



## **Bullying in School Environment: the Causal Factor of Academic Underachievement among Gifted Students in Ibadan**

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### **Abstract**

*There is a potential relationship among bullying, School environment, Social environment and academic underachievement among some gifted and talented students. Bullying can occur in school environment as well as social environment. Bullying can be mediated by several individual and sociological factors which could be differentially experienced by students with intellectual gifts. The degree to which intellectual environment of schools, operating through bullying, may diminish learning thus influencing manifestations of giftedness and artistic talent. Some students especially those that comes from strict authoritative parenting background are often tender-minded and possess low self-esteem thus making them easily subjective to bullying from more aggressive peers. However, some gifted and talented students could display social deficits or take little interest in the school's social life making them social targets for bullying. This paper therefore studied bullying in academic and social environment as predictors of academic under-achievement among gifted and talented students in some secondary schools in Ibadan. It could be concluded that rates of bullying will predict aspects of perceived quality-of-school life among students identified as intellectually gifted, or who otherwise demonstrate high levels of creativity and unusual talents. It could be recommended that teachers should display empathy in their relationship with their gifted students. School authority should also maintain a friendly environment for the gifted and talented students.*

**Key Words-** Bullying, Gifted, Students, School Environment

### **Introduction**

A situation where gifted and talented are scared of going to school or

afraid of other students in the school. Students can be harmed or psychologically disturbed as a result of verbal abuse or physical abuse from one or more peer.

Bullying can be defined as a situation wherein an individual experiences repeated attacks from one or more peers (Olweus, 2023). Olweus (2023) stipulated that perpetrators intend these attacks to harm or demoralize recipients. Bullying may not consist of entirely intentional attacks that in the absence of meaningful feedback from target, verbal playfulness and mild physical intrusions may be intended as humor or as efforts to initiate social interaction (Hoover & Oliver, 2016). In such cases, the reaction of the recipient constitutes the most salient definitional element.

Olweus (2023) agreed that bullying includes both physical and verbal attacks. Verbal attacks can be direct or can occur indirectly through gossip or via electronic means. The effects of bullying have been reviewed thoroughly by Hoover & Oliver (2016) but certainly include pejorative outcomes in the following life domains: Social, cognitive/academic (Barnes, Belskey, Broom field & Mehuish, 2016), and health/wellness (Rigby, 2021).

### **Bullying and Giftedness**

There is a direct relationship between gifted underachievement and bullying. This topic is probably too broad to reveal much; thus, a second general theme suggests itself: the nexus between bullying and academic performance. The latter topic as a more fruitful approach to understanding the quality of school life for creative, gifted, and individuals, as well as for their parents and professional advocates. Though ultimately the relationship between bullying and gifted/talented status remains complex, the correlation has been studied from within the gifted universe (Peterson & Ray, 2016)

or via qualitative investigations of the experience of bullying by gifted and talented students (Peterson & Ray, 2016). Significant percentages of GT young people have either experienced bullying (67% of grade right students), or have engaged in bullying others (33%, Peterson & Ray, 2016). Gifted and talent students reported that bullying about physical appearance was most distressing during late elementary years through middle school. Peterson & Ray (2016) reported that proportionately more males experienced victimization and engaged in harassment.

In a structural analysis (Peterson & Ray, 2016), two bullying items factored into what was otherwise an ability-based latent construct (teasing about [1] grades and [2] intelligence). While the existence of a correlation between gifted status and bullying variables is suggestive, it does not, by itself, support the notion that gifted or talented status places young people at risk for bullying. It is important to recognize that students regularly identify teasing and harassment as bullying and that teasing shares the negative outcomes of other types of harassment (words are important) Hoover & Oliver, 2016. The finding could be an artifact of the finding that high ability middle-schoolers would more likely suffer teasing about manifestations of talent among the gifted and talented students. The confounding status of bullying variables suggests that cluster analyses might prove useful in classifying subsets of the population that might prove vulnerable to bullying or who might be expected to bully others. This is particularly salient when one considers the potential relationship between bullying, giftedness, and social behavior.

Gifted and talented pupils often express that they experience unique risk and that this risk *is* experienced on the basis of their abilities and the gifted label (Peterson & Ray, 2016). Whether this feeling reflects an actual increase in risk may prove doubtful, but the phenomenon remains important for practitioners and advocates. Unfortunately, many gifted and talented individuals attributed bullying to their suffering from internal causes, thus potentially decreasing the actualization of their intellectual and creative endeavors. Such feelings probably correlate with risk in schools and communities with anti-intellectual social climates. Peterson & Ray (2016) noted that advocates can help students respond positively to these negative experiences and feelings, a not-surprising result, given the learning and adaptability evidenced in this population.

Olweus (2023) noted that gifted and talented students are likely to experience bullying, or harassment at rates higher than the general population and probably at a lower rate than students assigned formal labels (i.e., with emotional and behavioral disabilities). In addition, no overwhelming evidence exists that GT individuals as a group suffer differentially from the bullying that they experience. In fact, given their learning characteristics, it remains likely that these individuals may respond more successfully (than do others) to mentoring and counseling addressing peer harassment.

The lack of difference in rates of bullying and victimization between gifted and other students appears representative of existing quantitative results. However, the anecdotal findings of bullying among gifted students (and their perceptions of risk) should not be ignored because this

can lead to academic underachievement. We hypothesize that other influences affect creative, high-achieving individuals. The most probable mediating variables include: (1) the strength of local gender expectations; (2) manifestations of social skills; and (3) the climate of schools and communities.

### **Bullying and Academic Achievement**

Schools and communities can support or inhibit the care and feeding of intellectual, creative, and artistic gifts; for example, many researchers have noted that within-school variability explains differences in achievement (Ma, 2018) often more than does between- student variability. Goodenow & Grady (2023) noted that schools are likely to possess local sets of customs differing significantly by buildings and programs. A disorganized school may produce an academic climate inhibiting educational attainment, thus reducing the likelihood that intellectual gifts receive the nurturance required for maximization of this crucial human resource, even to the point of systematically decreasing the number of youngsters formally referred and identified as gifted and talented. In such institutions, it is possible that educators' attention is turned to workday survival and the students might not receive the levels support they need to truly flourish (O'Connor, 2022).

Though the research record is mixed, investigators have revealed that students at-risk of bullying and who undergo such trauma perform more poorly academically than their counterparts not at such risk (For example, Beran, 2019; Beran & Lupart, 2019; Moore, Huebner & Hills, 2022). Beran et al. (2019) noted that

adolescents, displaying disruptive behavior victimization perform at systematically lower academic levels. The same is true among students who perceived educators as non-supportive, in addition to those experiencing parental estrangement. Beran & Lupart (2019) noted that bullying and disruptive behavior together and separately predicted lower academic achievement. Electronic bullying has also been negatively associated with gifted and talented students (Moore, Huebner & Hills, 2022).

### **Gifted Students' Underachievement**

Bullying among gifted and talented students can lead to underachievement. The traits or characteristics of underachievers have been reported in many studies, although no one student would be expected to have all or even more than a few traits from this compilation. It has been noted that such children may be aggressive and act out their frustration by seeking attention negatively, or they may withdraw and quietly allow their talents to waste away (Clark, 2022). Although the underachiever is often able to maintain adequate grades during education life because of his intellectual gifts, the signs of the latent underachievement syndrome become increasingly observable over time (Rathvon, 2016):

- ❖ Performs well when given one-to-one attention but is restless and unproductive when required to work independently.
- ❖ Has trouble beginning and completing tasks
- ❖ Withdraws attention when parents or teachers give instructions
- ❖ Becomes distractible and distracting when not the center of attention
- ❖ Has difficulty relating positively to peers (may be revealed in complaints that others are “bothering” the child)
- ❖ Has difficulty relating positively to siblings
- ❖ Displays frequent temper outbursts or abrupt mood changes
- ❖ Makes incessant demands but is never satisfied with anything for very long
- ❖ Requires caretaking on some tasks beyond the age when it is appropriate
- ❖ Has difficulty organizing school materials and belongings at home

### **School Environmental Factors**

Bullying in the school environmental factors among underachieving gifted students has been noted in the following ways:

- ✚ Chronically under challenging, slow-moving classroom experiences or moving from a regular classroom to an appropriately challenging one;
- ✚ Peer pressure to conform to “regular” norms, to “be like everyone else”, which may be particularly intense for students from underrepresented minorities;
- ✚ Loneliness, isolation from classmates and the educational enterprise and
- ✚ Family dynamics (family conflict drains energies; parents centering on the underachieving child masks other conflicts (Neihart, Reis, Robinson & Moon, 2022)

School is the place where most underachievement behavior becomes visible. Educators must also realize that home, peer, and cultural environments may impact students' levels of achievement. As educators, we may or may not be able to change the external factors that contribute to the underachievement of certain gifted students. However, students who have reversed their underachievement behaviors have noted that having a teacher who supported and believed in them helped them overcome their underachievement. Therefore, in the absence of developing formal programs for underachievers, providing underachievers with support, attention, and positive feedback could help these students reverse their underachievement (McCoach, 2020).

### **Intellectual Climate and Other School-Based Variability**

Among many school-based factors that have been studied is general intellectual climate. Schools differ on such variables as academic pressure, at both the teacher and the building level. So called academic "press" is the real or perceived emphasis placed on achievement by a teacher at the classroom level or by teachers within institutions (McLaughlin & Drori, 2020). Students, for example, can reliably identify teachers with high academic expectations; these outlooks correlate positively with value-added outcome measures (MET Project, 2013); similar variables can be detected at the school level. An emphasis on academic attainment could serve as an indicator of school-level pro- or anti-intellectual climate.

Other school-level influences appear to correlate with performance, thus potentially affecting the proportion of students identified as gifted and the perceived quality of school life for these individuals. McLaughlin, utilizing the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), identified behavioral indicators (especially behavioral problems as perceived by educators, perhaps best categorized as "disorder") as a school-level factor significantly predicting academic achievement for middle- and secondary-level schools, though the factor disappears when organizational aspects of the school are controlled. School size, teacher-perceived cohesion, and class size were other factors that may interest researchers studying the experiences of high-achieving students.

Educators can organize schools and classes in ways that enhance students' sense of belonging. School-belonging correlates in the expected direction with such outcome measures as disciplinary climate, academic performance (Gonzales & Padilla, 2017), expectations of academic performance (Goodenow, 2021), teacher-rated student effort (Goodenow & Grady 2023) and graduation rate (Ma, 2023). A low sense of belonging in a school probably decreases the number of students to be seen as different-including the willingness to overtly participate in artistic and academic endeavors. Dijkstra, Lindenberg & Veenstra (2018) demonstrated elevated levels of negative outcomes when students experience bullying from their most popular peers. The salience of the popularity of bullies suggests that the intellectual climate in a school may well be set and then transmitted through the attitudes of the

most popular students. It may be important for educators to reach the student opinion leaders as part of the effort to improve the institution's climate.

In contrast with a direct relationship between bullying and gifted and talented students, a reasonably strong effect appears to exist between school-level factors and intellectual performance. It could be noted that disorganized institutions and those with lower intellectual climate indices may produce such effects as lower levels of gifted-talented identification, poorer programming, supports (and protections), and lower indicators of quality of school life expressed by gifted students. An unhealthy school climate affected by bullying and/or victimization will likely be observed. That is, disorganized schools will likely place gifted students at more risk than do other institutions.

### **Social Aspects of Bullying and Giftedness**

Hoover et al. (2023) argued that individuals with Asperger Syndrome or other types of social skills deficits and who were also gifted more frequently experienced bullying on the basis of their interests in intellectual, technical, and artistic pursuits. In the intervening years, it could be noted that there are variability in social cognition and behavioral skill deficits as significant predictors of bullying, that is, people in the general population and even many educators see social skill deficits and physical frailty existing as a function of giftedness (Moulton, Moulton, Housewright & Bailey, 2018). Thus, it is essential to reiterate that young people, who both manifest gifts and talents and who

experience social skill deficits, face more risk for bullying.

Successful programs have been developed to help gifted students analyze social situations and behave more appropriately. For example, Cohen, Duncan & Cohen (2024) found that fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade students who participated in a social skills intervention program received higher social desirability peer-ratings than comparable, untreated students. It could be noted that GT individuals respond well to assistance with feelings associated with peer harassment. Perhaps, ultimately, educative approaches ought to be developed around gifted and talented programs especially in environments that may place these students in particular risk. Indeed, it may be necessary in challenging environments to inoculate all students (through the use of educational programming) against factors reducing the potential for students to manifest artistic and intellectual gifts. Evans (2017) noted that excellent argument that all factors associated with bullying are exacerbated in environments wherein adults do not intervene. A little advocacy goes a long way.

### **Language Disorders**

Roughly three times as many students with language disorders experience bullying than do their non-disabled counterparts (Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2023). This suggests that behavioral decrements might differentially affect students with language disorders, particularly as these deficits affect pragmatics. Language disorders, particularly poor receptive skills, may produce greater perceptions of bullying by the misunderstanding of neutral or positive approaches as hostile. For example,

Luciano & Savage (2017) found similar rates of bullying experienced by students with and without learning disabilities, but only once they controlled language skill levels.

It is important to recognize that both social and language skills among students identified as gifted will increase their risk of experiencing bullying from peers. It is certainly possible to experience language problems along with status as gifted and talented, though it also plausible that gifted students with language disorders may be under-identified.

### Conclusion

Bullying can lead to academic underachievement among the gifted and talented. Moreover, the salient relationship between school climate and academic achievement could be noted. It could be predicted that bullying rates in schools, as mediated by between-school and between-community differences, produce at least three integrated effects:

1. High rates of bullying and other types of systemic behavioral disturbances at the building or program level likely produce decrements in either or both (a) the numbers of students identified as gifted and talented or (b) the willingness of candidates to manifest high-risk behaviors related to their gifts and talents.
2. Related to point 1, rates of bullying will predict aspects of perceived quality-of-school life among students identified as intellectually gifted, or who otherwise demonstrate high levels of creativity and unusual talents.
3. Bullying can lead to academic underachievement among the gifted

and talented students. This is as a result of emotional and psychological abuse that comes with bullying.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations could be made from the study:

1. Teachers should support and believe in the gifted and talented to help them overcome their underachievement that came as a result of bullying.
2. Teachers should provide underachievers with support, attention, and positive feedback which would help them to cope with other students in reversing their underachievement.
3. Educators must also realize that home, peer, and cultural environments may impact students' levels of achievement. Therefore, they should collaborate with the parents of the gifted and talented to bring out the best in them.

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