



STIGMA-BASED BULLYING IN SCHOOL

SUMMARY

Research has shown that **certain subsets of children face an elevated risk of being involved in bullying**; in particular, those with disabilities and members of the LGBTQ community (Rose, Monda-Amaya, Espelage, 2011, p. 114-130). This type of bullying – which targets the sexual orientation, race, religion, gender, weight, or disability of the victim, is known as stigma-based bullying (also referred to as prejudice-based, identity-based, or bias-based bullying).

It is well established that the **consequences of bullying include an increased likelihood of subsequent mental, emotional, and behavioral issues** for both the victims as well as the perpetrators (NASEM, 2016, p. 158). For those individuals who both bully others and are themselves targets of bullying, the risk of adverse psychosocial outcomes is seen as particularly high. Research within the fields of bullying and discrimination studies further shows that **stigma-based bullying results in more severe mental, health, and academic consequences** - such as depression, suicidal thoughts and actions, and diminished academic performance - than non-stigma-based bullying (Russell et al., 2012, cited by Earnshaw et al., 2018, p. 179).

By **targeting an inherent aspect of their identity** (e.g. sexual orientation), stigma-based bullying directly assaults the developing identity of the child, undermining the child's identity development process even more profoundly than non-stigma-based bullying. Additionally, childhood and adolescence may represent "sensitive periods" during which experiences of stigma-based bullying may exert a more pronounced effect on well-being than discrimination encountered later in life (Gee, Walsemann, Brondolo, 2012, cited by Earnshaw et al., 2018, p. 179). Current evidence that stigma-based bullying is both more prevalent and pernicious than non-stigma-based bullying, especially when coupled with the heightened vulnerability of youth to experiences of stigma, greatly underscores the **need for targeted efforts to address stigma-based bullying** (Earnshaw et al., 2018, p. 179).

STIGMA: An attribute that significantly diminishes one's credibility or societal standing. There are three types of stigma: 1. stigma related to physical attributes; 2. stigma related to an individual's character; and 3. stigma related to an "undesired difference from what we had anticipated" (Goffman, 1963, p. 5 cited by NASEM, 2016 p. 90)

INTERNALIZED STIGMA: Also known as self-stigma, internalized stigma occurs when an individual internalizes societal prejudices against their own group and directs it toward themselves as persistent self-hating, judgmental, or mean and/or self-doubting thoughts. (Source: <https://imi.guide/stigma001>) Self-stigma has been identified as one of the most significant challenges in mental health, as it affects many different aspects of life. (<https://kentuckycounselingcenter.com/what-is-self-stigma/>)

BULLYING: Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm. (Gladden et al. 2014 p. 7)

STIGMA-BASED BULLYING: Stigma-based bullying (also referred to as bias-based bullying or harassment) represents the overlap between bullying and discrimination and can be defined

KEY WORDS

THEORETICAL

BACKGROUND

Early research into bullying did not focus on the underlying motivations of this behavior. However, as research progressed, it became clear that certain instances of bullying could be linked to negative stereotypes, prejudices, and stigmas against particular groups. This is particularly likely to be true if these stigmas also appear on a macro level in the form of legislation, regulations, political messages and social norms. According to Goffman, there are **three types of stigma:** stigma associated with (1) physical attributes, (2) personality, and (3) stigma related to an „undesired difference from what we had anticipated” (Goffman, 1963). Link and Phelan (2001) further noted that **stigmatization occurs when four components are present:** (1) the labeling of human deviations, (2) the attachment of labels to negative stereotypes, (3) the separation of labeled and stereotyped persons from the group considered our "own", and finally (4) status loss and discrimination of these persons. Stigmatization frequency occurs when the power dynamic is such that these processes are able to take place. (Goffman, 1963, p. 3 and Link and



Phelan 2001 p. 367 cited by NASEM 2016, p. 90-92)

When the above mentioned four factors appear at school level, members of stigmatized groups are more likely to become victims of bullying. In order for this to happen, it is not necessary that the given person actually belongs to a stigmatized group, it is enough that others believe/perceive that the target is a member of the labeled group. Of course, stigma-related factors at all levels – societal, structural, interpersonal and individual – can contribute to stigma-based bullying. (Earnshaw et al., 2018 p. 178) Regarding **the dynamics of stigma-based bullying**, Thornberg writes the following: When someone is called "not normal" or "different" during a bullying process, a stigma is attached, and this stigma is then used as a reason for further abuse. It is very difficult to get out of this situation, because even if victims change their behavior/appearance, etc., the others take it as them stepping out of the "outsider" role intended for them, and because perpetrators want to define themselves compared to outsiders and this way strengthen their group affiliation, they don't let the "outsiders" step out of this role. (Thornberg, 2011 p. 318)

RELEVANT SURVEYS

- **Earnshaw** and his colleagues conducted a **systematic review of stigma-based bullying interventions** targeting youth in any country between 2000 and 2015. They concluded that stigma-based bullying interventions while becoming more numerous, are unevenly distributed across stigmas, geographic locations and types of organizations. They recommended multicomponent interventions with interdisciplinary and theory-based approaches and rigorous evaluations. (Earnshaw et al., 2018 p. 178-200)
- **Two meta-analyses** examining ethnicity-based bullying among children and adolescents in the United States, Canada, and Europe concluded that ethnicity, when assessed as a demographic characteristic, exhibited no significant correlation with either peer victimization or perpetration (**Vitoroulis, Vaillancourt, 2015 and 2018**, as cited by Kuldass et al., 2021, p. 256). Kuldass et al. noted that as majority and minority group members were no more likely to be perpetrators or victims, the term inter-ethnic bullying may be more appropriate. They also point to the importance of contextual variables, in particular the ethnic composition of a classroom/school and provide a transactional approach to inter-ethnic bullying/victimization. (Kuldass et al., 2021 p. 267)

CONSEQUENCES

Stigma-based bullying can have very serious consequences for victims, even more so than non-stigma-based bullying.

Victims:

may face **higher negative mental health outcomes coupled with higher levels of anxiety;**

may experience **increased stress, social isolation, depressive symptoms, higher distress and suicidality;**

are more likely to **abuse drugs and experience substance use disorder;**

and are more likely to **suffer from other forms of victimization,**

than non-stigma-based bullying victims.

(Blaya, 2021 p. 274-75)



- The report of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) on bullying prevention examined the issue of stigma-based bullying, emphasizing the importance of including the concepts of stigma, discrimination and bias not only into discrimination research, but also into bullying-focused research, emphasizing that anti-bullying programs should include elements suitable for preventing the formation of stigma and prejudice as they are seen as integral parts of underlying mechanisms of bullying. (Nasem, 2016 p. 92)

BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE

The essence of abuse lies in its detachment from any genuine conflict resolution; **the abuser harbors no intention of reconciling the relationship**, as the abusive behavior, at least in the short term, bolsters the abuser's standing within the community and reinforces their power over others. Nonetheless, research demonstrated that all parties involved in bullying scenarios suffer long-term harms.

When bullying is already taking place, especially if it is stigma-based, it is **very difficult to break down the stigmas and prejudices that underlie and feed the bullying behavior**. Nevertheless, the situation must be addressed however difficult and using appropriate evidence-based bullying procedures.



However **prevention is much easier than cure**. If educators working with children adopt a consistent approach from the time the children enter kindergarten or school, which fosters mutual acceptance and breaks down prejudices, it is much easier for other educators who will later encounter the same children as adolescents. Unfortunately, there are **many factors involved in this approach**: teachers and parents need to work on their own prejudices, teachers need to learn about different vulnerable groups so that they can teach children about them, and they need to include regular preventive activities for children class schedule. **It may help - to some extent - to get local NGOs involved in this work**, as they may be better suited take on the task of introducing certain vulnerable groups to children (e.g.

LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, Roma, etc.).

What is fine in theory can unfortunately be very tricky in practice. The process of prevention and treatment is aided if there are **efforts at the state level** to break down prejudices and build an acceptance into societal norms. Unfortunately, in many states this is either lacking or the opposite is happening. Furthermore, it is often the case that vulnerable groups in a country are protected at the level of declarations, but informally experience very strong prejudices in their everyday life.

A STIGMA-BASED BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAM IN HUNGARY – “SOKSZÍNŰSÉG MUNKACSOPORT”

In Hungary, the **Background Society (Háttér Társaság)** has conducted the most **comprehensive research on the prevalence of prejudice-based bullying**. Their findings show that in Hungary, action against bullying in schools, and in particular its prejudicial form, is in its infancy. Schools have few tools and are often unaware of the solutions available to them (e.g. training, mediation services). However, many schools consider it important to combat bullying in schools and we can hope that by becoming aware of the existing options (Peaceful Schools Program, ENABLE Program, Nyugi Ovi Program, relevant restorative techniques etc.) they will make use of them and thus make their institution safer for all students. (Támogató barátok, tehetetlen intézmények, 2019)

One **good example of civil initiatives to combat stigma-based and prejudice-based bullying** is **Diversity Week**, which saw the creation of the **Diversity Education Working Group's interactive educational material, called Speak Up** for students on prejudice-based bullying in schools. A key aim of Diversity Week is to raise awareness of the diversity of our own communities. The other is to inspire a common reflection on what can be done to prevent and end exclusion, prejudice and bullying in schools. It is best said in their own words aimed at students:

"By proclaiming Diversity Week, we want to encourage you and your teachers to discuss and even debate these issues. After all, tackling bullying and prejudice is not easy, and the environment in which you learn depends on the whole school. You have probably heard the term "bullying" or "school bullying". It's becoming more and more common these days, not just among teachers: it's the subject of many books, films and TV series. It is difficult to capture in one sentence what it is: repeated bullying, abuse, humiliation or ostracism, which increasingly leaves the victim feeling helpless and desperate. (...) You will also have experienced that there is a lot of prejudice - unfair and exclusionary negative judgements - against people who are different from the majority in some way: different in religion, origin, sexual orientation or gender identity, or who may have a disability. The Diversity Education Task Force aims to provide both support and inspiration to combat bullying and prejudice in schools.

And why do we want to help you and your teachers in the first place? Because every school community is diverse. It's not just about what kind of music you like, what colour your hair is, what body type you have or what subject you're good at. In Hungary, there are many different minorities living together as Hungarians: Roma, Jews, maybe people who have immigrated from Asia or elsewhere. And we live with a wide range of abilities: some people can say they are able-bodied, others have some kind of physical or mental disability. There are many different identities and attitudes: there are heterosexual people, there are LGBTQI people, who can also be very diverse.

(...) You are capable of standing up for your peers. Of course, it is not always clear how to do this. It is because you, children and young people, are best placed to make communities better, more accepting, peaceful and open (for example, the community of your future workplace, or even the city or country where you live).

(...) In this document, we have tried to gather some basic information and examples about bullying and prejudice in schools. We've also put together some tips to help you think about these issues further and to help you become a more accepting and supportive community. We will also ask you questions that can help you summarise your thoughts and experiences on the topic. We'll also introduce you to the organisations that have joined the Diversity Education Task Force, in case the work of one of them might be of interest to you."

(Sokszínűség Oktatási Munkacsoport: Szólalj fel! interaktív tananyag diákoknak <https://elearning.sokszinusegoktatas.hu/group/8?type=catalog> 2022)

The interactive education material is free to be used in any Hungarian school. Such and similar programs offer hope and certainly contribute to breaking down stigma-based

RECOMMENDATIONS

Three key factors have been identified as contributing to the success of antibullying programs (based on the evaluation of the highly successful Second Step antibullying and anti-bias program - <https://www.secondstep.org/>):

1. Challenging those social identity barriers that allow bullying to thrive and provide instruction on empathy and understanding,
2. Teaching students emotional regulation.
3. Developing communication skills and providing students with the language skills necessary to effectively intervene when they see bullying happen. (Rivers, Ian 2021 p.



301).

Special key factors for tackling the bullying of LGBTI youth:

1. A shared understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTI young people along with a willingness and ability to engage and talk with them may help to combat bullying related to sexual orientation.
2. Training teachers on equality and diversity issues and provide support to handle those issues that still remain taboo for some or with which they do not feel comfortable. (Blaya, 2021 p. 283)
3. The use of notable historical and contemporary LGBTI figures to demonstrate the contribution such groups have made and continue to make in society. (Rivers, Ian 2021 p. 300-301)
4. Legal and policy measures and mechanisms that promote equality.
5. Inclusive school antibullying policies that stress gender diversity and condemn transphobic discrimination and bullying. (Apostolidou, Zoe 2021 p. 316)

TIPS for implementation

- The institution's clear commitment to combating harassment
- Designation of an anti-bullying team
- Training of teachers, school staff
- Involving partners: parents, teachers, police
- Developing an anti-bullying protocol
- Registering incidents of harassment
- Integrating knowledge about minorities into the curriculum
- Targeted prevention sessions
- Sensitisation to the situation of minorities
- Sensitisation to the problem of harassment
- Regular evaluation of results

(Béres-Deák Rita et al., 2016)

QUESTIONS for evaluation

Q1. Which stigmas are most visible/tangible in your school?

Q2. Which stigmas are less visible and still affect the life of the school community?

Q3. Is there a uniform approach to bullying and discrimination in your school?

Q4. Does your institution have a system in place to identify, address and prevent stigma-based and/or non-stigma-based bullying?

Q5. Are there established methods in the school that help stop bullying and stigma-based bullying and restore the community?

Q6. Does your school provide mental health support for students affected by bullying/stigma-based bullying/discrimination?

Q7. Are there legal regulations in your country that ensure the legal conditions and background for the prevention and treatment of stigma-based abuse/bullying?

Q8. Do the schools receive state-provided or private funds and/or other forms of support to implement bullying prevention and intervention systems?

LITERATURE

Apostolidou, Zoe: Transphobic Bullying. In: The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying (Ed.: Smith, Peter K., O'Higgins Norman, James) Vol. 1. John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2021

Béres-Deák Rita, Bognár Zoltán, Boros Ilona, Daróczi Gábor, Dombos Tamás, Liska Márton, Majoros Kata: Útmutató az előítéletes alapú iskolai zaklatás kezeléséhez és megelőzéséhez. Háttér Társaság, Romaversitas Alapítván, TASZ, TEV, Budapest 2016

Blaya, Catherine: Bias Bullying Problems Among School Children: Sexual and Gender-Based Bullying and Intersectional Considerations. In: The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying (Ed.: Smith, Peter K., O'Higgins Norman, James) Vol. 1. John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2021

Earnshaw, Valerie A., Reisner, Sari L., Menino, David D., Poteat, V. Paul, Bogart, Laura M., Barnes, Tia N., Schuster, Mark A. : Stigma-based bullying interventions: A systematic review. Developmental Review Volume 48, June 2018

Gladden, R. M., Vivolo-Kantor, A. M., Hamburger, M. E. & Lumpkin, C. D.. Bullying Surveillance Among Youths: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements. Version 1.0. Atlanta, GA. 2014

Kuldas, Seffetullah, Dupont, Maeve, Foody, Mairéad: Ethnicity-Based Bullying: Suggestions for Fututre Research on Classroom Ethnic Composition. In: The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying (Ed.: Smith, Peter K., O'Higgins Norman, James) Vol. 1. John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2021

National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) (ed: Rivara, F. & Le Menestrel, S.) Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice. Washington, DC. 2016

Plummer, RS, Alter, Z, Lee, RM, Gordon, AR, Cory, H, Brion-Meisels, G, Reiner, J, Topping, K, Kenney, EL. "It's not the stereotypical 80s movie bullying": a qualitative study on the high school environment, body image, and weight stigma. J Sch Health. 2022; 92 1165-1176.

Rivers, Ian: Bias Bullying: Sexual Orientation. In: The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying (Ed.: Smith, Peter K., O'Higgins Norman, James) Vol. 1. John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2021

Rose, Chad A., Monda-Amaya, Lisa E., Espelage, Dorothy L.: Bullying perpetration and victimization in special education: a review of the literature, Remedial and Special Education 32, no.2. 114-130. 2011

Sokszínűség Oktatási Munkacsoport: Szólalj fell interaktív tananyag diákoknak <https://elearning.sokszinusegoktatas.hu/group/8?type=catalog> 2022

Támogató barátok, tehetetlen intézmények – Az LMBTQI diákok iskolai tapasztalatai Magyarországon az Országos Iskolai Környezet Kutatás alapján. Háttér Társaság, 2019

Thornberg, R.: School Bullying as a Collective Action: Stigma Processes and Identity Struggling. Children & Society Volume 25, 2011

Photos by: [Tim Mossholder](#), [Dee @ Copper and Wild](#), [Sydney Sims](#), [Priscilla du Preez](#), [James Eades](#) and [Brittani Burns](#) on [Unsplash](#)