

## **BACKGROUND VARIABLES AND PREVAILENCE OF BULLYING AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BAYELSA STATE, NIGERIA**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the extent to which background variables contribute towards prevalence of bullying among secondary school students in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Three hypotheses were formulated and using a combination of stratified and simple random sampling techniques, 640 secondary school students were selected from ten schools in five out of the eight local government areas (LGAs) of the state. The ex-post facto design was employed and data was collected using a questionnaire titled, Student Bullying Index (SBI). Accruing data was analyzed using Independent t-test and the result indicated significant differences in bullying among students on the bases of school location, parental socio-economic status (SES) and family type. The conclusion is that there is a high incidence of bullying in the area under study and because bullying has the capacity to place unnecessary strain and stress on students, parents and the educational system, if left unchecked, the following action plan is recommended for school guidance counsellors: Advocacy for good governance; for small sized classes and for improved infrastructure and school facilities, in order to keep students maximally engaged.

**Key words: Bullying, victimization, physical attack, intimidation.**

### **Introduction**

One social issue that has received considerable attention in many parts of the world is that of bullying (Owens, Shute & Sleer, 2000). It is a common experience among school children, with 10 to 15 percent experiencing it, consequently, affecting the general school climate and the right of students to learn in a safe environment (Peppler & Craig, 2000). Bullying is an intentional aggressive behaviour that involves the use of force or coercion to abuse or intimidate others; it could be verbal harassment or threat or physical assault or coercion that may be directed repeatedly towards particular victims, perhaps for reasons of

class, race, religion, ethnic group, place of origin, gender, sexuality, appearance, behaviour or ability (Wikipedia, 2013).

Bullying, therefore takes physical and verbal forms. Physical form includes, fighting, punching, pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking, beating, chocking, knock on the head, vandalization, etc. (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). While the verbal form include, name calling, persistent teasing, racist/bigotry remarks, gossip, spreading of rumours/lies, social exclusion, etc. (Mishna, 2003). It involves an imbalance of power, whereby a group of children can gang up against a victim or someone who is physically bigger or more aggressive intimidate, harass and victimize a target who is far weaker (Coloroso, 2002). It is the weaker, helpless, timid looking ones who are often targeted. It is all about power trip. The perpetrators seem to enjoy inflicting pain and fear on their victims.

Since human behaviour, according to Isangedighi (2007) is a product of heredity and environment, the background and other variables surrounding children and adolescent may therefore contribute significantly to aggressive tendencies in them. Such variables include age, gender, parental socio-economic status, school location (rural-urban), school environment, family type, family size and relationships (Denga & Akuto, 2004). Significant number of students are victimized by bullies and younger middle-school students are most likely to be affected (DeRosier, 2004). While direct bullying seem to increase during the elementary school years, peaks in middle/junior high school years and decline during the high school years (Olweus, 1993). Thus, the behaviour is more prominent among younger children than older ones (Sourander et al., 2000). However, while direct physical assault seems to decrease with age, verbal abuse seem to remain constant (Olweus, 1993).

School location (urban/rural) has also been linked to bullying. According to Olseh (2010) students in urban areas seem to have higher level of exposure to violence, substance use and abuse, perhaps aggravated by accessibility of information technology, social media,

news and entertainment media. Some studies have indicated that prevalence rates of bullying in urban schools vary from 24% (Fleshchler, Peskin, Tortolero & Markhan, 2006) to 72% (Hess & Atkins, 1998). Neft (2007) indicated that bullying rates were higher and more stable in urban schools than rural ones – bullies were classified as having aggressive, externalizing and hyperactive behaviour.

However, bullying in rural schools tends to be down played, perhaps because of the often times small size of student population, familiarity among students, familiarity and close interaction among staff and students. Hence, Olweus (1993) hypothesized that lack of communication about bullying contributes to the high prevalence rates in rural areas, which leads to lower awareness of its occurrence in the schools. According to Estell, Farmer and Cairns (2007) rural area schools have incidences of bullying, though such bullies are more likely to be rejected by their peers. Dulmus et al (2004) found that almost half of non-bullied students in rural schools felt sorry for those who were bullied and wanted to help. The study of Nansel et al (2001) showed that bullying was higher in rural than urban schools by 3% to 5%. Also, rural youths reported witnessing the most violent and experiencing the highest level of victimization at school (Carlson, 2006). Rural youths have also been reported to have significantly more externalizing and internalizing behaviour than urban youths (Robbins et al 2008). They are significantly more likely than the urban ones, to smoke, drink alcohol and have sexual intercourse (Atav & Spencer 2002). These may impact schooling and bullying experiences.

Adolescents from low socio-economic background may want to gain attention by performing antisocial actions, including bullying; being *tough* and *masculine* are high-status traits for lower socio-economic status boys (Coley, Morris & Hernandez, 2004). Schooling may be deficient in quality because of poor infrastructure, facilities, over-crowding and high

teacher/student ratio due to poor educational funding, resulting in aggressive behaviour because they are idle and not sufficiently engaged (Alagbu, Alagbu & Agwubuike, 2013).

Family settings and support systems are also associated with bullying and delinquency (Farrington, 2004). In polygamous family setting, jealousy and unfair rivalry are common, leading to suspicion and jealousy along mother-line; it becomes a matter of survival of the fittest, thus engendering bullying tendencies that might spill over into the school setting (Isangedighi, 2007). Single parents tend to have less time for their children, are less likely to use consistent discipline and have less parental control, hence unruly tendencies; moreover, the act of united parental support help to cushion the effects of the rigorous stressful school environment (Denga & Denga, 2007).

Parents of bullies are less skilled in discouraging such antisocial behaviour and in encouraging skilled behaviour than are parents of non-bullies and non- delinquents. Parental monitoring of adolescents is especially important in determining whether an adolescent becomes a bully (Coley et. al., 2004). Family discord and inconsistent and inappropriate discipline are also associated with bullying (Bor, McGee & Fagan, 2004). High levels of hostile sibling relationships and older sibling delinquencies have been linked with younger sibling bullying tendencies in both brother and sister pair (Slomkowski et al, 2001). Having delinquent peers greatly increases the risk of becoming a bully (Henry, Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 2001).

Victims of bullying have been found to have certain characteristics (Hanish & Guerra, 2004). They are usually perceived as the weaker ones, hence females experience higher levels of social and verbal bullying than their male counterparts (Popoola, 2005). Victims of bullies were found to have parents who were intrusive, demanding and unresponsive with their children (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Overly close and emotionally intense relationships between parents and sons might not foster assertiveness and independence but rather promote self-doubts and worries that are perceived as weaknesses when expressed in

male peer groups. Bullies' parents were more likely to be rejecting, authoritarian or permissive about their sons aggression whereas victims parents were more likely to be anxious and overprotective (Olweus, 1980).

Victims of bullies often suffer both short-term and long-term effects (Rigby, 2004). On the short-term, they can become very upset, afraid, ashamed, embarrassed, depressed, lose interest in school work, even avoid going to school or completely drop out (Hay, Payne & Chadwick, 2004). Some may even commit suicide. A case in point is the Canadian teenager, Rehtaeh Parsons, who was cyber-bullied and ended up committing suicide (Fox news, 2013). On the long-term, victims run the risk of developing severe psychological adjustment and emotional problems which may spill into adulthood (Rigby, 2004). Some males who were bullied during childhood were found to be more depressed and had lower self-esteem in their twenties than their counterparts who had not been bullied in childhood (Olweus, 1993). Also, bullies themselves have higher chances of becoming convicted criminals in their twenties than their non-bullying counterparts (Olweus, 1993).

It has often been suggested that aggressive motivation or the desire to inflict harm on others play a very common role in human behaviour. In fact, Freud and other famous psychologist/ethologist such as Konrad Lorenz had concluded that human beings possess a powerful built-in tendency to harm others (Baron & Richardson, 1994). However, most experts agree that aggression is influenced more strongly by a wide range of situational factors that evokes its occurrence, forms and targets than inherited tendencies (Anderson, Anderson & Deuser, 1996).

Bullies, often times, are pushed by the need to lord it over others. There is the drive to gain status, power and control over weaker ones. According to the drive theory, various biological as well as social needs push individuals towards satisfaction of these needs. Apart from biological needs – related behaviour, others include, social needs - behaviour such

as drive for stimulation, status, achievement, power and forming stable social relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thus behaviours that work in reducing the appropriate drive are strengthened and repeated while those that fail to produce the desired effect are weakened (Winn, 1995). In other words, aggression is more of a pull from without than a push from within.

Also, according to Maslow's (1970) needs hierarchy theory, human needs exist in a hierarchy. Only when lower-order needs are satisfied can higher-order needs be activated. (Baron, 2006). He referred to physiological, safety and social needs as deficiency needs which are so basic that they must be satisfied before growth needs can emerge. Above the social needs, he proposed, are the esteem needs, needs for self-respect, gain approval of others and achieve success. Finally, at the top, are the needs for self-actualization. The implication is that, failure to meet those basic deficiency needs as a result of poverty can result in frustration and lashing out on others, especially, those perceived as weaker. Hence, the circumstances surrounding the lives of some adolescents can push them into bullying.

Styles of parenting have also been shown to have impact on the adjustment and behaviour of adolescents. Parenting styles theory of Baumrind (1991) suggested that children from homes with authoritative style of parenting are often confident yet friendly and cooperative and tend to do well in school. In contrast, children from homes with rejecting/neglecting parenting style, often show unsettled patterns of behaviour, often engaging in various forms of anti-social behaviour that can get them into serious trouble. While children whose parents adopt authoritarian or permissive style tend to behave in socially incompetent ways, have poor communication skills and usually do not learn to control their behaviour, often lashing out on others around them.

Traditionally, there is the tendency to regard bullying as a normal part of childhood experience which children must learn to tolerate as one of the growing-pains in the

developmental process (Obidi, 1990). However, in recent times, it is believed to have assumed a dimension that has caused strife and stress as well as portend inherent danger to the smooth running of the educational system (Popoola, 2005). His study indicated high level of bullying among secondary school students in Western Nigeria (70.6%) and that attack on property was the most common, followed by physical victimization and social manipulation.

Indeed, bullying has moved even to a higher level, called cyber-bullying which tend to have made the covert aspect even worse (Ebochukwu, 2007). This involve the use of Information Technology whereby the internet and text messages are deployed to cause distress on bullied adolescents, occasionally, leading to suicide (Fox news, 2013; Olweus, Pepler & Rubin, 1991). Parents have become scared to send their children or wards to school because of bullying that seem to persist in schools. Thus, parents make choices of schools for their wards based on the school track record on bullying, among other things (Ebochukwu, 2007). Many schools have devised various means to checkmate bullying, all to no avail (Alagbu, Alagbu & Agwubuike, 2013). It is therefore a social menace that require urgent and continuous attention. The poser therefore is: do background variables significantly influence prevalence of bullying among secondary school students in Bayelsa State?

The purpose of the study therefore, is to establish the extent to which background variables such as school location, parental SES and family type contribute towards bullying among secondary school students in Bayelsa State.

### **Hypotheses**

- 1) School location does not make any significant difference on bullying among secondary school students.
- 2) There is no significant difference in bullying among secondary school students on the basis of their parental SES.

- 3) There is no significant difference in bullying among secondary school students on the basis of their family type.

## Methodology

The ex-post facto design was utilized for this study. The population of the study comprised all secondary school students in the state. Bayelsa State is located in the south-south of Nigeria, one of the core Niger Delta States. Administratively, it is divided into eight (8) local government areas (LGAs), most of these are located in the creeks of the Niger Delta. Apart from the state capital, Yenagoa, most of the rest of the towns and local government headquarters are mere big towns, lacking the infrastructure and facilities of cities. There are teachers, politicians, civil servants, contractors and the rest of the people are mostly fisherman and petty traders. Majority are of the Ijaw tribe and Christians though there are a good number of idol worshippers.

Five out of the eight LGAs were selected based on the level of urbanization since location of school (urban or rural) constituted one of the variables. Using a combination of stratified and simple random sampling techniques, two schools (1 urban and 1 rural) were selected from each LGA, then in each urban school twenty (20) students were drawn from each class (JSS 3 to SSS 3), totalling 80 per school, giving rise to 400 students from urban schools; in each rural school, twelve (12) students from each class (since these schools are less populated), totalling 48 per school, giving rise to 240 students from rural schools. The total sample drawn was 640 with ages ranging from 10 to 18.

The questionnaire used for collecting the data consisted of three (3) parts. Part 1, tagged personal Data Scale (PDS) sought information regarding students age, gender, family type, name and location of school. Part 2, Socio-economic status Scale (SESS), sought information of students' parental level of education, occupation, facilities at home, place and

type of residence. Part 3, a 10-item Bullying Index Scale (BIS), sought students' response to statements such as, *I feel I can always beat up those smaller in size than me, I make other student do my homework, I call some students' name because they deserve it etc.* Responses ranged from *always (A-3pt) sometimes (S-2pts) and never (N-1pt)*. The instrument was scrutinized and modified by two measurement experts who certified it adequate for the purpose of the study. Through the split-half procedure, reliability estimates of 0.71 and 0.68 were established for the parts 2 & 3 respectively.

The researcher, with the assistance of four graduate students and cooperation of the teachers and school principals, were able to administer the questionnaire and retrieve on the spot. The result of the analysis of the accruing data is presented on the following tables.

## Results

Hypothesis 1: School location does not make any significant difference on bullying among secondary school students. The independent variable is school location which was classified into two (urban and rural), while the dependent variable is bullying. To test this hypothesis, the bullying behaviour of students from urban and rural schools were compared using independent t-test analysis. The result is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Independent t-test analysis of the influence of school location on bullying of secondary students (N=640)

School location	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	t-value
Urban	400	20.47	3.98	4.57*
Rural	240	18.92	4.26	

\*Significant at .05 level, critical  $t=1.96$ ,  $df=638$ .

The result in Table 1 revealed that the calculated t-value of 4.57 is higher than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance with 638 of degrees of freedoms. The null

hypothesis was therefore, rejected. This implies that school location significantly influence bullying of secondary school students.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in bullying among secondary school students on the basis of their parental socioeconomic status.

The independent variable is parental socio-economic status which was classified into two (high and low), while the dependent variable is bullying. To test this hypothesis, bullying behaviour of students from high and low parental socio-economic status were compared using independent t-test analysis. The result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Independent t-test analysis of the influence of parental socio-economic status on bullying of students (N=640)

Parental economic status	Socio-	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	t-value
High		245	17.99	4.64	8.73*
Low		395	21.13	3.29	

\*Significant at .05 level, critical  $t=1.96$ ,  $df=638$ .

The result in Table 2 revealed that the calculated t-value of 8.73 is higher than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance with 638 of degree of freedom. The null hypothesis was therefore, rejected. This implies that parental socio-economic status significantly influence bullying of secondary school students.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in bullying among secondary school students on the basis of their family type which was classified into two (intact and broken), while the dependent variable is bullying. To test this hypothesis, bullying behaviour of students from intact and broken family types were compared using independent t-test analysis. The result is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:****Independent t-test analysis of the influence of family type on bullying of students****(N=640)**

Family type	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	t-value
Intact	387	17.99	5.01	8.30*
Broken	253	21.13	4.13	

\*Significant at .05 level, critical  $t=1.96$ ,  $df=638$ .

The result in Table 3 revealed that the calculated t-value of 8.30 is higher than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance with 638 of degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis was therefore, rejected. This implies that family type significantly influence bullying of secondary school students.

**Discussion:**

The result of hypothesis 1 revealed that school location significantly influence bullying among secondary school students, with urban schools student tending towards higher level of bullying than those in rural schools. This could be explained by the fact that students in urban school have higher exposure to social media, information technology, news and entertainment media which often times showcase a lot of violence in action and in words. There is also the possibility that bullying is lower in the rural schools because of the smaller sized student population and the familiarity and close interaction among staff and student. The study of Olseh (2010) corroborated that students in urban areas tend to have higher level of exposure to violence, substance use and abuse which can engender bullying. The study of Neft (2007), also showed higher and more consistent rates of bullying in urban schools than rural ones. Smaller sized student population encourages greater interaction between teachers and students as well as effective supervision by teachers that reduces the incidence of bullying (Ebochukwu, 2007).

Result of hypothesis 2 indicates a significant difference between students of low parental SES and those of high SES, in their levels of bullying. The bullying level is shown to be higher among students from low SES background than those from high SES background. This conforms with the findings of Coulton & Korbin (2004) which stated that adolescents from low SES background tend to gain attention through bullying and other forms of antisocial behaviour. Also, due to poverty, those of low SES can only afford to attend schools with poor infrastructures and facilities which are usually overcrowded with high student/teacher ratio, students not being sufficiently engaged, resulting in aggressive behaviour (Alagbu, Alagbu & Agwubuike, 2013). Moreover, poverty results in inability to meet basic human needs such as hunger and thirst. According to Maslow's (1970) theory, failure to meet basic physiological needs hinder progress to next stage which by implication can lead to frustration and lashing out on soft targets. Also, Anderson, Anderson & Deuser (1996) corroborated that aggression is strongly influenced by situation factors (which may include hunger, lack & want) that may evoke its occurrence, forms and targets.

Result of hypothesis 3 revealed higher incidence of bullying among students from broken homes than those from homes that are intact. This finding is hardly surprising because family setting that are fractured and discordant tend to provide a breeding ground for bullying and other aggressive behaviour as have been corroborated by several researchers and experts. Farrington (2004) asserted that family settings and support systems are associated with bullying and delinquency. Polygamous family settings engender rivalry, jealousy and survival of the fittest which result in bullying tendencies among adolescents, that might spill over to the school setting (Isangedighi, 2007). Single working parents may have less time and less parental control that may lead to unruly tendencies among children and such children tend to lash out on others, especially in situations where parents are embroiled in fighting and bickering (Denga & Denga, 2007).

Slomkowski et al (2001) attributed hostile sibling relationships to bullying tendencies while Bor et al (2004) associated bullying with family discord and inconsistent and inappropriate discipline. It could also be that the parenting styles in these broken homes are authoritarian or permissive or even neglecting/rejecting perhaps, because of some peculiar circumstances of such homes. The theory of Baumrind (1991) suggested that children of rejecting/neglecting style parenting often engage in various forms of anti-social behaviour that can get them into trouble while children from authoritarian or permissive style background have poor communication skills and usually do not learn to control their behaviours. Hence, they have the tendency to lash out on others and bully the weaker ones around them.

**Conclusion:**

This study revealed that bullying incidence is high in this particular area of study with mean bullying index ranging from 17.99 to 21.13 and an overall mean of 19.89 where the lowest possible mean is 10 and the highest is 30. However, the indication is that rates of bullying are higher in urban schools than rural ones, adolescents from lower parental SES tend to bully others more than those from higher parental SES and that students from broken homes have higher propensity to bully others than those from intact family background. Bullying, therefore remains a serious social issue in the school system that need to be properly addressed.

**Recommendation:**

Suffice it to say that as long as large numbers of adolescents who are by nature problematic, are brought together from different backgrounds and circumstance, to co-exist and learn side by side, the perceived weaker ones will always be preyed on by the ones who see themselves as more powerful. Howbeit, it should not be allowed to escalate to a proportion where strain and stress is placed on the students, parents, the educational system and society at

large. The following action plan is therefore recommended, particularly for the school counsellors. Counsellors should work in cooperation with the teachers and school administrators towards:

- Increased supervision and monitoring of students, especially in urban area schools
- More frequent personal-social counselling of students, especially, those who are known to be aggressive
- Advocacy for:
  - Improved infrastructure and school facilities in order to keep students maximally engaged.
  - Small sized classes to improve teacher/student ratio and for efficacy of teacher/student interaction.
  - Good governance that creates wealth which would trickle down to those of low SES to adequately meet their children's physiological needs that would reduce the frustrations of some of these adolescents.

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