**Self-efficacy and moral disengagement in**

**Mexican secondary school bullying bystanders**

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**Abstract**

*The role of bystander involvement in bullying has been widely researched and documented. Nevertheless, bystanders who stop the bullying and/or aid the victim are still the exception rather than the norm. Two factors that seem to be closely related with the decision by bystanders regarding whether to support the victim, are their levels of self-efficacy and moral disengagement. This study seeks to explore students’ perception of their own power to make a difference in bullying situations and their level of responsibility towards their victimized peers. These perceptions will be compared before and after a bystander focused intervention at a secondary school in Mexico in order to explore moral disengagement dynamics and the bystander roles that students can adopt to make a difference within their own behavioural repertoire. This intervention model could increase responsible bystander intervention and reduce bullying situations in schools. This paper presents preliminary findings from the pre-intervention data collection stage.*

**Introduction**

Bullying in schools is a persistent problem affecting many students worldwide (**Harel-Fisch *et al.****,* 2011**;** Smith, 2014). It is defined here, by the authors, as a type of aggression in which an individual is victimized intentionally and repeatedly over time by a more powerful peer or group of peers.

A number of researchers have focused on the role of bystanders when bullying incidents occur (Rigby, 2012; Salmivalli, 2014). The main three categories widely considered are: *reinforcer bystanders*, who reward the bully socially through laughing, making emboldening comments or serving as an approving audience; *passive bystanders*, who witness bullying but take no action; and *defenders*, who actively seek to stop bullies, help victims, or alert an adult. We need to be aware, however, that a particular student may play a different role at different times.

Bystander behaviour may have an important influence on the behaviour and feelings of bullies and victims. For the bully, laughter, encouragement and sometimes just having an audience, may reinforce the idea that bullying behaviour is not only tolerated, but valued. Without such reward and reassurance, bullies may be far less brazen (Tani *et al.,* 2003). Moreover, victims who have at least one defender, may experience less anxiety and depression than those who have no defenders (Sainio *et al.,* 2011). Nevertheless, whilst most students disapprove of bullying, there appear to be far more passive bystanders than defenders (Craig *et al.,* 2000; Pöyhönen *et al.,* 2012).

There are many factors which influence whether bystanders become reinforcer bystanders, passive bystanders, or defenders. Two important factors appear to be self-efficacy and moral disengagement. Self-efficacy refers to beliefs we have of our ability to deal effectively with a situation, whilst moral disengagement refers to the cognitive processes through which we avoid self-censure for engaging in activities that we consider to be morally wrong or for not taking actions that we consider to be morally right (Bandura, 2016).

Some researchers looking at the role of self-efficacy and moral disengagement in bullying have argued that students are more likely to become defenders if they thought they have a social responsibility toward their victimised peers and that their intervention could make things better, and less likely if they are able to detach themselves from the social guilt of allowing bullying to occur or feel that whatever they could do would make no difference. Pozzoli and Gini (2010) reported that the factors that led to defender behaviour were pro-victim attitudes, self-reliance and whether pupils think that they are expected to intervene or not. Barchia and Bussey (2011) argue that while empathy makes a big difference in terms of involvement, students often remain passive because of a perception that their involvement will have little effect. Thornberg and Jungert (2013) identified high moral disengagement as a predictor of reinforcing behaviour and high self-efficacy as a predictor of defending behaviour.

Some bystander programmes have stressed the importance of encouraging defender behaviour. These include the ‘Steps to Respect’ programme (Low & Van Ryzin, 2014), which has been successful in changing pro-bullying attitudes, and the ‘KiVa’ programme, which has demonstrated a decrease in bullying behaviour (Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012).

In the particular case of Mexico, bullying research is at a very early stage, and has mainly explored its prevalence and negative effects on the victim. Research that focuses on bystander involvement is of paramount importance in a society where high levels of violence are prevalent.

**The current study**

The first stage of the current study aimed to assess Mexican secondary school students’ perceptions of their own role as bystanders, their self-efficacy, and whether they morally disengage from bullying situations. A second stage will provide students with a bystander workshop addressing moral disengagement and self-efficacy, and will evaluate whether student perceptions on their own roles changed. Being a work in progress, only the first stage is addressed in this paper, which explores the following two questions:

• Do bystanders feel moral responsibility when witnessing bullying incidents (moral engagement)?

• Do bystanders think they have the power to alleviate bullying situations (self-efficacy)?

*Participants*

The subjects who participated in this study were students at a secondary schoollocated in a semi-urban area in Mexico. The whole student population (N = 186) completed a questionnaire. The sample comprised 90 male and 96 female students, aged from 12 to 15 years. 36 students also took part in a focus group meeting (18 male and 18 female).

*The Bystander Perception Questionnaire*

A questionnaire was designed consisting of four sections: Section I, demographic information; Section II, Likert scale items on observed bystander behaviour; Section III, Likert scale items on self-efficacy and moral disengagement; and Section IV, open ended items on reactions to hypothetical bullying situations. A Spanish version of the questionnaire was used.

*Focus groups*

The focus group questions were designed to gain information on student perceptions of their role as bystanders and their level of moral disengagement and self-efficacy. Each of the six groups comprised six participants. Two focus groups were carried out with first year students, two with second year students, and two with third year students. The questions asked in the focus group were the following:

• How do you feel when you see bullying happening?

• What do you think you should do when you see bullying happening?

• What do you think makes the difference between choosing to do this or choosing not to?

• How much do you think it is your place as bystanders to do something about bullying?

• Do you think you can make a difference in bullying situations as a bystander?

*Procedure*

Questionnaires were handed out to students after a half-hour session regarding what bullying is, what types of bullying exist and the roles that students play in bullying. This enabled all students to have some information about what the study meant by bullying and bystanders. Students who took part in the focus groups were list numbers 4, 8, 12, 16, 20 and 24 of every group to ensure random allocation of participants. Focus group meetings lasted from 15 to 20 minutes. The school counsellor was present at all the sessions.

**Findings**

The findings reported here are based on an analysis of section IV of the questionnaire (comprising open ended questions) and the focus group discussions. The data analysis here is qualitative in nature and is reported in terms of the key themes which emerged.

Moral disengagement

Generally speaking, students seemed to morally disapprove of bullying regardless of the type of aggression they were witnessing. Moral themes identified revolved around empathy, sense of justice and guilt. Students tended to feel discomfort when witnessing their peers’ pain, identified bullying as wrong and felt remorse over taking no action while being aware that a peer was being bullied. Only a few examples of moral disengagement were found, specifically victim blaming and moral justification. Victims were sometimes blamed for bullying because they were viewed as not being brave enough to defend themselves. Bullying was morally justified by ascribing to it the positive outcome of helping victims become stronger. Student perceptions in terms of five themes which emerged are illustrated by the following statements:

*Empathy.* “It’s bad because you wouldn’t like that to happen to you.”

*Sense of justice.* “It’s not fair because the victim hasn’t done anything to anyone.”

*Guilt.* “Often, when I’m watching I don’t do anything because I think it’s not my problem, but later on I feel bad, and I think, why didn’t I do anything?”

*Victim blaming.* “I guess that some people are just too submissive, they won’t stand up for themselves.”

*Moral justification.* “In the end, being bullied is going to build up our character, and that can give you courage. Because maybe in the future, in a job for example, you can’t go whining to a teacher, or your parents, you have to solve the issue there and then.”

Self-efficacy

Regarding what students felt they could do, some students reported mainly getting help from an adult, and some considered approaching victims and approaching bullies. Students also talked about factors that make them feel powerless, such as a fear of a social penalty, and a lack of confidence in their ability to make a difference. Even if students thought that they could act, they worried about antagonising the bullies and creating a problem for themselves. Additionally, there was a perception that bullying is a part of going to school and it always will be. These views in terms of five themes which emerged are illustrated by the following statements:

*Telling an adult.* “It’s best tell an adult, so they can figure it out.”

*Approaching the victim.* “I’d tell him not to let people do that to him, not to stay quiet, because then they’re going to latch on to him and never let him go as a victim.”

*Approaching the bully.* “Try to stop the bully, not by hitting them, but by using words, making them understand.”

*Fear of social penalty.* “If you do something, if you try to defend someone, then you know you will be the next victim.”

*Powerlessness.* “The worst part is to see it and knowing that there is nothing you can do about it. It’s just the way it is.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This section reports three main trends that emerged from a preliminary analysis of the pre-intervention data, which need to be viewed as tentative.

Mexican secondary school students in this study are generally not morally disengaged from bullying situations. Only a handful of students did not report feeling empathy, outrage at the injustice of the situation, or guilt. However, there are some common beliefs that help students disengage from the situation, particularly revolving around victims being weak and needing to learn to defend themselves.

Regarding self-efficacy, students believe that they could intervene in bullying situations by alerting adults or approaching victims and bullies. Nevertheless, they seldom carry out these behaviours, as there is a generalized idea of powerlessness and a strong fear of negative consequences if they do something. Students believe they will be isolated or chastised if they challenge the order of things in which there will always be bullies and there will always be victims.

Students would appear to need to learn strategies to intervene that will not make them feel like they are putting themselves at risk, physically or socially. This could become easier as part of a group-wide intervention at schools that empowers students to aid victims in different ways. Students could then choose a defending strategy that is consistent with their personalities so that they are comfortable intervening. It is also important that students perceive this as being a community effort rather than an individual one. Defending a student who is being bullied should not be perceived as a dangerous and personal activity, but rather as the social norm in their school environment.

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