3	27.8	21.4
Reported being forcefully hurt by parents ^{a,b} % (n=4,817)	9.3	23.8	24.3	16.2
Reported being physically hurt by adults ^{a,b,c} % (n=4,764)	18.8	30.7	23.6	22.4
Has witnessed any physical violence at home ^{a,b} % (n=4,815)	22.2	38.1	36.0	29.0

¹Test for significant differences in weighted proportions was based on Pearson chi-square test for independence

^a Significantly different at $p < 0.05$ between Luzon and Visayas; ^b Luzon and Mindanao; ^c Visayas and Mindanao

Figure 1. School-related outcomes and being physically hurt by friends/classmates¹

¹Predicted rates adjusted for relevant child, household, and community characteristics. Excluded in graph: being in school since about 98% were in school.

²IC does not aspire for nor believe he/she can attain college education.

³Mother/caregiver does not aspire for college education for IC nor believes IC can attain such level.

*Significantly different between not hurt by friends and hurt by friends at $p < 0.05$.

Policy Responses to Bullying in Schools

The Department of Education (DepEd) institutionalized its response to the problem of bullying in schools with the issuance of the Child Protection Policy (Department of Education Order No. 40, s. 2012). The policy included protocols on how to protect school children against violence, bullying, and other forms of abuse. These policies were refined further with the passage of Republic Act 10627 or the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 and the issuance of its implementing rules and regulations (IRR). DepEd reiterated the need to adopt and enforce anti-bullying policies with Department Order No. 5, s. 2017.

The IRR of RA 10627 provides for a broad range of prevention and intervention programs to address bullying. The prevention programs may include school- and classroom-wide initiatives, involvement of parents, and monitoring of students who are vulnerable as victims or perpetrators for the purpose of early intervention. In addition, there is also increasing incidence of bullying based on one's gender identity (HRW, 2017). Studies on gender development argue that children's gender identities are established early in life. Slaby and Frey (1975) as cited in Martin (2001) showed that children as young as 2-3 years old may start being conscious of gender identities and can already exhibit sex-specific behaviors at that age (Ruble & Martin, 1998). As these children grow, their concept of gender identity becomes more stable. As such, gender-based bullying among children at ages 10-11 should also be given appropriate attention. While the IRR of RA 10627 has specific provisions for the protection against gender-based bullying, it is crucial that the rights of children and early adolescents, most especially the marginalized, are adequately addressed. This type of gender-based violence already hinges on discrimination and may have serious and lifelong effects on the lives of both victims and perpetrators (HRW, 2017).

There is a need to implement intervention programs that are designed to address underlying issues such as why do students bully each other, why particular students are bullied, and the effects of bullying on the victim, perpetrator and even the bystander. Programs may include counseling, life skills training, education and other activities that will enhance the psychological, emotional, and psychosocial well-being of both the victim and the bully. Such programs may involve activities that not only directly address acts of bullying but also focus on formative and corrective measures and provide opportunities to practice pro-social behavior. Moreover, intervention strategies need to target all parties, such as bullies, victims, bystanders, parents, school personnel, service providers and all other persons who may be affected by the bullying incident. Based on the Cohort Study results, the marginalized children and youth may be particularly vulnerable to bullying and must be adequately covered by these anti-bullying initiatives. Likewise, school administrators, teachers, parents, and other responsible government agencies must be equipped with gender-sensitivity training to make them more effective in addressing bullying particularly gender-based violence.

Moving Forward

The current policy framework provides considerable leeway and responsibility at the level of schools to address and prevent the problem of bullying. It would then be important to monitor school level adherence to the requirements of the law. It would also be important that adequate support mechanisms are available at the school level for teachers and guidance counselors.

As being in a minority or marginalized group (such as those with disabilities, LGBTQIA, ethnic minorities, and those in remote or conflict areas) has been found to expose children to the greater possibility of bullying, it is important that school programs are in place and being implemented to protect children in marginalized sectors from instances of bullying by other classmates, teachers or parents.

As schools implement programs to address bullying, DepEd needs to assess the effectiveness of these school programs. Effective programs are likely to be ones which capture the many dimensions of prevention and intervention measures suggested in the IRR of RA 10627. Among these dimensions that may be given added emphasis are those that help bullies to acquire skills to control their violent tendencies, and to help victims to build resilience and coping skills.

In line with this, DepEd can promote and enforce programs intended to develop age-appropriate life skills and inculcate personal safety lessons among children at all levels of education in both private and public schools. This will enable children to learn safety measures against peer violence and acquire knowledge on how to best deal with peer violence either as victims or witnesses to such. Aside from that, the promotion of age-appropriate life skills will also help those children with violence potential to manage their emotions and control their anger.

Addressing the issue on peer violence among children must also encourage active participation from children themselves. DepEd, the school administrators, teachers, staff, and parents must work together in empowering children to raise their voice and take part in solving this problem.

The organization of peer support groups and a conducive environment for these organizations to grow may also be an additional measure that DepEd can encourage schools to undertake. These support groups will serve as platforms for children to participate in the formation of social norms and practices that could minimize and discourage violent behaviors among their peers. Similarly, DepEd should extend the necessary services for the promotion of these peer support groups such as the provision of guidance counselors, faculty-advisers, and meeting places, among others.

It is also recommended that DepEd strengthens its implementation of providing training through seminars or workshops for school administrators, teachers, and staff in identifying

incidence of peer violence among children and proper handling of such situation. This will enable schools to be pro-active in minimizing and eliminating peer violence among children and become more sensitive and responsive to their needs. When schools and their administrators are being pro-active, it encourages participation from children in addressing peer violence.

The evaluation of the effectiveness of school programs should not only look at the effect on reducing the incidence of bullying, but also on the improvement of schooling outcomes not only among the victims and perpetrators but of the entire schooling population as well. It can be hypothesized that the incidence of bullying, if pervasive, disrupts school activities and reduce learning opportunities. Reducing the incidence of bullying allows everyone to focus on learning.

It is recommended that DepEd publish a compendium of “best practices” among schools with effective prevention and intervention programs as models for replication and scaling up. Such best practices are those that demonstrate effectiveness in reducing not only the incidence of bullying but also in improving schooling outcomes for all. One way of achieving this policy recommendation is to conduct studies among schools using appropriate methods to gather information regarding the best practices for preventing and managing peer violence among children. By disseminating these best practices through publication, it would provide the channels by which experiences in handling peer violence could be shared across various schools from different backgrounds.

Lastly, a national policy against discrimination must be enacted to address gender-based violence not only among children but also for everyone. At the moment, the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression (SOGIE) Bill or also known as the Anti-Discrimination Bill is still pending in Congress after the House of Senate failed to act on it during the 17th Congress (Abad, 2019; Luci-Atienza, 2020). The enactment of this bill will guarantee equal protection of all people with different sexual orientations and gender identities regardless of age. For LGBT children, this proposed law will provide them with safe spaces where they can freely express themselves without the fear of being attacked or bullied because of their gender identity.

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