Letter to the Editor

Let’s prevent school violence, not just bullying and peer victimization: A commentary on Finkelhor, Turner, and Hamby (2012)

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The present commentary welcomes David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, and Sherry Hamby’s (2012) comments published on the April issue of Child Abuse & Neglect, pointing-out the many conceptual difficulties with the term bullying. Nevertheless, we claim we should expand the concept of bullying to the wider notion of school violence, rather than focusing on peer victimization and aggression, as proposed by the above authors.

Finkelhor, Turner, and Hamby (2012) acknowledged the groundbreaking work of Scandinavian psychologist Dan Olweus on bullying (Olweus, 1993), and the burgeoning research that have since focused on this serious problem. The authors remind us of Olweus’ original criteria to define bullying (incidents involving repeated aggressive acts by peers, in a relationship in which there is a power imbalance), but correctly state that, despite its conceptual importance to research and intervention, the terminology has several limitations.

In summary, Finkelhor et al. (2012) criticisms on bullying reiterate that: (1) it excludes situations of serious violent acts which are not repetitive; (2) students consider any act of violence they suffered as bullying, demonstrating that the technical definition is discrepant with usage; (3) power imbalance is difficult to define and, in some specific cases it is not a defining criteria for the phenomenon; (4) some isolated violent situations may be even worse than bullying (e.g. gun possession); and (5) the term became associated with the school environment, excluding other context in which peer problems are as important. In sequence, Finkelhor et al. (2012) provide us an alternative which consists on the investigation of peer victimization and peer aggression, defined as harm caused by other persons (in the case of bullying, peers acting outside the norms of appropriate conduct), or acts intended or perceived as intended to cause harm.

We agree with the criticism on bullying, and would like to reinforce the position defended by Finkelhor et al. (2012) that there is yet to be consensus among bullying researchers on its precise definition. This lack of rigorous standard raises enormous methodological difficulties, such as we encountered when assessing victimization/aggression among 400 students from two economically vulnerable public schools in Brazil, using our questionnaire which uses the period within the last six months as a time frame, and the alternatives never, once or twice, 3–4 times, 5–6, 7 or more (Stelko-Pereira, Freitas, & Williams, 2010). If we considered bullying every time a student chose 7 or more for one alternative (e.g. being called names), as well as once or twice for another (I was punched or slapped), 70% of the students met criteria for bullying victimization. In contrast, when we chose to use scores above one standard-deviation from the sample mean score, only 13% of students met bullying victimization criteria. This lack of precision surpasses research methodological questions, as it also impacts on the number of students who may be referred to health-related support.

Rather than adopting Finkelhor et al.’s (2002) alternative of peer victimization and aggression instead of bullying, our own answer has been to focus on school violence, instead of bullying, as the former broadens the scope, as well as refines its multiple dimensions. We do not adopt the definition of violence chosen by Finkelhor (2011), as “acts of physical force.
intended to cause pain”, but the broader WHO definition (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002), which may be self-inflicted, interpersonal or collective, as well as physical; sexual; psychological; or involving deprivation or neglect in its nature:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (p. 5).

Although we are cognizant that there is not a universally accepted definition of school violence, our conceptual model (Stelko-Pereira & Williams, 2010) defends that when referring to school violence, one should specify: (a) the location of the violent incidents (not only the school, but the home to school trajectory, for example); (b) the persons involved in the incident(s), such as students, teachers, staff, parents or others; (c) the type of role involved (e.g. victim, offender, witness or mixed role); (d) the most prominent nature of the violent incident (physical, psychological, sexual, negligence and/or property destruction); (e) its severity or frequency (which range from incivilities which are not considered criminal, to very severe and less frequent acts, such as gun possession); and (f) special categories such as bullying and cyberbullying.

One advantage of studying school violence is the fact that bullying is very much related to school climate, quality of teacher-student relationship, level of student’s supervision, and student risk behavior (Aspy et al., 2012; Battistich & Hom, 1997). A second advantage is that bullying will not be prevented unless all involved in the school community understand what is socially appropriate, and the role of modeling, in ways so that students, parents and teachers respect each others’ rights and responsibilities. Finally, the model allows for specific target behaviors which are indeed very serious, and need special interventions, such as drug trafficking and physical assault.

References


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